



Janet Varner Gunn

A

West Bank

Memoir



S E C O N D L I F E

Foreword by

Lila Abu-Lughod

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*For two sons:
Adam Gunn and Mohammad Abu Aker*

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The Abu Aker family

Malka (Um Nidal, the mother of Nidal)

Naim (Abu Nidal, the father of Nidal)

Nidal and Rafat, twin brothers, the eldest children

Mohammad, the “living martyr”

Hazem, the youngest brother

Nida’, the family’s first daughter

Hala, the second daughter and youngest child

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Foreword

“Our Blood Will Plant Its Olive Tree”

Lila Abu-Lughod

As the Palestinians find their way in a confusing new phase of their history of dispossession, Janet Varner Gunn’s memoir of two years of the Intifada will stand as an eloquent and troubling record of a previous moment. She tells the story of this history in the making as she and the families in a particular place—the politically active Palestinian refugee camp near Bethlehem called Deheishe—lived it. The decision to tell her story in this form, as a memoir of daily life that interweaves her own memories with the experiences of people she came to know through her human rights work, makes this a book that speaks to more than the Palestinian situation. *Second Life* speaks both to the more general experience of what it means to be a “survivor” and to contemporary debates across the humanities and social sciences about forms of knowledge, modes of inquiry, and ways of writing.

In the Everyday

Much has been written on the Intifada, the uprising that began in late 1987 among the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians who had been living under Israeli military occupation for twenty years. Even more has been written on the question of Palestine and what goes by the name of “the Arab-Israeli conflict,” of which the Intifada was but a small part. The

books and articles devoted to this topic fill rows of library stacks, stuff research centers, and occupy busy scholars and partisans. Perspectives vary; opposing arguments seek to persuade. Yet these writings, for the most part, share one thing: they distance readers from the everyday lives of ordinary people making this history.

Gunn instead has chosen to privilege the everyday, the personal, the ordinary (although in the Palestinian case ordinary life takes some extraordinary forms). She wants to get behind what she calls the Big News: the deaths, injuries, punishments, land confiscations, and house demolitions that might be the currency of journalism or the documentation of human rights violations. But she also seems to want to get behind what we might call the Big Topics of scholarly political analysis: 1936, 1948, 1967, 1973, 1987, the British Mandate and the United Nations, blooming deserts, settler colonialism, expulsion, terrorism, the peace process, and so on.

We need to know the Big News; work on the Big Topics is invaluable. But neither can provide what is crucial in a conflict in which one side's suffering was for so long excluded from world concern and in which representations of a community have been so willfully distorted. Gunn intends *Second Life* to provide a much needed "discourse of familiarity" on the Palestinians. This discourse, I have argued in the somewhat different context of a critique of anthropological modes of writing, is an essential element in a humanism that is still our most powerful moral discourse against domination.¹

Concerned about the politics of representation, I had explored in my book on women in a Bedouin community in Egypt how conventional ways of writing about people in other "cultures" might reinforce a sense of separation between "us" in the West and "them" elsewhere that would help underwrite larger structures of global inequality. I worried particularly about writing that worked through generalizing or typifying. Noting that we all live in the world of dailiness, even though the content of our days may be quite different, I suggested that a strategy of writing by focusing on individuals and the particulars of their lives might begin to undermine the pernicious reification of cultural difference.

Although I recognized that social scientific and other generalizing modes were just as often used in describing our own society in the United States as in writing about other societies, I argued that the distancing effect the writing produced was always balanced by the effects of other sorts of accounts. These were the familiar accounts in the ordinary lan-

guage we use in personal conversations to discuss our lives, our friends and family, and our world. But these alternative and offsetting accounts hardly existed in the West for other communities, and so I thought perhaps we would do well to create them.

This is what *Second Life* has done. Gunn has constructed her narrative in the language of everyday events like a conversation with an old man in a room overlooking his garden, a sudden encounter with a mouse and an Israeli patrol while she was breaking curfew to feed some rabbits, and a young man's joking relationship with a piece of lifesaving medical machinery. She has constructed it around the teenager Mohammad Abu Aker, whom she met in 1988 as a serious bullet injury "case" and helped to obtain medical treatment in Boston, to whom she dedicates her book as a second son, whose two years as a "living martyr" of the Intifada she chronicles. She prevents us from forgetting, through this technique, that we are privileged to know something of the lives of people living elsewhere.

Ironically, by trying to get at the everyday and the ordinary, Gunn makes us see that ordinary people in different places are forced to live their lives in vastly different ways. The discourse of familiarity, of individuals and incidents of everyday life, actually enables us to grasp the specificity of the human. For the Palestinians of Deheishe in the late 1980s, this humanity involves living with the real possibilities of violent death—so much so that even when outside observers are pronouncing the Intifada over, Gunn reports that two of her friends remark, as she leaves for the United States and says she will see them in a year, that maybe they will be dead. It involves watching young boys who throw little stones being shot at the funerals of other youngsters. This humanity also involves hospital wards with fourteen-year-old boys whose lives are on the line, one paraplegic because a bullet passed through his spinal cord, one who has lost his finger while making the victory sign.

On a more mundane level, the specificity of the human means the ordinary disturbances and intrusions of house searches and identity card checks and the furtive visits home of young men on the run because they are on "the Bingo list," Israel's inventory of suspected activists. This had all become so much of the everyday that Gunn comments, "The enormity of the outrage under which Deheishe lived its ordinary life hit me full force only when I left Palestine for the familiar territory of home."

If suffering is a taken-for-granted part of everyday life for ordinary people, it is not paralyzing. Gunn notes that the Palestinians she knows

do not make of suffering a badge of their humanity, as do the Jewish characters in Bernard Malamud's stories of the mundane. Instead, they seem to celebrate it in order to continue to fortify their resolve to continue resisting—often, as she says, by trying “to keep hold on the ordinary, no matter what.” She tells of a woman who continued to cross-stitch the sleeve of her dress while her house was being raided and one who rolled grape leaves to feed the family under an extended curfew; she tells of people who marry and have children, who tend gardens and build houses. Most poignantly, she tells of children who fly kites even when Israeli soldiers shoot the kites down, of children who provoke soldiers to shoot round lead bullets coated in rubber so they can replenish supplies for marble games.

To be human and active, for the people Gunn knows in Deheishe, is also to be political. Death is that most human and universal of losses, but even that, in the camp, is made to take on a different meaning. Following the practice instituted during the Intifada, funerals of “martyrs” in Deheishe took on a novel form. There was crying and mourning, especially among the old women for whom this is unbreakable practice. But sweets were also distributed, as at a wedding. Most of the funeral activities involved family, neighbors, and friends, but delegations of political groups also came to pay their respects, and much of the energy of young mourners was spent making and arranging political banners, posters, plaques, and wooden shields. The bravest spray-painted graffiti—for which they could be shot on sight—under cover of darkness. Besides playing on loudspeakers the expected Koranic recitation, mourners sang or played patriotic political songs. Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers watched closely, entering houses at random moments to confiscate “mourning decorations” or shouting to request songs to which they could disco.

This chronicle of Deheishe shows that political activity was an everyday matter. Everyone seemed to be affiliated with a political faction and had a strategy or opinion about what should happen. In a telling scene, Gunn describes how Nasser, a young man of the camp, responded to a request from his older brother, now living in New Jersey, to write him letters about day-to-day life in the camp—leaving out the politics. “How,” he asks, “can I keep politics out of my letters?”

Not all of this political activity is inspiring. Although the book has lessons to teach about the meaning of resistance and revolution, and the resilience of humanity in circumstances of persistent violence and political repression, Gunn does not shy away from some of the ugly effects of the

Situation, as Deheishe residents call it, on relations within the embattled community. She describes factional infighting and bickering. More pointedly, she writes openly about the problem of collaborators, not only revealing the tactics prisoners in Ansar III, the tent prison Israel set up in the Negev, used to expose them but also describing the shunning and even violence that is used to punish them in the camp. What is most troubling about this situation, as in many situations, is that women are dealt with more severely than men are.

What Gunn wants us to remember, though, is that she found a group of people who struggle and suffer but can still laugh and embrace others. Her stories of ordinary people clinging to life and refusing to give up or to leave—stories of what the Palestinians refer to as *sumud*, or steadfastness—remind me of the searing lines of a poem by Mahmoud Darwish.² This is the same poem from which the title of Edward Said's essay-memoir, *After the Last Sky*, was taken. That book, accompanied by Jean Mohr's striking photographs, speaks, like *Second Life*, of the everyday realities of Palestinian lives.³ The poem opens with this line: "The earth is closing in around us, pushing us through the last passage and we tear off our limbs to pass through."

Gunn describes the limbs that people had to tear off: mothers who cut off tears so they will not despair after losing sons, fathers who cut off anger as they wait for the return of sons from prisons, neighbors who cut off friends when they are found to be collaborating with the Israeli authorities.

But Gunn also shows the young people of Deheishe echoing the image of the last line of Darwish's poem as they commemorate the martyrs of the Intifada with portraits that depict them with roots coming down into the earth. The life to which this suffering gives birth will last because it is rooted in the land. In Darwish's words, "We will die here, here in the last passage. Here or here our blood will plant its olive tree."

Situated Writing

In recent years feminist scholars, anthropologists, historians of science, and others have mounted a damning critique of the possibility of objectivity. Tracing the origins of all knowledge in particular perspectives, historical contingency, and partiality, they have gone further than earlier critics of objectivity in the social sciences by arguing that claims to objectivity are themselves political. Noting that only the powerful can

pretend—and believe—that their own position is one of objectivity, that they hold the perspectiveless perspective, feminist scholars have been particularly good at questioning such claims. What Donna Haraway argues, however, is that we are able to make sustainable claims about the knowledge we produce *only* if we *care* about the world; we dare not fall into the relativism of care-less objectivity. Making a case for what she calls “situated knowledges,” she calls for

politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people’s lives; the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.⁴

Second Life is a wonderful illustration of the usefulness of situated knowledge. We never forget in this book how a view is always from somewhere and that what one sees—and is enabled to see and describe—depends on that somewhere. Gunn situates herself as an American, a woman, an academic, a human rights worker, and a long-ago little girl from Western Pennsylvania searching for something. She also situates herself squarely within the Palestinian camp of Deheishe, not outside it looking in over the twenty-foot fence meant to pen residents inside.

She self-consciously invokes situatedness by opening chapter 2 with a contrast between her own first impressions of Deheishe camp and those of David Grossman, the author of *The Yellow Wind*. Where he, a stranger and an Israeli Jew, saw in the rain ugly cement growths, empty grocery shelves, open sewers, and children with runny noses, she, an American human rights volunteer who had just paid one of many hospital visits to a young man from the camp, saw sunshine and a courtyard full of roses, geraniums, daisies, morning glories, and a glassed-in veranda offering panoramic views of Israeli soldiers patrolling the camp around the clock. Grossman described the refugee camp as a place of waiting and nostalgia. Gunn came to see Deheishe from inside the fence that surrounded the camp as a place of constant activity and ongoing lives.

She also positions herself differently from Jean Genet, whose autobiographical memoir of two years in the 1970s in a training camp for Palestinian fighters was posthumously published as *Prisoner of Love*. For

the French writer, Gunn notes, the healing epiphany was a moment—did it ever happen?—when he stayed in a young man’s room; the young man was away fighting, and his mother brought Genet coffee and a glass of water as she would have to her son. It was a moment of recovering the maternal love Genet, abandoned by his prostitute mother, had never had. Gunn too found healing in Palestine, but it was by stepping beyond the exoticism of Old Jerusalem’s Jaffa Gate into the ordinary (but extraordinary) world of Deheishe.

Gunn comes to know some of the women in the camp, but she is never confined to their world. She moves back and forth between the men and the women, actually spending more of her time and learning more from conversations with men, since she does not speak Arabic. Yet she is most often touched by the way women, seeming to sense her pain, take her into their homes and lives.

Loss threads through Gunn’s life, making her sense of homecoming among the Palestinian families of Deheishe poignant and her concern for them understandable. Evoking memories of girlhood—the loss of her father, the frightening experience of a sudden emptiness in the supposedly solid ground of her side yard—she moves to her broken marriage and her mother’s death to make us see that she is a person seeking to know how to survive loss. The circumstances that bring her to know Palestine as more than a biblical place or the home of “terrorists” are related to this search: it was on a sabbatical spent in Israel studying autobiographical writing of Holocaust survivors that she first went to the West Bank.

Gunn’s perspective as someone who worked with the Palestinians determined not only the form in which she chose to write this memoir (as a counterbalancing “discourse of familiarity”) but also the very possibility of knowing the details of everyday life that make such writing possible. Only if you sit in the hospital and see the injury cases coming in can you know what the Intifada meant to those who were punished. Only if you stay in the homes of Deheishe, once tents and now of concrete block, can you know what it is like to live the curfews, searches, and violence that are the “security measures” of the Israeli state.

Her description of the mundane realities of curfew from the perspective of its objects is revealing. We in the United States read about curfews in the newspapers, and the view is always from the outside—from the point of view of those who impose the curfew. How often do we think what it means for those who are confined, unable to go out or to get supplies? Gunn tells us of boredom. Curfew from the inside, Gunn says, is

about “numberless cups of sweet tea, long hours of American sitcoms and Egyptian melodrama on television, and endless watching of the criss-crossing army patrols and groups of youths.” After a few days, “even the sound of live ammunition [becomes] an unremarkable part of the background noise.”

Gunn’s view of Israelis is also determined by her situation. She encounters them as soldiers in her visits to the refugee camp and as officials in her efforts to get medical care and protection for her teenage friend. They shine flashlights in her face and ask where she is going; they knock on the door and search the house she is staying in; they carry guns and shoot people. They display large Israeli flags when they know it will be most offensive. She talks to them in English as a weapon to protect herself and her friends. She is met with surprise, sometimes hostility. Occasionally there is inexplicable politeness or a fleeting moment of common humanity. She notes their occasional fear and embarrassment; more commonly she notes their arrogance or that terrible declaration that “I’m only doing my job.” This is a situated, embodied view of Israelis; it is what they look and feel like when you are in a region under military occupation, in a Palestinian camp that would not be home to 1,650 families unless they had been forced out of their villages and towns, first in 1948 and then in 1967.

For writing and talking about the Middle East, people usually invoke the ideal of “balance” rather than “objectivity.” Yet if one looks closely, one sees that the requirement of balance is enforced only selectively. It applies only to those who are perceived to *have* a perspective: those, in other words, who are differently situated from the dominant, with their perspectiveless perspective. Above all, it applies to those who are situated to know the Palestinian experience. In following Donna Haraway’s argument, however, it is precisely Janet Varner Gunn’s *situatedness* that gives her knowledge its weight.

Giving Voice

Gunn fears that her desire to give voice to the Palestinian people she lived among might have been subverted by her writing this memoir, by the educated Western outsider again speaking for others. But her story of the failure of her autobiography workshop for the Palestine Human Rights Information Center reminds us why outsiders are still needed to *give* voice.

As a Human Rights Center volunteer, she was assigned the task of producing a report on the martyrs of the Intifada, the victims of Israeli state violence. She decided that instead of documenting the circumstances of their deaths, horrifying but numbing, she wanted to profile their lives. It was, after all, as she shows so clearly in *Second Life*, the courage of these young men and women that was celebrated in Palestinian homes, schools, and public events.

Rather than writing the profiles herself, however, she wanted to train the Palestinian field-workers at the center, those who knew the families and the community, to do this writing. She tried to set up a workshop on autobiographical writing for them, but during her two years there she was never able to get the workshop going. Israeli curfews kept preventing meetings. And the Palestinian human rights workers who were supposed to attend the workshop kept disappearing, not because they were not interested, but because they had been taken into administrative detention and carried off for varying lengths of time to the crowded tents and scorching sun of Ansar III, where thousands of them would never be accused of anything specific or brought to trial. Because Palestinians are prevented in so many ways from speaking to the world, it is left to this woman scholar who found her way to the West Bank because she did not want to turn fifty in Greensboro, North Carolina, to give voice to some of them.

She need not worry about “confiscating” their story; by telling it she does not prevent Palestinians from also telling it, as they do through poetry, statements, actions, and even booklets like the 108-page political hagiography Gunn tells us the friends of her martyred “second son” have now written. But they tell it mostly to each other and in ways that sometimes need explaining to outsiders. Gunn is positioned to do that explaining. Calling this a project of border crossing, she offers the memoir as a path outsiders can take to cross over into Deheishe and learn something of how its people live and survive—and why they find it hard to accept the capitulations of “peace agreements.”