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PARADOXES OF ERASURE: PALESTINIAN MEMORY AND THE POLITICS OF FORGETTING IN POST-DICTATORSHIP CHILE

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In this essay I explore the relationship between diasporic Palestinian memory and the politics of forgetting in post-dictatorship Chile. Drawing on ethnographic material from long-term fieldwork in Santiago, I argue that dual processes of remembrance and forgetting are central to a diasporic Palestinian politics that hinges on ideas of resistance and that always refers to the ongoing struggle of the Palestinian people, but that is also located within something of a memory void with regards to the recent Chilean past. The essay points to the paradoxical ways in which Palestinian-Chilean remembrance aiming to counter attempts at negation and erasure elsewhere often entails a compliance with the symbolic violence of a wider-reaching politics of oblivion in the Chilean era of post-dictatorship. By taking such an approach, I seek to nuance our understanding of the political dynamics of memory and to highlight the analytical potential in approaching diasporic practices at the intersection between local context and transnational points of reference.

Introduction

On a sunny and surprisingly warm Saturday morning in early June, when the Chilean winter with its cold and rain seemed to have retreated only to gather force for another approach, I found myself at the entrance to Parque Arauco. One of the biggest, and perhaps the fanciest, of Santiago's newer shopping centres, Parque Arauco was easy to get entirely lost in. I had not come to shop, however, but rather to meet Gabriela,¹ the young woman who had acted as my first connection to the Palestinian collective sphere in Santiago eight months previously. Together, coffee in hand, we found a spot in the sun outside where she could smoke a cigarette and we would not be bothered by the noise of coffee grinders. "To me," she said as she looked at me from across the small metal table between us, "resistance is as simple as being alive ... being Palestinian, identifying myself as a Palestinian. It's a way of holding ourselves together, holding together our identity as a people."² Gabriela's statement stands as an apt example of what engaging with Palestine from Santiago for many, in broad strokes, is about. It is a keeping intact, a holding together of a people. At the same time, as I hope to show in what follows, Palestinian resistance in the context of Chile also entails a refusal to engage with the years of military rule from 1973 to 1990 and the present-day effects of the violence and wide-reaching political reform that they spurned. In that sense, the political project of remembering a particular Palestinian way of being goes hand in hand with forgetting a potentially troublesome and divisive Chilean past.

This essay explores the politics of memory among Palestinian-Chileans in Santiago and aims to show how the commitment to Palestinian resistance in this context often results in a somewhat paradoxical resistance to the politically fraught issue of remembrance in the wake of the Chilean dictatorship. As a consequence, efforts to counter the symbolic erasure of Palestine via an engagement with memory bring about a seemingly contradictory absenting of the recent Chilean past. For the purposes of this essay, memory is understood as a social phenomenon first and foremost; it is understood as practice, as action, indeed as work (Gillis 1994; Hirsch 2008; Huyssen 2003; Rothberg 2009). With that, this essay seeks to highlight an analytical approach to diasporic memory that foregrounds the always shifting and contested role of remembrance within particular political contexts where a shared past is narrated and otherwise made present in diverse and sometimes contrasting ways. Drawing on ethnographic material from long-term fieldwork in Santiago, the essay highlights how a troublesome Chilean past is tucked away, actively forgotten, while a cohesive version of a politicized Palestinian past is pushed forward into the present through reiterated narratives of resistance, thus making for a notable presence of the Palestinian where the Chilean is made absent. By scrutinizing diasporic Palestinian memory politics in relation to

1 All names have been changed and some personal details left out to ensure anonymity.

2 All interview quotations have been translated from Spanish by the author.

the particular context of post-dictatorship Chile, I hope to lend fresh perspectives to the study of memory in the wake of state violence and likewise underscore the importance of local context to studies of diasporic politics.

The first part of the essay, made up of two sections, will focus on the particular context that informs the issues at stake. This context is remarkable for being bound to two distinct national histories that, despite their differences, form a coherent, albeit complex, backdrop to political engagement and memory work among Palestinian-Chileans. The second part, also comprised of two sections, will delve further into the notions and practices of resistance that are at the very centre of the social dynamics at play and show how, for Palestinian-Chileans, the work of memory cannot be separated from a kind of resistance that entails both defiance in the face of efforts to erase Palestine – literally as well as figuratively – and an unwillingness to confront the violence of the Chilean era of military rule.

Making for a Palestinian presence in Santiago

The Palestinian presence in Chile goes as far back as the turn of the twentieth century. Palestinian immigrants had in all likelihood begun arriving even earlier, but according to family narratives and historical records the real foundation for the Palestinian presence in Santiago was laid in the late 1800s and early 1900s when especially young, single men began making their way from Ottoman-ruled Palestine to Chile and other parts of Latin America (Arancibia Clavel, Arancibia Clavel, and Jara Hinojosa 2010; Baeza 2014; Foroohar 2011). The vast majority of Palestinian families in Chile today can trace their roots back to Bethlehem or, as is even more common, the nearby villages of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. Stemming from these predominantly Christian communities, and professing this minority religion, many young men ostensibly left home out of fear of being used as cannon fodder by a weakened Ottoman Empire in the years leading up to World War I (Arancibia Clavel, Arancibia Clavel, and Jara Hinojosa 2010). Generally, it is said, these emigrants came from poor families, although not so poor that the extensive journey to Chile could not be afforded.

The first Palestinians in the country might thus have come with their pockets more or less empty, but they came with a certain entrepreneurial spirit that in large part has come to characterize the Palestinian presence in Chile. Many of the Palestinians who came inland to Santiago after having arrived by boat on the coast set up shop in the neighbourhood of Patronato, just north of the city centre. According to many of the family histories that were relayed to me during my fieldwork, a large number of Palestinian immigrants started out as peddlers and street vendors when they first came to Chile.

One person told me the story of how her grandparents had started out selling newspapers and “fixing things” before moving on to become shop-owners and landlords in Patronato, and indeed this was a story not out of the ordinary. Arguably, in the early decades of the twentieth century, it was Patronato that made for the first notable Palestinian presence in Santiago. It was, and to a slightly lesser degree still is, an area full of Palestinian and Arab shops, factories, and cafés, as well as cultural and religious institutions. While many Palestinian-Chileans have moved their business elsewhere by now and few still live in the area, the streets of Patronato continue to be marked by the colours of the Palestinian flag on storefronts and billboards and the smell of *shawarma* flowing from the small restaurants that line the streets of the neighbourhood.

Although faced with discrimination, expressed perhaps most directly in the widespread use of the derogatory term *turco* to identify those who had come to the country holding Ottoman passports, the Palestinians in Chile quickly grew in number and started organizing themselves in various Palestinian and Arab institutions. In 1912 Palestinians founded Chile’s first newspaper in Arabic, and in the years leading up to this, Ottoman or Arab organizations had sprung up in at least eleven towns across the country (Arancibia Clavel, Arancibia Clavel, and Jara Hinojosa 2010, 82, 84). The joint effects of external discrimination and internal organization kept Chile’s Arab population close together, and as more and more Palestinians arrived to join family or friends, specifically Palestinian institutions began sprouting. The sports association Club Sportivo Palestina – which later became Club Deportivo Palestino – was thus founded in 1916 while the membership-based Club Palestino was established in central Santiago in 1938 before being moved to the Las Condes district in the late 1940s. Both of these institutions still exist, and they continue to be important centres of diasporic Palestinian life in the Chilean context. With the heightened tensions in Palestine following World War I, the Palestinian struggle became a focal point among Chile’s Palestinian immigrants, and the notion of a liberated Palestine became an ideal that has since been passed on to generation after generation of Palestinian-Chileans (Arancibia Clavel, Arancibia Clavel, and Jara Hinojosa 2010, 117). As such, while being Palestinian in Chile is only to a very limited extent directly marked by the trauma of Israeli violence, the Palestinian cause and the struggle for a free Palestine became an early and lasting concern that still has a massive influence on Palestinian social, cultural, and political life in the Chilean capital.³

3 While the Palestinian-Chilean minority in Chile is predominantly made up of pre-1948 migrants and their descendants, a

Today, the Palestinian sphere in Santiago is rooted in a number of organizations and institutions, with the impressive Club Palestino standing out as the absolute hub of communal life. Currently laid out on a large piece of land in the city’s Las Condes district, the club features football fields, tennis courts, a fully equipped gym, two cafés, a bowling alley, a number of meeting rooms,

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number of Palestinians have made their way to Chile in the years following the establishment of the State of Israel, not least a relatively large group of Muslim Palestinians that came to the country in 2008 after having lived as refugees in Iraq.

outdoor pools, and several halls to be used for wedding parties, concerts, conferences, and other events. These facilities not only afford its members with an impressive image toward the club's surroundings, but also accommodate practically any form of gathering. This, in turn, means that meetings, lectures, parties, workouts, and friendly lunches can all be kept within the club, creating, as it were, an intimate sphere marked by a distance to the wider Chilean society that is articulated both physically and socially. Not only is the club exclusive to those who can trace their ancestors back to Palestine, the exclusivity is also underscored by walls and metal gates that only open to outsiders by approval of the security guard posted in front.

However, the reasons for building an exclusively Palestinian place like Club Palestino in Las Condes go beyond efforts at securing a Palestinian presence in light of experienced discrimination and the dawn of conflict in the old land. Indeed, the existence of the place itself, along with its location in one of the wealthier districts of the capital city, points to the changing social position of those it tends to. Many Palestinian-Chileans have done well for themselves since the early days of immigration, not least during the years of military rule, and both families, businesses, and institutions have thus largely abandoned central Santiago and moved northeast in the city to find security, quiet, and comfort. Part of a larger wave of Palestinian migration within the city itself, then, the club relocated much of communal Palestinian life to the heart of one of Santiago's most upscale areas. Importantly, this development must be understood within a wider political framework and points to a prevalent tendency among Palestinian-Chileans to keep a certain distance from reminders of the troubling effects of the dictatorship era and its politics.

Violence and diverging politics

Chile's years of dictatorship and the political developments that culminated in the coup of 1973 have been dealt with extensively by scholars far and wide (e.g. Huneus 2007; Mouliau 1997; Paley 2001; Stern 2006) and are not the main focus here. However, the violence of dictatorship has had a lasting impact on Chilean society, not to mention a chillingly profound effect on those who endured it first hand or had to deal with the abuse of family members, colleagues, and friends. While many went into exile abroad,⁴ executions, torture, and disappearances were commonplace and made Augusto Pinochet's Chile an infamous case of state violence on a grand scale. At the same time, as Paley (2001, 7) writes, the military coup "introduced one of the most comprehensive free market restructurings ever attempted worldwide."

4 According to Stern (2010, 36), "well-informed estimates range from 200,000 to 400,000" Chileans going into exile, mainly for political,

but some also for economic reasons; according to Meade (2001), however, UN estimates claim that around a million Chileans left the country from 1973 until the mid-1980s.

The Chile of today, still heavily influenced by the regime of the past, is highly privatized and to a great extent driven by consumerism. For some, including many Palestinian-Chileans, the long process of privatization within Chilean society has been a source of growing financial success. At the same time, as Han (2012) has shown, for many lower-class Chileans daily life is now marked by insurmountable debt. The liberalized economy and the inequality that goes with it, both tightly connected to a violent history, are unmistakable traits of Chilean society and continue to act as reminders of both what was and what could have been. In a post-dictatorship context characterized by a remarkable disparity between the haves and the have-nots, and likewise marked by the disparate memories of all those affected in one way or the other by military rule and its consequences, it is unsurprising that the past remains controversial and that memory work remains an ongoing and difficult labour. Indeed, as Stern (2010, xxi) has pointed out, the violence that followed from the military coup in 1973 has generated something of “a contentious memory question in Chilean life.” As a result, often-diverging memories of the past from the pre-Pinochet years when democratically elected Salvador Allende held the presidential seat, until the end of military rule, have become central points of discord in a Chile divided along both political and socioeconomic lines (Stern 2010, xxiii).

The divisions, political as well as economic, that have laid their claim on Chilean life for decades now, rendering the question of memory contentious, are significant to the issues brought forth here. Chile is still in many ways a society marked by rupture, and remnants of the past continue to bring to the fore a multitude of opposing political views (Lira 2011). As I will come back to on the following pages, domestic politics are by and large kept out of the communal realm among Palestinian-Chileans in Santiago. However, the somewhat fragmented political landscape of this collective sphere indeed reflects the overall political fault lines of the era of post-dictatorship. This landscape, to keep with the image, tells of greatly diverging political standpoints and, with that, a lack of cohesion when it comes to ideological approaches to domestic issues. Club Palestino might carry more or less subtle references to financial success within the neoliberal system of contemporary Chile. At the same time, as another home to the Palestinian diasporic community, Patronato tells a different story; a working-class story, an immigrant story, a story of adversity and, eventually, of overcoming adversity. Many Palestinian-Chileans see the struggle that played out among their parents and grandparents in the neighbourhood as connected to larger struggles, in Palestine as well as in Chile. As a consequence, their politics is often one of solidarity and thus also one often associated with the political left wing.

One example of someone who made that connection was Andrea. During a conversation in her home, Andrea explained to me how her views on Chilean

politics and her commitment to the Palestinian cause relate to one another. A woman in her early fifties and by her own definition a third-generation Palestinian in Chile, Andrea took active part in the political work within Palestinian-Chilean organizations during dictatorship. She was among the first members of the Chilean chapter of the General Union of Palestinian Students, an organization that fostered perhaps the most overt political involvement in the Palestinian cause and that forged ties to similar organizations within and beyond Chile during the years of military rule (Zelkovitz 2015). As part of this involvement, Andrea and her friends from the organization were active and vocal in their politics, and often, as she told me, “had planning meetings and political discussions that lasted all night.” Their politics did not go unnoticed, however. “Back then,” as she explained, “we were harassed, called communists, *turcos* and terrorists for wearing our *keffiyehs* in the street.”

At that particular time, the scarf that still acts as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism, that had been donned by the infamous Leila Khaled and become an icon with Yasser Arafat, came to stand for much more than the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. As Andrea describes, it was thought to connote a socialist politics of resistance—something that was unavoidably seen to pose a threat to the state of things in Chile, and something that therefore caused trepidation (Abugattas 1982). To Andrea and others back then, expressing a commitment to the Palestinian struggle came with what was regarded as an inherent opposition to military rule. As her account shows, this put strain on a political atmosphere that was already riddled with tension. For Andrea and some of her Palestinian-Chilean friends back then, however, there was something to it. Their politics did in fact spill over from the Palestinian cause to the Chilean left wing, as many saw the struggles of ordinary Chileans as symbolically connected to the struggle of the Palestinian people. Meanwhile, being at a relatively safe distance from the reality in Palestine, the Palestinian was a cause easily resorted to in a context where being anti-regime and engaging in subversive practices was a dangerous undertaking. As Andrea has taken her politics with her into post-dictatorship Chile, she remains active within the Palestinian communal realm and likewise critical of the current state of domestic Chilean affairs. In her view, even now, being engaged in the Palestinian cause and professing a conservative politics at the same time displays an incongruence that to her great chagrin is prevalent at Club Palestino and beyond.

To Andrea, being Palestinian-Chilean and pro-Palestine is strongly tied to taking a leftist position on issues nationally as well as internationally, but for many others it is not so. In fact, the years of military rule were by many seen as a blessing. Many businesses gained momentum during those years and that meant, among other things, that Palestinian-Chilean families were able to move out of crowded Patronato in central Santiago and up to Las Condes. Presently, although some might like it to be otherwise, the Palestinian

collective sphere in Santiago is largely constituted around a majority of people who campaigned against socialist president Michelle Bachelet as she ran for office a second time in late 2013 and by and large supported Pinochet's mandate and politics during military rule.

Echoing other strong Palestinian-Chilean voices on the matter was Alberto, a young man who was very involved in social life at Club Palestino and pro-Palestine political mobilization during the time of my fieldwork. As we sat in his kitchen with a plate of sweets between us and the radio playing softly in the background, Alberto told me that, in his own opinion, "he did bad things, but essentially Pinochet made Chile a better place." Later on, as she bemoaned the prospect of seeing Bachelet rise to power for another turn at the Chilean presidency, Laila, a young woman I had come to know well during my time in Santiago, formulated her stance even more strongly by simply stating "everything was better when Pinochet was in power." Both Alberto and Laila were too young to have experienced life under military rule first hand, but were nonetheless clear on the matter. Moreover, this sort of assessment of the past fell in line with an overarching conservative streak within the communal Palestinian realm.

When I met Gabriela, she provided me with her own perspective on the diverging politics at play within the Palestinian communal sphere. At our table outside the shopping mall, she presented her personal analysis as she grappled with the conservative tendency among her fellow Palestinian-Chileans. To her, the fact that many adopt a right-wing stance on domestic politics hinged first and foremost on the financial success many Palestinian families and businesses experienced. In Gabriela's own words, "what happens in Chile is that if you belong to the upper class, you have to be rightist. There are very few people from the upper class that are leftist." After a sip of coffee, she went on to explain:

It's that ... ideals are one thing, but reality is another. If they're getting in your pockets, well ... When you have more to protect, you're more careful. If you don't have much, you have less to lose and more to struggle for.

Herself critical of the widespread conservatism among Palestinian-Chileans, Gabriela nevertheless saw the logic behind it.

For many Palestinian-Chileans, gaining political support as business people – and in some cases factory owners – with Pinochet's implementation of neo-liberal policies was no doubt experienced as a positive development following the Allende presidency.⁵ If we follow Gabriela's reasoning, this development has in turn meant sticking to a recent Chilean brand of conservatism that is closely connected to promoting neoliberal reform. Unsurprisingly, there exists a not-so-subtle awareness of the rift between those who consider themselves left-leaning and those who have adopted a more conservative stance on

5 A fascinating example of a Palestinian immigrant and entrepreneur is Juan Yarur, whose cotton

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mill was seized by its own workers during the Allende era, albeit well after his own death and the takeover of the business by his sons (Winn 1986).

national politics among Santiago's Palestinian-Chileans. Indeed, Gabriela was not the first to express her dislike of the conservative trend, which she traced back to the financial success among Chile's Palestinians and their descendants. However, this awareness did not often find expression beyond the private sphere. Although often outspoken in the field of politics, Gabriela, like many of her friends, mostly kept her political views on Chilean society to herself when taking part in communal activities at Club Palestino and elsewhere. Likewise, both Alberto and Laila let their views on Pinochet and the intricacies of Chilean politics be known by me only at a distance to their Palestinian-Chilean peers. By doing so they all fell in line with what I explore further below: a widespread inclination to silence and effectively forget about Chilean politics in a diasporic context where remembering Palestine is the preeminent political project.

Traumatic histories and the lure of oblivion

I had met Sandra at an outdoor concert during the Santiago spin on the international Israeli Apartheid Week, and as it quickly turned out, she had her own take on the tendency to quiet down issues regarding Chilean politics in Palestinian-Chilean circles. I met her again on a cloudy and cold autumn afternoon in downtown Santiago a couple of weeks after our first meeting. We were sitting outside a small café when Sandra, pulling her shoulders up to her ears in an attempt to keep warm, explained that one history is simply easier to deal with than the other. As she put it: "It is just a lot easier to talk about Palestine than to deal with national politics." Having grown up with a Chilean father and a Palestinian mother, now in her mid-twenties and engaged more than ever in Palestinian political and cultural life in Santiago, Sandra saw a clear discrepancy between how Chilean and Palestinian pasts and politics are approached, respectively, and she had already told me how the years of dictatorship seemed to have left Chile somehow disabled by the past. With her comments during that conversation, I believe Sandra pointed to something central: that the issue of Palestine is not only "easier" to deal with, but that remembering Palestine, to Sandra and many others, is also a political act that seems perhaps to carry more political potency than any form of engagement with a troubled Chilean past.

Memory has been at the centre of numerous studies on post-dictatorship Chile, as well as on a Palestinian reality, both past and present, that remains immensely conditioned by what is known to Palestinians as the *Nakba*, literally the "catastrophe," which has been ongoing since the events leading up to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (Frazier 2007; Gómez-Barris 2009; Said 2000; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). As nations

both characterized by histories of conflict, although in many ways different to one another, Chile and Palestine are undeniably marked by a continuous reckoning with the past. One very important factor sets the Chilean and Palestinian cases apart, however; while most official efforts to reckon with past atrocities seem to have come to a halt in Chile, recurrent bursts of violence and the continued occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel regularly spur investigations. At the same time, both histories continue, albeit in very different ways, to have a bearing on social life among Palestinian-Chileans.

Omar Al-Qattan (2007, 191), writing on the *Nakba*, seems to speak both to the Palestinian and the Chilean experience when he contends that “when the individual narratives of pain accumulate, they become not only inescapable, but also impossible to dispel, at least for a few generations.” Hard as they may be to dispel, however, memories and narratives of a painful past seem to have been, in effect, widely silenced in post-dictatorship Chile. According to Frazier (2007, 147), the years following the end of military rule “for the most part embraced the related memory modes of nostalgia (celebrating a past clearly delimited from the present) and melancholy (mourning a past political possibility that holds no promise for the present).” She goes on to argue both these modes of memory come from a sense that history has come to an end, that the past has indeed passed and that the future will “merely elaborate the logics of the present” (147). With the past irrevocably gone, then, some have argued a certain unwillingness to engage with that past has resulted in a specifically Chilean “culture of oblivion,” characterized by the compulsion to forget a troubled and potentially troubling past (Stern 2010, xxix). Although this “culture” is often challenged by popular efforts to not let the events of the past slip away, active memory work does seem to have been somewhat lulled within the domain of the political establishment in present-day Chile.

In both the Palestinian and Chilean cases, of course, memories remain sites of struggle (Frazier 2007, 9; Hite, Collins, and Joignant 2013), but while Chilean politics continues to be a source of ruptures and fractures, overt engagement with memories of ongoing violence in Palestine is part and parcel of Palestinian-Chilean politics. Although inconspicuous in nature, this unwillingness to engage with the violent Chilean past and its effects is expressed more than anything in the silence on and lack of engagement with the national politics of the present in the collective sphere.

Daniel Jadue, a descendant of Palestinians and now mayor of the Santiago district of Recoleta, recounts what it was like growing up Palestinian in Chile in a book that was published during the time of my fieldwork. While his childhood was confined to Chile in the physical sense, “there was never a birthday or a family gathering where we did not talk about Palestine, about the military occupation, and about Israeli state terrorism” (Jadue 2014, 15; my translation from Spanish). Jadue’s reflection on growing up Palestinian in Chile shows how Palestine and the Israeli occupation were invoked constantly and made

present within the familial realm despite the glaring absence implied in the geographical distance between the family home and the place of violence. To Jadue, however, Palestine was “geographically distant, but *present*, emotionally, in every step I took” (14; my italics). For him and many others, daily life was and continues to be lived in a specific Chilean context, but is at the same time massively influenced by the presence of another reality, marked by its own history and invoked by always remembering, individually, but perhaps especially collectively.

This dynamic of remembering Palestine and forgetting Chile has indeed become a central feature of the Palestinian-Chilean diasporic community in Santiago, where the focus rests on resisting the ongoing erasure of Palestine. In light of a Chilean past that has extended into the present to make for an exceedingly complex political context with all its more-or-less subtle points of rupture, most Palestinian-Chileans seem to have opted for a practice of forgetting, of immersing themselves and each other in an atmosphere of oblivion that appears to be prevalent when it comes to establishment politics in Chile. At the same time, as this forgetting has caused, in effect, something of a mnemonic vacuum or “memory void” (De Cesari 2012), memories and attitudes tied to a decidedly Palestinian experience are taken up in lieu of those which seem so much more difficult to deal with. The Palestinian experience, in turn, is strongly tied to notions and narratives of resistance.

The paradoxes of Palestinian-Chilean memory politics

During my time in Santiago, a whole week was dedicated to commemorating and discussing the *Nakba*, including film screenings, a series of lectures on “thinking Palestine,” panel discussions, a formal commemorative ceremony at Club Palestino, and finally a grand show featuring dance and music. These events, and particularly the grand finale, gathered many Palestinian-Chileans and quite a few interested outsiders, not to mention diplomats and politicians who had been invited to demonstrate their support and solidarity with the Palestinian people. The events that marked this occasion brought together the past and the present in commemorating what was repeatedly referred to as an *ongoing* catastrophe for the Palestinian people. Indeed, the idea that a devastating past is yet unfinished in Palestine is widespread and continues to be fuelled by the continuing occupation of Palestinian lands and recurring Israeli violence. More than an idea, however, the trope of the *Nakba* as ongoing disaster is part of a prevalent narrative of resistance. In the words of Jayyusi (2007, 110; see also Abu-Lughod 2007), the *Nakba* is often considered “the foundational station in an unfolding and continuing saga of dispossession, negations, and erasure,” forming part of a “living

narrative, which continues to reconstitute the salience of the past in the fabric of the present.” The events of that week in Santiago put those words into practice by mobilizing a large group of Palestinian-Chileans to take active part in a sort of memory work that pertained specifically to the Palestinian rather than Chilean past.

The main waves of migration between Palestine and Chile flowed in the first half of the twentieth century, and set off well before the era of settler-colonial violence commenced in Palestine. However, the collective Palestinian sphere in Santiago, in its more-or-less grounded and organized form, came to be in large part through a process closely connected with the escalation of violence in the old land. As quotidian oppression continues to tighten its grip on Palestine, practices that serve to keep Palestine present and the Palestinian people together continue to lend shape to Palestinian-Chilean memory politics in Santiago. The *Nakba* has not in and of itself laid the foundation of Palestinian life in the Chilean capital; rather, the very practice of remembering, of keeping Palestine and the Palestinian cause present, continues to shape a collective Palestinian sphere to which the notion of resistance is key. More than anything, I suggest, the Palestinian cause has served to hold together, and still holds together, collective Palestinian life in Chile, just as Gabriela suggested in the opening paragraph of this essay (Arancibia Clavel, Arancibia Clavel, and Jara Hinojosa 2010, 215). Tightly bound to this cause and the practices that keep it present are reiterated narratives and memories of a common past marked by struggle. That these memories do not pertain to individual Palestinian-Chileans is secondary. They are memories generated and reiterated through narratives that might be grounded in the first-hand experiences of others elsewhere, but that are rooted in a Palestinian experience that does not limit itself to the forever-changing geographical makeup of Palestine. Further, as the Israeli occupation continues to dictate the everyday realities of people in the old land, these narratives are expanded and nuanced in coherence with news that flows from family, friends, and strangers in Palestine, potency added with every heated debate at the dinner table and elsewhere.

Jadue also takes up the concept of resistance when he writes on a trip to Palestine, and relates:

It was not hard for me to understand that in Palestine, everything that the Palestinians do from day to day is, ultimately, an act of resistance. Taking their children to school, opening their shops, visiting their relatives, planting an olive tree or an orange tree, having children; in short, to keep living: all of it, all of it is an act of resistance. (2014, 86–87)

With that, Jadue explains, during his time in Palestine he came to understand “that the struggle takes place everywhere, all the time” (87). In this passage, Jadue reflects on daily life in Palestine, but he touches on exactly that sort of

quotidian, unspectacular form of resistance that is brought into the context of Santiago via narratives such as his own.

While most Palestinians have little choice but to go on with life under occupation, Palestinian-Chileans choose to adopt a version of Palestinian resistance adapted and modified to fit into their own everyday reality. Keeping Palestine alive and present is central to a kind of resistance to which claiming a past, indeed claiming a shared history, is pivotal. By taking part in communal activities, going to events, conveying through words and actions a belonging to the Palestinian people, Palestinian-Chileans take part in a political project to which continued presence is key; all of this within a national context that in many ways is hard to deal with and therefore pushed aside in light of the divisions and the memory struggles it sparks, in the Palestinian collective sphere as well as in wider Chilean society. The central paradox of this tendency is that, in an effort to counter the violence of erasure elsewhere, the dominant Palestinian-Chilean memory politics effectively plays into wider processes of erasing the violence of the recent Chilean past and, importantly, the violence it continues to inflict on local communities in the neoliberal era of post-dictatorship. As a consequence, taking part in resisting the “repressive erasure” (Connerton 2008) of memories of Palestine as a land, a nation, and as a people, often entails taking part in repressing the memory politics of post-dictatorship Chile, whether wittingly or unwittingly.

Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to add nuance to our understanding of how memory politics work in diasporic contexts where several histories intersect in complex and sometimes paradoxical ways. In the particular context of Chile, where people are prone to shy away from the political in terms of domestic affairs, the form of resistance highlighted within the Palestinian collective sphere in Santiago is to a great extent shaped by its surroundings. It is a form constituted exactly at the intersection of a Palestinian history of resistance and a Chilean past that has come to incite collective oblivion and a great reluctance to take a stand on national politics in the communal realm, these tendencies thus creating a space emptied of Chilean politics to be filled with narratives of Palestine. With that, the dynamics at play foreground the importance of the notion of resistance to Palestinian communal life in Santiago, while at the same time pointing to what might be considered a certain mnemonic resistance to matters of domestic politics past and present.

Ultimately, a Chilean political and historical context that would perhaps at first glance seem impossible to put aside, does not in fact play a prominent

part within the Palestinian-Chilean sphere in Santiago. Instead, the relation to domestic issues in Chile is marked by a practice of forgetting, of oblivion, or simply of making absent. Thus, for many Palestinian-Chileans, a past connected with Palestine rather than Chile has taken centre stage, and Palestinian memory has thus to a great extent filled a mnemonic void created by the troublesome nature of Chilean memory politics in the era of post-dictatorship. That is not to say that Palestinian-Chileans do not engage with memories of dictatorship and Chilean politics in the wake of military rule on an individual level – Jadue being but one high-profile example of a commitment to local issues – but that these are most often left aside at the collective level. As we have seen, much of social and political life within the Palestinian-Chilean domain in Santiago reflects efforts to disentangle itself from that stuff of politics and past that belongs to its surroundings.

At the same time, the Palestinian reality is drawn closer through a joint commitment to remembering and retelling the continuing history of Palestinian struggle. “Every Palestinian represents a concrete history of loss – of a society, a country, a national identity,” writes Said (1994, 46). Indeed, the very distance between Chile and Palestine, the loss and the absence, calls for the kind of practices that serve to hold together not just a diasporic community in Santiago, but the Palestinian people as such. Central to these practices are notions and narratives of resistance, tying quotidian life to the Palestinian cause and the ongoing Palestinian struggle. Despite the centrality of remembrance in that regard, memories of a Chilean past that is seemingly much more near at hand are, in effect, made absent, leaving the troublesome issue of post-dictatorship memory erased and removed from the communal realm.

The memory politics of the Palestinian-Chilean diasporic community thus come to be at the intersection between a Chilean reality that has spurred on an overarching politics of forgetting and a certain *being* Palestinian that is grounded in both past and present. Meanwhile, the constant friction between what is made present and what is effectively rendered absent seems to be an inherent force within dynamics that go beyond the Palestinian case. Indeed, the unwillingness among Palestinian-Chileans to engage in national politics within their collective sphere has much to do with the contentious question of memory in a Chile still dealing with the consequences of its recent past. In this context, efforts to reckon with state violence and its after-life continue to be faced with the symbolic violence of mnemonic erasure.

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