

# FEMALE GENEALOGIES OF PLACE

## Nation, City and Refugee Camps in Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*

---

Marta CARIELLO

**ABSTRACT** • This paper aims at analyzing the ways in which the differential treatments of human bodies that are played out in the ‘permanently exceptional’ space of the refugee camps emerge in Palestinian-American author Susan Muaddi Darraj’s 2007 short story collection, *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly*. In particular, the focus will be on how such differential – gendered and racial – treatment of bodies is articulated into a differential form of memory and of genealogy, in narratives that are passed on, in the stories and through the stories, from women of different generations. This gendered genealogy, in turn, serves to re-configure the space (or non-place?) of the refugee camp as a problematic alternative to the militant equation of the temporary refugee camp as the potential Palestinian nation waiting for its people’s return. The space of the refugee camp will also be pitted against, or read in parallel to, the urban space and its migrant communities, as construed in Muaddi Darraj’s collection of short stories.

**KEYWORDS** • Arab-American Literature, Refugee Camps, Palestine, Female Genealogies

### 1. Refugee camps as border narrative

The refugee camps. The very mark of our condition, the sign of the original deed which catapulted us all into this unending journey, the embodiment of what might have been, what was, what could be, the body which must be dismembered for so many to breathe lightly, rest back in comfort. The body within our body, the representation of our memory. The actual face of the encounter which has ceaselessly been miscast and untold over the years, but which will not stop telling itself to anyone who will look in its eyes. (Jayyusi 2002, n.p.)

Lena Jayyusi wrote these highly evocative words in 2002 in a text significantly titled “Letters from the Palestinian Ghetto”, reflecting on the ‘permanent status’ the refugee camp has within the identity of the displaced, and, specifically for Jayyusi, of Palestinian refugees. The refugee camp is “the body within the body”, permanently living within, wherever the refugee is or moves to. Indeed, the refugee camp is a mark of the contemporary condition that needs to be urgently addressed, first and foremost on a political and material level, but also on the symbolic and narrative level, because the space it is created in, and the one it creates, speaks to and of the crucial signifier of Western modernity, namely the nation and its constitutive principle of inclusion and exclusion. Refugee camps speak to and of borders, of individual and collective uprootedness, and of the consequential permanent need for retaining and reviving memory. The camps are, in this sense, the border-narrative of the contemporary world.

As Geetha Ganapathy-Doré writes in her Introduction to *On the Move: The Journey of Refugees in New Literatures in English* (2012):

---

The study of the journey of refugees has several dimensions – literary, ethical, economic, political, sociocultural and legal. The journey of refugees sheds a different light on the postcolonial theme of the meaning of home and the plight of homelessness. (Ganapathy-Doré 2012: 2)

All these aspects conflate to create a common discourse on refugees and on ‘the refugee camp’ in particular, though clearly situations can be and are very different, depending on the geopolitical territories the camps are set in, the journey undertaken by the individuals or groups of refugees, the times and places left behind, and those found upon (temporary?) arrival.

When the issue of refugees began to be legally and politically dealt with, UNREF gave a (declaredly non-comprehensive or standard) definition of “refugee camp”, which would designate “a group of dwellings of various descriptions [...] which, mainly because of the poor conditions of the dwellings but also for other reasons, are meant to provide temporary shelter” (1958).<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the keyword in this description is the term “temporary”, and, though the definition obviously needs updating given the changed and changing conditions under which people become displaced and the dramatically transforming international scenario, indeed the implied, albeit often illusory, temporariness of the condition of the refugee remains fundamental, both in terms of the practical implications on the lives of the displaced, and in terms of the interruption within the personal and collective narrative of refugees. This is, then, “the body within [the] body, the representation of [...] memory” that Jayyusi refers to: the inhabitation within interruption that forcibly emerges, as will be shown in this article, in the narratives of refugees.

A more specific description of ‘refugee camp’ is that of an artificially designed habitat for incoming refugees, relying almost completely on external resources for economic and material sustenance.<sup>2</sup> A refugee camp is therefore juridically a site of exceptional, supra-national and temporary governance. It is also, however, a site of material and human subtraction and destitution; it is, furthermore, a cultural construct signifying otherness, no-man’s land, the margin.

Marc Augé famously included refugee camps in the category of “non-places”:

A world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity) [...] offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object... (Augé 1995: 78)

While the conflation of “luxurious and inhuman conditions” under the same category appears today somewhat enmeshed in a strongly post-modern (or “super-modern”, as Augé

---

<sup>1</sup> As concerns the personal status of refugees, this was established by international law thanks to the refugee regime set up in 1921 by the League of Nations. In 1948, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict, setting up the Agency that would help refugees “whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict.” (UNRWA, n.d. <http://www.unrwa.org/>) The Geneva convention (1951), defines the refugee as someone who, “owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” (<http://www.unhcr.org>)

<sup>2</sup> Economic and material sustenance to an extent also designates the difference between a refugee camp and a settlement, with the latter relying at least in part on its internal resources.

would phrase it) anti-materialism, Augé's analysis does point to one fundamental aspect of the space of refugee camps: that of transit zones, and in particular of spaces that "do not integrate the earlier places" (Augé: 78). In other words, an interruption of spatial memory, a space where memory (and therefore time) is suspended. This suspension concerns not only the philosophical analysis of the relations of (super)modernity and time, but also, on a very practical level, the degree to which rootedness and identity can develop or be retained; at the same time, it leaves space for specific forms of governance and control. In this sense, in the study of the space of the refugee camp, a fundamental reference is Foucault's definition of "heterotopia of deviation", with the refugee camp organized, by the very humanitarian agencies that build it, as spatially separated from the "ordinary social and political order" (Foucault 1984; Agier 2002: 318).<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true in the case of the Palestinian refugee camps, essentially the incarnation of the oxymoron of 'permanent temporariness', where suspension keeps lives, memories, and history permanently outside a socially and politically 'normal' order, in the paradox of the potential/impossible return to the homeland, and therefore within a permanent space/state of exception (Agamben 2005; Zembylas 2010).

The issue of the space of the refugee camp is a multilayered one, and the risk is that of reducing its analysis to an all-encompassing view of 'the camp' as having certain characteristics no matter where or when it is located, along with the tendency to equalize the space of the refugee camp to all other 'camps'. It is, in this sense, useful but also somewhat risky to read the refugee camp solely through the perspectives of Hannah Arendt or Giorgio Agamben on concentration camps (Arendt 1973, 1998; Agamben 2005).<sup>4</sup> There are, however, juxtapositions that unavoidably come into play and indeed underscore the idea of the 'camp' itself; these are quite evidently, as already mentioned, the insistence the space of the 'camp' has on borders. In the case of the refugee camp, it is inhabited by displaced people, removed from one nation and thrown into the temporary space of another, to which, however, they do not belong and that does not belong to them. If then, Agamben speaks of "bare life" in the case of all those subjects that are cast outside the State, the discussion Judith Butler engages with Agamben in *Who Sings the Nation State* (2007) appears here even more poignant, to the effect that, speaking to and of the border, migrants, refugees, all the "expelled and contained" persons – those Butler calls "the jettisoned" – are never really 'outside' State power: they are "thrown on the border" precisely because State power exists and there is no place (or space) where a State does not exercise its power, be it even to cast someone out (Butler and Spivak 2007). Refugee camps, then, become the narrative of national borders, and always, inevitably, a critical one.

Along these lines, Alessandro Petti observes that

[t]he camp system goes beyond the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy that operated as a barrier between citizens and non-citizens, and beyond what are today the borders of nation-states. The camp marks the limit of this mechanism, the degradation of a political organization. It is a desperate attempt to preserve an outdated political order through the construction of a space of suspension in which to confine all those who "do not belong." (Petti 2013, n.p.)

<sup>3</sup> This argument is also made in Anthony Barnum, "Marginalized Urban Spaces and Heterotopias: An Exploration of Refugee Camps", <http://rumiforum.org/marginalized-urban-spaces-and-heterotopias-an-exploration-of-refugee-camps/>. Foucault himself specifically addressed the issue of refugee camps – in relation to the then ongoing Vietnamese and Cambodian refugee crisis – in a 1979 interview by Uno, H., published in French in Foucault 1994, and translated in English in 2015 by Colin Gordon for openDemocracy.net

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting discussion of Agamben's theory of "bare life" in contrast to Hannah Arendt's distinction between human life and the political, see Owens 2009, as well as Butler and Spivak 2007.

Petti underlines the fundamental fact that the camp form first made its appearance “in the colonial context, as an instrument for ruling local populations” (Petti 2013: n.p.), thus connecting the Foucaultian perspective (though Foucault himself never really addressed the issue of colonialism directly) of ‘the camp’ as a space of suspension, where social control can be exercised, if not experimented (Latif 2008). The specific space of the refugee camp, then, intersects the suspension of the ‘othered’ with the specific suspension within the crisis of forced migration: the interruption of memory, life suspended in an impossible return, as in the case of the Palestinians.

However, as, again, Alessandro Petti underlines,

[d]espite the fact that the “camp form” has been used as an instrument for regulating the “excess of the political dimension” of the refugees, the camp—as an exceptional space—is also a site for political practices yet to come. (Petti 2013: n.p.)

And, furthermore, in connection to Marc Augé’s observation that “non-places” offer the anthropologists a “new form”, it is equally important to note that

although more recent scholarly work highlights the refugee figure as a central critical category of our present political organizations, these very conceptualizations have reduced the refugee to a passive subject, created by the exercise of power and lacking an independent and autonomous political subjectivity. (Petti 2013: n.p.)

The “political practices yet to come” that Petti refers to, as re-articulations of the relation between territory, state, and population confute indeed the idea of the refugee camp as a space for passive subjects. This very re-articulation re-writes the significations of nationhood, State borders and even citizenship in unexpected ways, in both artistic and militant projects inside the refugee camps, and in literary and artistic works born outside the material space of the camps.<sup>5</sup> These re-significations inscribe the camp, once again, “within the body” of the writer, of the individual or the collective, whose memory demands to tell, whose narrative is in turn inscribed in spaces and places that become part Western urban centers, part destitute refugee camps; all in one, surprising semiotic texture.

## **2. *The Inheritance of Exile, the legacy of the camp***

An example of the re-articulation of the relationship between national space, borders and memory is Susan Muaddi Darraj’s short story collection, *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly* (2007). Muaddi Darraj is an Arab American scholar and writer, brought up in the United States and daughter of Palestinian immigrants.<sup>6</sup> As the subtitle of her collection suggests,

<sup>5</sup> In his article, Petti gives an account of the Al-Feniq Cultural Center in Dehesha Refugee Camp, West Bank, which hosts the experimental educational program Campus in Camps (<http://www.campusincamps.ps/>). Such projects are based on the idea that improving living conditions for refugees does not conflict with the right to return, as has been so far the dominant political imperative. A rich survey of artistic and cultural practices coming from inside the material space of the camp, and from its cultural force-field is included in Solombrino 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Muaddi Darraj has published two collections of short stories, *The Inheritance of Exile* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) and *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* (University of Massachusetts Press,

the stories in *The Inheritance of Exile* are not set in a refugee camp; instead, they are declaredly rooted in a multicultural South Philadelphia, but this is in part what constitutes the very power that the space of the refugee camp assumes in its emergence *from within* the American city.

*The Inheritance of Exile* is divided into four parts, corresponding to the narratives of the four young women protagonists: Nadia, Aliyah, Hanan, and Reema. Their stories are independent but interconnected and are contrapuncted (or completed, depending on the perspective) by their mothers', like the necessary backdrop not only in generational terms, but also in the legacy (or, the inheritance of the title) of the young women's inhabiting the Western urban space, and the Palestinian imaginary space of the land they lost before ever really possessing it. The inhabitation of this interrupted memory is fleshed out in the gendered-differential treatment of the four women's bodies, and of their mothers', in an interesting layering of socio-cultural constructions that compress and dilate the time-space of Philadelphia/Palestine.

The narrative layers of the stories create what Steven Salaita defines as "something of a structural tapestry that is not necessarily patterned but is interconnected" (Salaita 2011: 74). The narrative alternates between daughters and mothers, switching from the first to the third person in no particular order, except for a prevalence of the first person in the daughters' accounts, which results in a stronger emphasis on the occasional first-person narrative of the mothers. The every-day affairs of teen-agers and the tribulations and big or small tragedies endured by the four young protagonists are both the common events all coming-of age young women face virtually everywhere in the world, and the very specific circumstances tied to their condition of immigrants' children, and, more specifically, for two of them, of refugee's children. The even more specific trait of the stories unfolding in the voices of the daughters and mothers is precisely the female genealogy that emerges as the strongest tie, irremovable no matter their will or circumstances. The first story, in fact, opens with a deep female genealogy, reaching to an interestingly common trait in much Arab-American women's literature: that of the grandmother, and what might be called her 'extending touch' that outstands time, space, and even death.<sup>7</sup>

Nadia, the opening narrator of *The Inheritance of Exile*, begins her story ("Back to the Surface") in a direct connection with her dead grandmother:

Nobody believed what I said about Siti, not even my mother. Maybe she didn't want to accept it, maybe it was too painful, like opening your eyes to the yellow glare of the midday sun, so she resisted. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 3)

Nadia is isolated in her visions, which always involve only her grandmother, and, significantly, not her father, who died when she was twelve:

My father had never spoken to me again after he died, though I willed him to. Many nights that year, I'd lie attentively in bed, conjuring up his image in my mind. [...] On the other hand, my grandmother arrived in my dream the same night she died – she flew in quietly and settled into the brightest corner of my mind. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 4)

After this first vision, Nadia faces her grandmother's death with utter calmness:

---

2015), as well as numerous biographies, scholarly essays and articles, and has edited and contributed to several volumes on Arab and Arab-American literature.

<sup>7</sup>On the trope of the grandmother in Arab-American fiction, see, among others, Salaita (2011: 77-78); Kadi (1994).

---

She grinned and left, and I didn't cry two days later when we buried her, even though all my aunts beat their foreheads and wailed and my uncles sobbed into their hands like children. They had flown from Jerusalem for the funeral, arguing that their mother should be buried back home. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 5)

The dead grandmother's body serves not only here as connective tissue, so to speak, through the three (female) generations, but also as the vector that introduces the constant tension that will bring, throughout the entire book, Philadelphia – the Western urban center – to be constantly pulled to an 'elsewhere', a home that is far away, in space and time, but that is also, in the syncretic working of the literary word, here and now. Philadelphia and Jerusalem, in this case, are conflated into the construction of a polysemic home: the United States and Palestine, the Western metropolis and the stratified layers of history that are signified in the inhabitation of Jerusalem, its divisions, its displaced people, the refugee camps always in the background.

As Yousef Awad observes, in Darraj's stories the city serves as a space for negotiating belonging and home (Awad 2015). In particular, quoting Gilbert and Dikec (2008), Awad notes that in Muaddi Darraj, the city acquires "a new spatial level where the practice or performance of citizenship unfolds through local affiliations, in contradistinction to a notion of citizenship conceived merely at an abstract level and national scale" (Gilbert and Dikec 2008: 254). The specific space of the city, furthermore, houses the very sense of liminality articulated by the suspension of the space of the refugee camp, as noted by Alessandro Petti:

These spaces in suspension are no longer inside or outside: they represent a sort of third area, in which an increasing number of individuals who are excluded from the polis are shut away. (Petti 2013: n.p.)

Here, the term 'polis' is clearly used in its political-philosophical meaning, but the reference is also, very explicitly, to the element of 'space', and the city (Philadelphia in this specific case) serves precisely as the urban space that, by its very nature, is always, already, something/somewhere else.

This tension of 'removed inhabitation' of Philadelphia, constantly projected in a specific 'elsewhere' (the Palestinian community/homeland) explicitly emerges again, and is a constant trait of the narrative, in the same story, when Nadia speaks to the vision of her deceased grandmother, assuring her that it would be fine for her to go on a trip with her boyfriend and some friends, and that she wouldn't have to worry about what "people would think":

I assured her that we were going with a group of friends, that we'd be safe, that she didn't have to worry about *a-naas*. *A-naas* is a phrase that I had often heard her fret over: "What will *a-naas* say?" "What will *a-naas* think?" She always worked herself into a frenzy about the gossip circles created and perpetuated by *a-naas*, the small but organized network of Arab women and men in America who had the uncanny ability to transmit a single, juicy nugget of information about someone's reputation across the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea to the corresponding family network back in the Middle East. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 7)

The juxtaposition of territories and spatial-temporal communities underscores the fundamental role of the construction of place, in *The Inheritance of Exile*, as "an additional character" (Salaita 2011: 73): Philadelphia is a place with its own, very specific and contingent memory, a memory that in this case is, surprisingly, that of the Middle East, of Palestine, of the refugee camps. Just like two of the mothers used to be 'camp children', so the substance of the city we read is the substance of the camps of the past; as if, turning the page of this specific Philadelphia, we found a carbon copy outlining refugee camps in the Middle East. In other

words, the stories of *The Inheritance of Exile* are ‘spatial stories’, in which, as in much postcolonial literature, the politics of place and space are fundamental. The urban space is very specific in this sense, in that it is, by its very nature, always multiple places at once, incorporating time and space into its multivocality. In Muaddi Darraj’s stories, then, the lived territory is always inhabited in its material and imagined space: South Philly, Jerusalem, Ramallah, the camps.

The specific trip that Nadia discusses with the vision of her grandmother turns out to be the dramatic turning point the young woman’s life, since she is involved in a car accident that leaves her bed-ridden for months, and in a state of barrenness that eventually leads her to leave her Arab-American boyfriend, in fear that her inability to bear children will drive him and his family away. This is the first instance of a gendered-differential construction of the body in Muaddi Darraj’s book, that opens up a very interesting discussion on the different levels of such differentiations, which span, in the case of the four protagonists and their mothers, from the body as differentially treated on the basis of its potential to procreate (or lack thereof), to its inscription inside a racially differentiated construction of norms generated internally and externally to the Arab-American community. Finally, the ultimate differentiation emerges in the construction of space and time inhabitation deriving from the legacy of the refugee camps, transmitted by the women, to the women.

The first section of the book – titled “Nadia” – alternates the stories of Nadia and of her mother Siham; the former narrates in the first person and the latter in the third. In the final story of the section, under the title “Survivor”, Nadia tells of the aftermath of her accident, including her breakup with her boyfriend, and concludes with an observation on the very legacy that ties her grandmother, her mother, and herself, through the blue stones (sent over the years by the grandmother back home) that are supposed to protect their house from the Evil Eye:

The beads were flat, round, made of glass. A deep blue, “the color of the Mediterranean,” Mama said, with a black center representing the pupil of the eye.  
I saw the beads, and I was reminded that I was a survivor, like my mother. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 46)

Nadia’s mother, Siham, is a survivor because her husband died, hit by a car, leaving her a widow in a strange land, with a child to look after; but she is also a survivor because of her very origins. Siham has not grown up in the camps, but her path from displacement to the comforts of America triggers the incident upon which the refugee camps are mentioned for the first time in the book as part of the stories and history of this small female community. In the flashback-story titled “Reading Coffee Cups”, Aliyah’s mother feels envious and resentful when Siham brags about her new dishwasher, and the seemingly wealthy life she and her husband are leading, and finds herself differentiating the treatment of her small group of friends on the basis of what she calls a “class conscience”:

Why did I resent her? Because she liked to show off? And I... I was no better than Samira and her mother, the way I still thought of Layla and even Reema, both of whom had grown up in the camps. Somewhere between leaving Palestine and having children, I had developed a class conscience. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 65)

The two correlated and inseparable trajectories that determine the differential inhabitation of the Philadelphia territory for the four young women and their mothers are those of Palestine and of the refugee camps. These two, in turn, are inscribed in the wider discourses of immigrant identity, gendered identity, and, more specifically in this respect, the Arab-American

---

community and its endogenous and exogenous negotiations in terms of gender construction. So, the girls tell themselves, at one point:

“...We’re different, and that’s it. They tell us we’re not Americans and, sure, we listen to the music and drink the coffee” [...] “We’re just different, and that’s OK”. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 74)

But, the camps appear also as an extreme element of what another of the four young protagonists, Hanan, in the story “Preparing a Face”, wants to distance herself from, as representing what her mother is, and what she is not:

When she was finally in complete silence, sitting on her bed and gazing at the pillows lined up like soldiers at the front line of a cultural war, when she finally felt safe in her fortified room, she decided she was not an Arab. Her father was American, born to Arab parents, but her mother hadn’t been born here – she’d grown up in the hilly town of Ramallah, had fled a series of wars, had left behind camps strewn with shrapnel, legless corpses, wailing women, and eyes too weary to weep. But Hanan had been born right here, in Philadelphia... (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 81)

When, in unexpected moments, the refugee camps surface in the seemingly ordinary and safe life in Philadelphia, the projection of time and space is evident in the story that demands to be told, and in the impossibility of ever inhabiting a ‘safe’ place again. As Steven Salaita underlines, in *The Inheritance of Exile*, “[o]ne sensibility that binds all the women is a focus on safety” (Salaita 2011: 74). Hanan recalls the emergence of life as refugees at the dinner table:

When I don’t finish my plate at dinner, she lectures me about the refugee camps again, about her life before Baba, about how she and her sisters had to walk to the next village, and knock on the doors of the convent and ask for food. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 109)

The suspension in her mother’s narrative is clear when Hanan notes:

My mother has never shown me a map, and I’ve heard these stories a million times, but she tells them like they are new, as if the memory just popped into her mind and she is living it again. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 109)

The reference to the ‘impossibility’ of maps related to the Palestinian question here is evident; however the obliteration of cartography is also an indication of the constant presence and co-habitation of multiple territories, insolvably united, for Hanan’s mother, even more, when her husband is violently robbed in Philadelphia. No place is safe, and, in an echo of Salaita’s analysis, Hanan’s mother tells her: “We have to always be scared, Hanan” (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 112).

Clearly, as, again, Steven Salaita argues, Muaddi Darraj

incorporates the issue of Palestine realistically, illuminating how it has become an everyday factor, culturally and politically, in the lives of Arab Americans, those of Palestinian origin especially. (Salaita 2011: 76)

Indeed, Palestine becomes “an omnipresence that provides meaning to the characters habits and characteristics” particularly “when the mothers reflect on their childhoods in the refugee camps” (Salaita 2011: 76).

When Hanan is about to get married, shunned by her mother who disapproves her pre-marital pregnancy, Nadia’s mother has a wedding veil shipped from Jerusalem, because “They don’t know how to make veils here in America” (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 136). This incident

triggers the most explicit ‘cohabitation’, inside Muaddi Darraj’s narrative, of the refugee camps within the urban life of Philadelphia. Like an isolated flash within the novel, Hanan reflects on the camps, becoming surprisingly close to her mother, so morally far away at that very moment:

I had often envisioned the camps where Mama grew up. After all, I’d spent almost all my life hearing about them, so it was natural to picture them for myself: cement shacks with hastily decorated thatched roofs, children running barefoot on dirt paths, sidestepping donkey dung as they scampered about, old men sitting on wooden crates playing *tarneeb* with a badly worn deck of cards. The women in the camp wore clean but threadbare clothes, and flashed smiles that displayed missing teeth. At times I felt my imagination fail me, so I would ask Mama for the details, for the nuggets of information that would help correct the picture in my mind. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 136)

Then, as if it were a poem:

Was there food?  
Not much.  
Was there water?  
Barely.  
Were there schools?  
Not really.  
What was there?  
Only the hope of a better life.  
Only my family.  
Only love.  
How did you leave?  
(Muaddi Darraj 2007: 136-137)

This poetic fragment, thrown in to interrupt the steady narrative frame of Hanan’s story, offers the affective space for Hanan – and with her the younger generation of women – to channel the maternal experience, in the suspension of linear language, through the semiotic space of poetic language (Kristeva 1984), preceding logic, preceding “the new world”, preceding Philadelphia.

### 3. Female genealogies, textures of common inhabitation

What can be called, following Marianne Hirsch, the “postmemory” of the four young protagonists of *The Inheritance of Exile* is construed inside a female narrative of suspension, in which the stories are passed on, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes willingly, from the mothers to the daughters. Hirsch’s definition of “postmemory”, as Yousef Awad underlines, seems to evoke precisely the type of “relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents” (Hirsch 2001, 9, in Awad 2015: 6), a relationship “so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right.” (Hirsch 2001: 9; 2011). Such ‘acquired memory’ is a common trope in postcolonial literature, while the reference to what might be called an ‘acquired geo-erasure’, with maps erased and interrupted, is very specific to Palestinian-American fiction, obviously referencing the primary struggle over occupied and subtracted land in Palestine. A specific instance of an often young woman picking up the legacy (or the burden) to tell her parents’ interrupted story is found, for example, in Randa Jarrar’s *The Map of Home* (2008). In Jarrar’s novel, as in Muaddi Darraj’s, the protagonist symbolically claims the power to write, seizing a pen that her family is convinced is a spy-pen, that belongs to her father; that same father who, in the beginning of the novel, uses a pen to write down her name on her birth certificate, at first mistakenly choosing a boy’s name. The symbolic power of

---

claiming the instrument to tell stories with is unambiguously declared by Jarrar in the closing lines of the novel, in which it is the mother who, in the end, somehow passes the pen on to the daughter:

Mama reached over and threw the pen out the window.

I catch the pen now and listen to all our stories. (Jarrar 2008: 290)

The parallel with Muaddi Darraj's stories is strong, and indeed the conclusion of *The Inheritance of Exile* marks the official 'passing on' of the stories from one generation of women to another. Reema interviews her mother as part of her PhD thesis in sociology, and thus the book closes with a first person account of the camps (titled "The Scent of Oranges"), and the unending trauma of living under siege. Reema's mother, Huda, mentions a friend, whose father had been killed by a bomb, and whose mother had been wounded, but she says, in the italics that interrupt her direct account of her childhood:

I shouldn't talk about Dina anymore. I don't want to.

No, I will not. It's not my right to tell her story. I can only tell you mine.

You? You can tell mine because I am giving it to you to keep safe, or to tell the people, or to tell your sociology professor. Do as you like. It is yours now. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 192)

In the very last lines of the book, as to reinforce the genealogy of storytelling and the power of the new generations to appropriate and tell the stories of the camps and of Palestine, Huda delivers her words officially:

I have to finish dinner now. OK? Good. Just shape the words I said the way you want – fix them and make them sound good. You are the writer, *habibti*, not me. (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 196)

As mentioned above, this female legacy of story-keepers and story-tellers is set against a discussion that unfolds, within Muaddi Darraj's writing, around the differential treatment of bodies, on various levels. Both generations of women negotiate throughout their lives the possibilities and impossibilities of inhabiting a space that marks them as female, as migrants, and as Arabs and, more specifically, Palestinians.

In this sense, again, a common feature of Arab-American women's writing is what might be called, following Salwa Essayah Cherif, "gendered memory":

[I]n addition to asserting their ethnicity in a hostile, image-ruled environment, Arab American *women* must also voice their femaleness. Their experience of self is strongly gendered on account of the serious limitations for women that the journey to the past leads them to (dis)/(un)cover. The articulation of the self through the traditionally empowering return to the past, in their case undertaken to negotiate the Arab and the American parts of the self, requires the use of a gendered memory guiding through the silences about the female past. (Cherif 2003: 207-208)<sup>8</sup>

Thus, for example, Nadia's life is completely determined not only when she becomes barren as a consequence of the car accident she is involved in, with the possibility of reproduction as "the basis of a variety of social segregations" engendering "the development of

---

<sup>8</sup> Cherif refers in particular to Diana Abu-Jaber's first novel, *Arabian Jazz* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1993), and Elmaz Abinandar's memoir *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1991). See also Majaj 1996.

differential forms of embodiment” (Alcoff 2006: 172). She must also negotiate her belonging to a community. When she doctor’s response comes, her mother warns her:

“Habibti, George is the only son in his family – he has four sisters. His parents will definitely want him to have many children so he can carry on the family name.” [...]
 “They will not accept it if they know that you might have trouble having children. And that will put George in a very bad situation.” [...]
 “They are an Arab family, with only one son, who have put all their savings to send him to medical school in America. Do you think they will accept for him to marry and not have children?” (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 44)

In the end, it turns out George does not care about Nadia’s condition, but this passage is still key in what can be, as already mentioned, defined as a discussion Muaddi Darraj opens on the construction of bodies and their inhabitation of the land, the home, the city. Nadia’s condition is revealed through a reference to Frida Khalo – a direct call upon the icon whose life was strongly determined, and famously so, by her impossibility to reproduce:

After the accident, I started reading Frida Khalo’s work. About when she was a young woman, riding the trolley when it was involved in a horrible accident. A rod from the trolley broke loose and impaled her abdomen.
 This is not what happened to me. My accident was not nearly so dramatic. But I will never forget my mother’s face when the doctor told us quietly, “The uterus was ruptured. We managed to save most of it, but it is also damaged internally.” (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 42)

Hanan, too, experiences the construction of her inhabitation of ‘legitimate’ space on the basis of her potential to reproduce. She is cast outside the family space by her mother when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock (and then splits from her husband even before the child is born). But even earlier, when a cousin – Rola – visits from Ramallah, she first becomes an ‘outsider’, suddenly too ‘American’ compared to her cousin, so proper and ‘Arab’, only to be drawn into the same ‘differential space’, when Rola confesses she is pregnant:

“I felt like such a slut.” She pronounced the word more harshly than necessary, hitting the “t” emphatically. “That is what our culture does to you. It makes you feel like a slut for making a mistake.”
 “American culture does the same thing, believe me. You should hear what some people here still think about single mothers.” (Muaddi Darraj 2007: 94)

A common space opens here, for the inhabitation of the two women, where the marking of the female body as bearing the possibility/potential/danger of reproduction blends the two worlds they have grown up in.

Hanan will, eventually and significantly, find her own way inside the space of her mother’s legacy, when she starts weaving baskets in the patterns she has learned from her mother, who in turn learned the craft in Palestine.

The symbolic use of texture and patterns is very clear, as Muaddi Darraj literally weaves the stories in *The Inheritance of Exile* like a mingling of the legacy that binds the two generations of women together in a common space of inhabitation and (sometimes) survival, and of the unpredictable deviations of gendered spaces, body politics and the language of borders: internal, national, interrupted, breached borders, re-written in the female word, passed on from mother to daughter.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

- Agamben, G. (2005), *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attel, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Agier, M. (2002), *Between War and City: Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps*, in "Ethnography", Vol.3 n. 3: 317-341.
- Alcoff, L. M. (2006), *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Arendt, H. (1973) [1951] *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Harvest.
- Arendt, H. (1998) [1958] *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press.
- Augé, M. (1995) [1992], *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe, London and New York, Verso.
- Awad, Y. (2015), *Displacement, Belonging and Identity in Susan Muaddi Darraj's The Inheritance of Exile*, in "Studies in Literature and Language", Vol. 10 n. 2: 1-10.
- Butler, J. and Spivak, G.C. (2007), *Who Sings The Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*, New York and Calcutta, Seagull Books.
- Cherif, S. E. (2003), *Arab American literature: gendered memory in Abinader and Abu-Jaber*, in "MELUS", Vol. 28 n. 4: 207-228.
- Foucault, M. (1984) [1967], *Des Autres Espaces (Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias)*, trans. by Jay Miskowicz, in "Architecture/Mouvement/Continuite", October.
- Foucault, M. (1994) [1979], *Dits et écrits III*, text 271, Vol. 3, 1976-79 trans. by Ryōji Nakamura, Paris, Gallimard.
- Ganapathy-Doré, G., Ramsey-Kurz, H. (2012), eds. *On the Move: The Journey of Refugees in New Literatures in English*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Gilbert, L., Dikec, M. (2008). "Right to the City: Politics of Citizenship", in S. Kipfer, et al. (eds.), *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*, New York & London: Routledge: 285-305.
- Hirsch, M. (2001), *Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory*, in "The Yale Journal of Criticism", Vol. 14 n. 1: 5-37.
- Hirsch, M., Miller, N. K. (2011), *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Jarrar, R. (2008), *The Map of Home*, New York, Penguin.
- Jayyusi, L. (2002), *Letters from the Palestinian Ghetto 8-13th March*, in "Égypte/Monde arabe", Deuxième série, 6, published online 8 July 2008, available at <http://ema.revues.org/936>. (17.03.2016).
- Kadi, J. (1994), *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, Boston, South End Press.
- Kristeva, J., (1985) [1974], *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Latif N. (2008), *Space, Power and Identity in a Palestinian Refugee Camp*, in "REVUE Asylon(s)", n. 5, September, *Palestiniens en / hors camps*, available at <http://www.reseau-terra.eu/article800.html> (18.03.2016).
- Majaj, E. S. (1996), "Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory", in Amritjit Singh, et al (eds.), *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures*, in Boston: Northeastern University Press: 266-290.
- Muaddi Darraj, S. (2007), *The Inheritance of Exile*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press.
- Muaddi Darraj, S. (2015), *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, Amherst and Boston, University of Massachusetts Press.
- Owens, P. (2009), *Reclaiming 'Bare Life'?: Against Agamben on Refugees*, in "International Relations", Vol. 23 n. 4: 567-582.
- Petti, A. (2013), *Beyond the State: The Refugee Camp as a Site of Political Invention*, in "Jadaliyya", 26 March 2013, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10813/beyond-the-state\\_the-refugee-camp-as-a-site-of-pol](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10813/beyond-the-state_the-refugee-camp-as-a-site-of-pol). (18.04.16).
- Salaita, S. (2011), *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press.
- Solombrino, O. (2016), *Arcipelago Palestina. Territori, appartenenze, poetiche digitali della palestinianness*, PhD Dissertation, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale".

Zembylas, M. (2010), *Agamben's Theory of Biopower and Immigrants/Refugees/Asylum Seekers: Discourses of Citizenship and the Implications For Curriculum Theorizing*, in "Journal of Curriculum Theorizing", Vol. 16, n. 2: 31-45.

**MARTA CARIELLO •** is a researcher in English Literature at Seconda Università degli Studi di Napoli. Her research currently focuses mainly on Arab Anglophone women's writing, cultural studies, postcolonial theory and literature, Mediterranean studies. Her most recent publications include articles on strategic multilingualism in Arab Anglophone poetry, Palestinian women's narratives of home and diaspora, the construction of nationhood in diasporic women's literature, as well as the volume *Scrivere la distanza Uno studio sulle geografie della separazione nella scrittura femminile araba anglofona* (Liguori, 2012). She is co-founder and co-editor-in-chief of *de genere. Rivista di Studi Postcoloniali e di genere / Journal of Postcolonial and Gender Studies*; she is on the Editorial Board of *Tolomeo* and of *Politics. Rivista di Studi Politici*. She is an elected member of the AISCLI Scientific Board (Associazione Italiana di Studi sulle Culture e Letterature di lingua Inglese).

**E-MAIL •** [martacariello@gmail.com](mailto:martacariello@gmail.com)