

the French existentialist-phenomenological tradition, with its attempts to address the 'question of the other'. In the works of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, and in the development that these have received in the thought of Bernhard Waldenfels, much has been said about existential homelessness, and the relationality and liminality of self and other that are highlighted in Agier's essay.

It is hard to say, however, whether these comments highlight shortcomings of the argument, or whether they testify to its vigour, in that they point to directions it may be extended. Be that as it may, *Borderlands* presents a bold and original intervention on topics of central importance in our time, and deserves to be widely read.

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GABIAM, NELL. *The Politics of Suffering: Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps*.

208 pp. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016

The contests this book describes, surrounding material improvements in the built environment of a Palestinian refugee camp in pre-conflict Syria, are in one sense, tragically obsolete. Most Palestinians in the war-ravaged country have been displaced and are dependent upon humanitarian aid. At least 70 per cent of the population of the immense Damascene Yarmouk camp, portrayed by Gabiam as a thriving, distinctively Palestinian urban centre, has fled or been driven out, while the much smaller Ein al-Tal, a recently built camp and locus of Gabiam's ethnography, had its entire population expelled in 2013 by armed opposition groups. Moreover, Palestinians, who had been for so long part of Syria's national self-image as the vanguard of Arab resistance to Zionism, are now seen by some as a source of competition for scarce resources: 'The goods of the country for the people of the country', in the words of one slogan Gabiam reports.

Nevertheless, this text provides a fresh insight into some critically important processes, not least in the wake of mass movements of people at the current moment. It revolves around the following questions: how distinctive must Palestinian refugees be within their host countries if their status as people who still belong in Palestine – and are entitled to return to Palestine – is to be in no way diminished; and, how important is present hardship to this distinctiveness, alongside other markers such as location, particular Palestinian social configurations, political activism, the persistence of certain symbols, or internal, psychological memory?

Based on fieldwork mostly conducted at and since the turn of the century, *The Politics of Suffering* illuminates refugees' attempts to answer these questions by attending to the technocratic, political and humanitarian debates surrounding a proposal on the part of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the agency tasked with advancing Palestinian refugees' material interests, to renovate a refugee camp called Neirab near Aleppo.

The Introduction establishes the parameters of the book and its aim of tackling questions of external actor involvement, as well as of the actions and narratives of refugees themselves. It also describes the author's location as a participant observer who volunteered for UNRWA while conducting her research, and introduces Gabiam's theoretical commitments, not least to ensuring that agency is recognized where, in the case of Palestinian refugee camps, there may be a tendency to portray its people and their engagement with space as static, a process only of preservation. Chapter one describes the situation of Palestinians in Syria, where they had considerably more rights, short of citizenship, than in neighbouring Lebanon, and shows how the description of Palestinians as 'kin' within Syrian official discourse served both regime and Palestinian interests. For the state, relating to Palestinians as younger brothers reflected the paternalistic claims of the Assad regimes, both enhancing their anti-Zionist credentials, and recalling the epoch of a Greater Syria in which all of the Levant was under the sway of Damascus. Moreover, emphasizing the Palestinian cause created an outlet for political activism in the country, which was otherwise thoroughly suppressed. For Palestinians, their enhanced residency rights gave them a greater level of freedom, prosperity and dignity, in comparison to their compatriots in Lebanon, while preserving their community as a refugee population on its way, eventually, back to Palestine.

Indeed, the remainder of the book centres on the dilemma created by the desire to live as freely as possible, and the desire to preserve something of the moment of suffering – the Palestinian *Nakba*, or catastrophe, namely their displacement in 1948 – in the present. Chapter 2 focuses on the role of UNRWA, which seeks to respond, inadequately in Gabiam's view, to the political problem of Palestinian displacement through humanitarian, and increasingly neoliberal, 'capacity-building' solutions. Gabiam shows how UNRWA itself is a site of contest, a dynamic and conflicted actor whose own story reflects the changing interests and priorities of powerful international actors. Chapter 3 focuses on the proposed rehabilitation of Neirab, alongside the development of nearby Ein al-Tal, and on contesting interpretations of what such a project meant for UNRWA, not least because it represented the international order, and the refugees themselves, among whom there was considerable disagreement over what could change and what needed to stay the same for Palestinian refugees to retain their anchoring story in the *Nakba*. The contested meaning of the built environment is more thoroughly examined in Chapter 4, while Chapter 5 takes us to the biggest Palestinian refugee camp, Yarmouk near Damascus, where a distinctively Palestinian space was nevertheless integrated to a considerable degree into the capital. Returning to Neirab and Ein al Tal, Gabiam presents these spaces in terms of their residents' self-narratives, and shows what is at stake when material 'improvements' are proposed. A conclusion looks at the narrative and performative ways in which the Palestinian 'politics of suffering' and the 'politics of citizenship' could be synthesized or transcended, and how this allows

us to rethink the concept of citizenship. The Epilogue however, brings us up to date and describes the second *Nakba* of Syria's destruction as experienced by some of its Palestinian residents.

Some would wish for a more systematic argument, and her key claims seem to be asserted more often than necessary, but the way the material is organized and certain themes reprised, like motifs, affords the text a suggestiveness of tone which will allow different readers to think with the material differently. It thereby speaks to a range of theories on environment, space and place, urbanity, race, locality, memory, narrative, identity, the authoritarian state, humanitarianism and migration, and provides a valuable perspective onto underrepresented expressions of the Palestinian experience. Most compelling to this reader, was not how greatly Gabiam's interlocutors treasure the right of return – this we already knew – or even their unwillingness to risk de-materializing the anchoring story of original loss by unpicking it from the fabric of their built environment, but the way in which the story of exile and loss becomes a way of navigating their everyday environment: a way, paradoxically, of being at home.

This way of navigating is also part of the relevance of this particular tragedy to the Syrian catastrophe unfolding against an uncertain geopolitical backdrop. It is hard to overstate the likely impact of millions of disrupted and dislocated selves now narrating themselves anew in unfamiliar contexts. What 'wounds' will they need to keep open in defiance of the integrative discourse of host governments? And what will this relationship look like, not least physically, in their new, perhaps indefinitely provisional, homes?

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McMURRAY, DAVID and UFHEIL-SOMERS, AMANDA (eds.). *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East*. 272 pp. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

*The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East* is a collection of essays and articles, originally published in *Middle East Report*, relating to the political, economic and social contexts of the phenomenal wave of protests and uprisings that swept across North Africa and into the Middle East in 2011. A product of the Washington based *Middle East Research and Information Project* (MERIP), the articles are penned by a rich diversity of scholars and professionals working in the region, including journalists, historians, political scientists and anthropologists. In accordance with MERIP's remit, the analyses provided by the various contributions were drawn together in a timely manner, within the heady early months of the 'Arab Spring', and offer a 'meso-level' appraisal of the causes and possible consequences