

# YOUTH MEDIA IMAGINARIES IN PALESTINE: A HERMENEUTIC EXPLORATION

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## Abstract

A primary purpose of our paper is to demonstrate how young people in refugee camps in Palestine appropriate and reconfigure old and new media in the process of creating personal and social narratives. Focusing on Palestinian identity and selfhood, the project explores *how* and in *what* specific ways, children and young people engage with media forms to express their ideas of politics, citizenship, and democratic participation. The paper shall examine three Palestinian youth initiatives as case studies that span various media – magazines, radio, photography, video, and the new media – particularly the multiple uses of the Internet. Drawing insights from postcolonial and feminist epistemologies, media and cultural studies, certain strands of media education scholarship, the paper shall probe the issues through a set of inter-related questions. What are the salient features of the Palestinian youth media practices? What kinds of media narratives are produced and how do these relate to young people's notions of identity and selfhood? How do young people refashion the notion of the political? What do these media practices mean in Arab cultural contexts and settings?

The researchers paid a visit to the Palestinian Territories and Haifa Israel to meet with youth media leaders and interview youth media writers.

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**Keywords:** Palestinian Youth, Palestinian Youth Media, Palestinian Identity

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A primary purpose of the project is to demonstrate how young people living in refugee camps in Palestine and as minority Palestinian Arabs in Israel appropriate and reconfigure old and new media in the process of creating personal and social narratives. Focusing on Arab Palestinian identity and selfhood (in Arabic *hawiyya* and *dhatiya*), the project explores *how* and in *what* specific ways children and young people engage with media forms to express their ideas of politics, citizenship, and democratic participation. Scholars have shown how young people can draw upon and combine a range of cultural materials – metaphors, symbols, local histories, global ideas – to produce a range of media narratives that are not only bracing critiques of adult-centered conceptions of citizenship, civil society, and public sphere, but also serving as pragmatic elaborations of the various notions (Asthana, 2009; Buckingham, 2007; Feilitzen and Carlsson, 2002). To these young people, citizenship is not as much a matter of contractual and legal obligations as it is a process marked by performative practices. For them, citizenship is as much about consensus as it is about 'conflictual' engagement (Miessen, 2007; Mouffe, 2007).

Palestinian youth share common legacies of socio-economic inequities, ongoing conflict, and the clash of religious and secular ontologies (Abourahme and Hilal, 2008; Bulle, 2009). However, their imagination is shaped not by despair, but to borrow Peter McLaren's (1993, p. 7) phrase, the "arch of social dreaming" – that is, a forum for sharing pain but also for constructing new hope through efforts that arch toward and eventually unite those whose

subordination appears to have minimized the possibility of their active struggle for an emancipated subjecthood.” Mamadou Diouf (2003, p. 6) noted that African and Arab youth are uniquely positioned to mediate across the local and global contexts, particularly in light of the failures of national political enterprises. Furthermore, Diouf argued that “looking beyond national borders, young people appropriate new technologies (digital and audiovisual),” to produce new narratives of democratic engagement. Appadurai (2002, p. 24), meanwhile, through his specific articulation of the idea of “deep democracy,” explains how poor people in the city of Mumbai, India mobilize and rework citizenship and “seek new ways to claim space and voice.” Likewise, Palestinian youth living in refugee camps and in Israel as minority Arabs are engaged in creating numerous media narratives that articulate interesting ideas of the *political*, one that stands in sharp contrast to dominant adult-centered understanding of politics.

The project shall examine four Palestinian youth initiatives as case studies to explore how the praxis of media education is being carried out, especially among poor, underprivileged children and young people from Palestine.<sup>158</sup> These case studies span various media – magazines, radio, photography, video, television, and the new media – particularly the multiple uses of the Internet. To study the various initiatives as case studies, the present project will deploy two methods – narrative and hermeneutic analysis of documents, policies, reports, youth-produced media content, and focused semi-ethnographic interviews with young people, youth media policy-makers, and program managers. Young people gain access to tools of media production in a variety of ways; from training and imparting basic to advanced technical skills, using production facilities and equipment to learning about script writing, story boarding, lighting, set design, page design, layout, digital graphics, and computers. The acquisition of media making knowledge and skills, embedded in the lived experience of young people, offers unique perspectives, a vision and a voice that need to be examined to understand how young people as authors and producers create imaginative ideas about themselves and the social world.

There are deeper issues at stake that relate to how young Palestinians engage with the media, which this project will identify and explore. For instance, some of these issues, stated above, can be better grasped through concepts like embodied practices, affect, and narrative identity. The project takes up the question of creation and production of media content in terms of dialectic between formal and cultural elements that go into the making of various media forms. Drawing insights from postcolonial and feminist theories, media education and cultural studies, the project sketches a praxis<sup>159</sup> oriented analytic framework by bringing together the idea of a “hermeneutic self” from Paul Ricoeur’s (1996) work, the notion of “social imaginaries” developed by postcolonial theory (Gaonkar, 2002; Appadurai, 2002; 1995; Chatterjee, 2004, Said, 2004), and new media studies concepts like participation, remediation, and bricolage (Lievrouw, 2006; Deuze, 2003; Bolter and Grusin, 1999). We probe the issues through a set of inter-related questions. What are the salient features of the Palestinian youth media practices? What kinds of media narratives are produced and how do these relate to young people’s notions of identity and selfhood? How do young people refashion the notion of the political?

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<sup>158</sup> Young people’s media practices span a wide range of activities – from learning technical, production, writing, and reporting skills to developing and deconstructing media content – and are closely connected to the processes of media education and literacy. In contrast to the common understanding of literacy as acquisition of technical, analytical and creative skills usually applied in classroom situations, curriculum development, and policy related legislations, Colin Lankshear, and Michele Knobel (2003) argue that the concept of media education and literacy is embedded in a range of social and cultural practices of reading, writing, and seeing.

<sup>159</sup> Praxis is understood “as a social or pedagogical process which enlists human efforts to understand the world more accurately in conjunction with a political will to transform social practices and relations” (Sholle and Denski, 1993).

## Background and Significance

The four Palestinian youth initiatives, *Baladna* (<http://www.momken.org/baladna/>), *Ibdaa* (<http://www.dheisheh-ibdaa.net/>), *Lajee* (<http://www.lajee.org/>), and *PYALARA* (<http://www.pyalara.org/>), accord a central role to media that ranges from disseminating information about their activities to training young participants as future journalists. In fact, a significant amount of media work relates to developing creative and critical media narratives in printed, audio, video, and digital formats. The young participants learn media making and production activities from local and international volunteers and mentors. *Baladna*, founded in 2000 in Haifa in Israel by the minority Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, describes itself as a developmental and capacity building organization. A main purpose of *Baladna* is to promote the interests of the marginalized Palestinian Arabs inside Israel, and to seek a dialogue with larger Israeli society. An important part of *Baladna's* work relates to the articulation of Palestinian identity, wherein it is involved in “encouraging a Palestinian political culture based on pluralism and democracy capable of neutralizing factionalism and guaranteeing social and gender equity. And work to cultivate a healthy balance of pride and self-critique as a framework for developing genuine, durable individual and collective identity, strengthening youth capacity and enabling young people to express their leadership, cultural and creative potential.” The media projects developed by young people at *Baladna* involve the publication of a monthly magazine called “Shabab” and an online website “Momken” ([www.momken.org](http://www.momken.org)). In addition youth participants at *Baladna* have produced a photography project with support from Anna Thomin, a French volunteer, and a short film, “Against All Odds” with the help of Oriol Poveda, a volunteer from Spain.

The *Ibdaa Cultural Center* (henceforth *Ibdaa*, in Arabic *ibdaa* means ‘to create something out of nothing’) was set up near the Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem in 1994. The media initiatives of *Ibdaa* are broad-based covering a range of grassroots activities: from the oral history and village documentation projects to digital storytelling and an online radio program called radio 194. A popular dance-documentary – “The Children of *Ibdaa*” – featured an interesting mix of Palestinian folk genres like *debka* to express the plight and struggles of Palestinian people in refugee camps. Through innovative use of computer labs across various refugee camps in the Middle East – Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon – young people at *Ibdaa* connected thousands of Palestinian refugees to each other and their homeland.<sup>160</sup>

The *Lajee Center* (henceforth *Lajee*, in Arabic *Lajee* means ‘refugee’) is located near the Aida Camp in Bethlehem and was established in 2000. Youth members of *Lajee* have been involved in producing a magazine, radio broadcasts, and a series of children’s storybooks and photographic projects with mentoring and training from the British creative artist and photographer, Rich Wiles. The photographic narratives offer powerful accounts of daily life in refugee camps, the aspirations and hopes of children and young people for a better future, and observations of nature and landscape in and around their camps and villages. The photo-exhibits and storybooks, “The Boy and the Wall,” “Dreams of Home”, “Our Eyes”, and “Flying Home” have been displayed at several locations around the world. The highly acclaimed children’s storybook “The Boy and the Wall” won several awards and, in addition, the film workshop “Dreaming in Palestine” resulted in several short films produced and directed by young participants at *Lajee*. The organization *PYALARA* (acronym for Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation), established in 1999 in Jerusalem-Ramallah has taken a pragmatic approach to youth participation, stressing the leadership potential of young members through their rights. Several of these themes underpin the media initiatives pursued by young members of *PYALARA*, particularly from the monthly magazine,

<sup>160</sup> After the creation of Israel in 1948, Palestinians have been split into three groups, the Israeli Arabs (Palestinians living inside of Israel), Palestinians living in the occupied territories, and Palestinians in diaspora ((in Arabic, *Ghurba*) dispersed around the world.

“The Youth Times” to the regular television talk-show program, “Alli Sotak” (in Arabic, ‘Speak up’). With sponsorship and funding from the European Union and other international organizations, PYALARA is also involved in providing regular journalism training programs like “Journalism Across Boundaries” for the benefit of its young members, along with hosting a forum called “Tawasol” for young Palestinian journalists.

## Method

To study the various initiatives as case studies, the project will deploy two research methods: narrative and hermeneutic analysis of documents, policies, reports, youth-produced media content, and focused semi-ethnographic interviews with young people, youth media policy-makers, and program managers. The first stage of the research process will involve analyses of documents, reports, policy papers, and the multimedia materials (printed, audio, video, digital texts, and narratives), all of which may be considered “texts.” The narrative and hermeneutic analysis will be guided by Critical Textual Analysis (CTA), a methodology familiar to media scholars. CTA is appropriate for uncovering the deep meanings of texts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) and is valuable because it considers not only manifest content but also latent meanings driven by cultural nuances, and specific production settings and circumstances. As Jo Ellen Fair (1996, p. 8) writes, CTA “facilitates discovering how meaning is produced.” Two steps will be followed in carrying out the CTA: first, texts will be read repeatedly; and second, common themes will be identified and the entire body of text organized thematically.<sup>161</sup>

Margaret Somers’s (1994, pp. 618-625) reformulation of narrative provides two useful heuristic concepts that link her model with performative acts and embodied practices. Somers points out that narratives are “constituted by a person’s temporally and spatially variable place in culturally constructed stories composed of (breakable) rules, (variable) practices, binding (and unbinding) institutions and the multiple plots of family, nation, or economic life.” Somers specifies different types of narratives, out of which two are useful for our purposes: *ontological* and *public*. According to Somers, ontological narratives are “the stories that social actors use to make sense of – indeed, to act in – their lives.” In short, ontological narratives are about individual selves and their identities. Public narratives, on other hand, are “attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to inter-subjective networks or institutions,” where publicly shared set of beliefs get reproduced.

In the second stage of the research process, open-ended, structured and semi-ethnographic interviews with youth media policy-makers, program managers, media education trainers, mentors, and young people will be conducted at the four different locations in Palestine and Israel: Bethlehem, West Bank, Ramallah, and Haifa. For conducting the interviews, the specific IRB guidelines and protocols will be followed. The semi-ethnographic interviews will prove valuable because of what they will uncover about the planning, objectives, and intentions of the youth media policy-makers, and program managers. The interviews will complement the analysis of texts and will offer explanations of why and how texts are produced the way they are. Informants will be asked about their inspiration for producing media content, how and why specific messages were constructed, the meanings and purposes of messages, and general production goals, among other things. Informants will also be queried about how media products relate to notions of Palestinian identity and culture. There is growing interest in Palestinian youth media and the purpose that organizers and trainers hope to achieve.

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<sup>161</sup> These documents and multimedia materials will be transcribed from Arabic to English. The LPI and CO-LPI will also examine the symbolic and cultural meanings specific to the Arabic language. During the first stage of research, a research assistant will help the lead researchers in pursuing a detailed literature review of media education and media literacy published in the Arabic language. This is particularly important since a significant number of documents and multimedia materials are either written and/or produced in Arabic.

Julie Norman (254), who visited the West Bank around 2006, explains that youth media serve crucial multi-prong objectives where the end result is enhanced empowerment for youth through the camera lens or the airing of a journalistic report where the universe is the reflection of their daily perspective. Norman's analysis as to the potency of Palestinian youth media can be summed up with the following points:

- The bulk of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict coverage concentrates on perennial violence and top level decisions in world capitals. Accounts by communities and individuals, especially youth, are relegated to an auxiliary role. Young Palestinians through their youth media present a fresh perspective on occupation as seen by their own lens.
- Palestinian youth are frequently portrayed as either perpetrators of violence or hapless victims of it. Youth media alter the prevalent narrative and allow the budding reporters to share their stories in "proactive creative ways," thus nurturing the emergence of a different and more benevolent image.
- The mere process of youth media restores a sense of well-being, ability to function and lessens feelings of anomie and failure. According to a 2009 report by United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 80 percent of Palestinian youth suffer from depression.
- Palestinian youth media empower the young to express their views of the current environment in their own unique, reflective imaginaries

In order to personally assess the role of Palestinian youth media empowering the trainees to share their daily realities with the rest of the world, a field trip by the research team was undertaken to the West Bank and Haifa in Israel in early January 2013. During the eight-day trip, the team visited four youth centers, two in Bethlehem (Lajee, Ibd'a), Pyalara, one on the outskirts of Ramallah (the facto capital of Palestinian Territories), the last in Haifa, Israel (Baladna)

The team audio-taped interviews with trainers, young trainees and directors of the youth centers.

Some of the findings which emerged during the visit and later:

- The ability of youth to document the physical hardships and dangers they endure. Photo journalism and videography trainee Miras Al Az, was shot from an Israeli lookout six years ago when he was playing with other kids. Merely 13 the time, he shot a video which he narrated about his injury (see video)
- On April 9, 2013, videographer and former trainee Mohammad Al Azza, 22, grabbed his camera and rushed to document Israeli incursion into camp AIDA where the Lajee Center is located. He was warned by an Israeli soldier to stop taking picture: "You're shooting bullets, I am just taking pictures," Azza reportedly told the soldier. He was shot in the face with a rubber-coated bullet which shattered his cheekbone. (see pics of incursion and last pic Azza took of the soldier before he was shot).
- More often than not, the modus operandi of the trainees is to give youth a camera and tell them to go around shooting stories which reflect their culture, identity and their prism of reality. Frequently the subject of their daily reality is the eight-meter wall built around the West Bank.
- A number of trainees have come back, after getting degrees in journalism in the West Bank, to work in the youth centers, to train a new generation of budding journalists
- One of the assignments that youth remember fondly is when trainers armed them with cameras and asked them to go with grandfathers to their old villages and homes they had to abandon and document what they saw there.
- Some centers have magazines, others newspapers. Our Voice, a magazine by Lajee Center in Bethlehem empowered youth to write articles covering a wide range of topics. Each article had the youth's name and age, between 13-17. Only youth could write such articles as The Right to Play; Respect For the Views of the Child; The

Future of Our Camp; How Shall We Rebuild Our Village; Can We Palestinians and Israelis Live Together; Our Story With the Wall.

The magazine unfortunately ceased publication when its Belgian NGO withdrew support after the economic crisis hit the country.

- According to the director of the Pyalara Center, at the beginning Palestinian officials did not take the youth media seriously. One day a group of youth, enraged by poor school bus system, went to see the transportation minister. They confronted him with their journalistic tools: pens, notebooks and cameras. He was impressed. Now youth media are invited to press conferences.
- The position of Palestinian youth media in Israel is intriguing. As Israeli citizens they said they felt marginalized. As such, their biggest campaign now is to produce Public Service Announcements calling on young Palestinians to refuse army service. See examples of youth PSAs against public service.

Palestinian youth and their media are leaving their imprint on a society which traditionally did not believe in the role of young people.

As an assistant director of Pyalara put it:

“Young people are rarely regarded as partners and active members of the society. ” (Rother, 229).

The four youth centers which are the subject of this society view their young charges as full partners who use the pen and the lens as a weapon of resistance and a conduit to document their daily realities. Below we offer some provisional analysis of youth media materials produced by young people from Baladna and Lajee.

## **Baladna**

For the minority Arab youth from the cities and towns of Haifa, Jaffa, Ramle, Lydda, and Accre in Israel, selfhood and otherness become central to the way they struggle to define their identities as both Arab-Palestinians and Israeli citizens, due to the burden of history, geopolitics, and Israeli state oppression. On the one hand, as Arabs they are denied basic citizenship rights by Israel, and on the other, as residents of Israel they are banned from entry to Arab countries. As residents of the so-called “mixed towns,” Arab-Palestinians live in poor segregated neighborhood “clusters” with little or no access to education and economic opportunities. Furthermore, the hegemony of the Hebrew language, inscribed in the governing logics of the state, the media apparatus, and other forms of public communication, has all but destroyed the Arabic language. What has emerged in its place is a strange hybrid colloquial “Arabebrew” that Anton Shammas (2007) argues is part of the ideological project of Zionism, designed to erase the linguistic and cultural identity of Arab-Palestinians in Haifa.

It is in this context that Baladna’s youth media projects explore the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of Arab-Palestinian identity. Broadly, Baladna’s youth media practices are conceived as projects for social change that appropriate ICTs and digital media in building collective solidarities among Israel’s Arab-Palestinians, between Arabs and Jews and in the wider regional/international community. Before discussing the youth media practices in detail, I offer a critical overview of Baladna’s overall institutional structure. Baladna, an independent youth-run organization from Haifa, was established in 2000 by a group of young Palestinian citizens of Israel—artists, community workers, feminist activists, journalists, and lawyers. While Baladna seeks to address socioeconomic inequalities and historic injustices at the hands of the Israeli state, it also questions dominant social practices of Palestinian society with respect to gender discrimination and religious ideology. Consequently, through this self-reflexive dual critique, Baladna opens up a space for debating pluralism, tolerance, democratic engagement, human rights, collective memory, and identity. Baladna’s activities are carried out through a wide network of partnerships with local, regional, and international youth groups, NGOs, and quasi-governmental agencies. Some of the partnerships have

resulted in translocal production and sharing of knowledge—particularly through the uses of the ICTs and digital media forms—about identity and community, which this chapter will examine in later sections. What is worth pointing out is the ability of Baladna’s youth participants to build local-local links as sites for exchange of memory and collective identity that might, perhaps, offer a way forward in reconciling the entrenched power-geometries in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To this end, “Baladna assures that Arab youth in Israel have access to a wide range of views and perspectives by linking Arab youth with the international community, regional Palestinian groups, and local Jewish groups.”<sup>162</sup>

Each year, around 30 to 40 university students are selected to participate in Baladna’s key project, the Youth Leadership Training Course, which extends over three months. The youth participate in a series of lectures, workshops, and debates covering topics around the history of Arab-Palestinians in Israel, Israel’s policies of discrimination, human rights, and democracy, as well as the changing configurations of identity, gender, and family structure in Palestinian society as a result of globalization. In addition, youth participants watch films and tour neighborhoods in towns and villages. According to Nadem Nashif, director of Baladna, one of the main purposes of the training course is to prepare youth for community-based activities. Two other youth projects, the Public Achievement Model and the Interregional Encounter, offer young people avenues to engage with local communities in resolving issues relating to public housing, health, street cleaning, environmental, educational needs, etc. Baladna organizes field trips for high school students from Haifa who visit historic sites such as Golan, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jaffa, and Accre to understand the bygone culture of coexistence among Jews, Arabs, and Christians. Baladna’s youth participants have been involved in undertaking regular work camps where Arab-Palestinians and Jewish volunteers work side-by-side cleaning public spaces, fixing old homes, planting trees, etc. Baladna adapted the Public Achievement Model that had been developed at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Hubert Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. Adapting the Humphrey Institute’s framework for community development programs, Baladna has localized and extended it as part of their agenda for social change in Haifa.<sup>163</sup> The interregional encounters enable a shared sense of community among young Arab-Palestinians from different regions of Israel. A notable feature of such encounters relates to increasing conversations between Arab-Palestinians and Jewish youth. Building upon the success of these conversations, Baladna developed the Jadal (debate) project that was led by the local Arab social movement Haifa El Fattah and sponsored by the Open Society. While the Debate through Dialogue program trains youth in critical thinking, debating skills, and techniques, the underlying idea is consciousness-raising and the cultivation of a tolerant and creative generation of young Palestinians. Since 2008, Baladna’s youth have been debating Israel’s controversial national civil service plan, which was designed for orthodox Jews and Arab-Palestinians to participate in voluntary civil service as a prelude to national military enlistment. In fact, Baladna argues that the civil service plan is undemocratic and a pretext to erase Palestinian identity. As part of the debate project, young people produce short videos of debate workshops that enable them to explore the topic in greater detail. A few videos posted on Baladna’s website examine the implications of the civil service plan for Palestinian identity, arguing against enlistment in the military because Israel’s army is fighting against Arabs and Palestinians.

Baladna’s youth media practices—*Shabab* magazine, photographic projects, and digital stories—explore interesting facets of Arab-Palestinian identity from a number of perspectives—historical, cultural, and political. Several media narratives deal with particular aspects of relational histories of Arab and Jews that make visible the overlaps between Arab/Jewish cultural identities. Recently, Baladna has begun to explore the role of hip-hop

<sup>162</sup> <http://www.momken.org/baladna/en>

<sup>163</sup> Baladna, Annual Report, 2006.

and other poetic forms in articulating relational identities. Artistic and cultural practices such as hip-hop among Arab-Palestinians have been used to reconfigure the state discourse on identity and to bring back to the public arena larger socioeconomic issues such as endemic poverty, lack of employment, and state discrimination (Stein and Swedenburg, 2005).

At one level, Baladna, like other Palestinian groups, is involved in gathering and organizing oral histories on the Web and in other published formats, in what Doumani (2007) characterized as “archive fever” among Palestinians. Baladna’s youth media practices are engaged in refiguring identity by recuperating aspects of Palestinian collective memory in terms of its performative dimensions. While the question of memory for Palestinians is connected to *Al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe), the creative retelling and narration via media forms enable young people to grasp the multiple genealogies rendered in oral accounts, songs, letters, old photographs, personal objects, destroyed villages, etc. The presence of the past in *Al-Nakba*, reactivated across several social generations, finds a complex rendering in youth media practices where particular aspects of collective memory are translated into projects of social change. What is interesting in youth media projects is their ability to creatively rework oral histories and collective memories to produce narratives of empowerment that offer deeper insights into youth identity, selfhood, and otherness. Bodily practices and performativity have always been central to the articulation of Palestinian identity in public spaces such as Israeli checkpoints, to reactivating memories of *Al-Nakba*, and to other forms of resistance. The performative aspects of artistic expressions—songs, hip-hop lyrics, dance, music, theater, etc.—via ICTs and digital media have opened up and expanded the spaces for youth to refigure their identity and citizenship in terms of doings that reveal the affective and embodied elements of youth experience.

### **Lajee Center, Aida Refugee Camp**

Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, established in 1950 by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), is one of the several refugee camps that dot the Palestinian landscape. The camps, an outcome of the creation of Israel in 1948, are composed of hundreds of shanty homes where around 5,000 third-generation Palestinian refugees live. Lajee was established as a community-based grassroots cultural center offering the refugees avenues for exploring Palestinian traditions. Over the years, Lajee has developed a range of political and cultural initiatives centering on freedom, justice, and the right of return of all Palestinians. It has three main initiatives: *dabke* (traditional Palestinian folk dance), human rights workshops, and the new generation project (Al-Nashia). Both *dabke* and Al-Nashia are designed to recuperate Palestinian cultural memory in terms of oral history and performative practices. Through *dabke*, Lajee seeks to commemorate Palestinian national identity by reinterpreting the cultural traditions. (In the later sections of this chapter I will discuss the complex ways in which youth relate to Palestinian national identity.) The new generation project, Al-Nashia, is an extensive workshop where young people are trained in cultural remembrance of *al-Nakba* and in building cultural memory. The human rights project deals with enunciating children’s rights through the United Nations’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), as well as basic human rights issues in the region. A major component of Lajee’s activities centers around arts and media projects for children and youth aged fourteen to twenty-five. These projects include photography workshops, digital stories, radio podcasts, and a bilingual quarterly magazine that is published in Arabic and English. Lajee also uses the Internet as a platform for the youth-produced media. Young people are trained in the various aspects of media making by adult staff, mentors, and full-time volunteers who design specific workshops that continue over several weeks. The youth media narratives cover a wide array of subjects and topics that are developed as journalistic reports, features, short documentaries, and fictional stories. Topics deal with the daily lives of refugees in their camps, their ancestral villages, conversations with grandparents, the Palestinian right to return, children’s rights, etc.

Although Lajee refers to the youth-produced media as tools of resistance, several narratives explore Palestinian artistic and cultural traditions that offer glimpses into the particular ways young people explore their traditions. While such explorations into Palestinian traditions are fragmentary, they question certain dominant social practices like gender inequality within their own communities.

### **Lajee's Media Projects**

Over the years, numerous photo workshops have been conducted by the British photographer and volunteer Rich Wiles, who is also actively involved as an editorial member of Lajee's magazine. Several of the photo-essays have been published and also are available on Lajee's website. The photo-essays are evocative accounts of young people's daily lives, reflections on their dreams, hopes, and nightmares, and conversations with grandparents about their ancestral villages. Young people also produce short digital stories that are composed of series of still images with audio—either commentary or music, or sometimes both. More recently, Lajee initiated the radio podcast projects set up by an Australian volunteer, Daz Chandler. Young people use inexpensive software and low-end ICTs to produce a weekly podcast that can be accessed on the Lajee website. The eight-week radio podcast workshops have generated great enthusiasm among the youth from Aida camp. Apart from the ability to operate and use low-end ICTs and digital media, youth gain exposure and learn about the arts and skills and journalistic practices that underpin media-making processes. Young people receive extended education and training in a wide variety of subjects and are involved in producing Lajee's quarterly magazine, *Our Voice*. Every year, 60 youth participants, male and female, selected from Aida and other refugee camps in Bethlehem, participate in lectures/workshops over several months. The youth participants follow a structured syllabus based on the following subjects: children's rights, human rights, democracy and peace-building strategies for conflict resolution, gender equality, journalism, and photography. The lectures and workshops are led by academics and media professionals from Al Quds University and Birzeit University in Palestine and by other volunteers from outside Palestine. Some of the former youth members of Lajee lead the discussions on several topics. At the end of each session, the participants divide themselves into groups and begin developing ideas for features and stories for the magazine, collaborating on layout, graphics, photography, etc.

While all media projects at Lajee discuss issues around children's rights, *Our Voice* magazine offers a focused approach in articulating key principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).<sup>164</sup>

Lajee's radio podcasts scripted and produced by children and young people deal with a wide variety of personal, local, and global topics. Although the radio broadcasts are available on the Internet as podcasts, they utilize several low-tech applications through which children and young people produce radio narratives. On most occasions, Lajee's young members bring creative ideas regarding their view of the world that are then united with their right to expression. Interestingly, the young broadcasters do not think of their listeners as passive receivers; rather, in an uncanny way, they seem to dissolve the perceived separation between speaker and listener—a separation that Walter Benjamin termed the major flaw in the makings of the institution of radio. This offers us an interesting perspective, which on the one hand critiques the institutional epistemology of radio, and on the other hand offers a potential for creating dialogue via the Internet to produce forms of empowering and enabling communication. The motivation to become a radio broadcaster demonstrates that children seek to go beyond merely using media to voice their opinions. Rather, the abiding interest in radio has led numerous children to express their desires to pursue professional careers as civic broadcast journalists. While we may perceive this as an instance of what Appadurai

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<sup>164</sup> In 2009 the magazine received funding from the European Union and the nonprofit organization Broederlijk Delen.

characterized in terms of technologies altering relationships between identity, subjectivity, and social imagination, a notable feature of Lajee radio is the production of specific aspects of Palestinian soundscape that become available to other Palestinians living as exiles in the Middle East and other parts of the world. These radio stories via the Internet lead to the possibility of forging a network of translocal relations where place, identity, and subjectivity all tie into multiple registers: memories of their homeland, and a longing for return that Edward Said (2004: 133) characterized as having far-reaching pedagogic implications. Similarly, other media projects of Lajee are involved in forging translocal networks of relations. Through such connections and networks, young Palestinians are involved in crafting new forms of political spaces while at the same time archiving their memories of displacement and dispossession.

### **Photo-narratives**

The photographic projects and digital stories incorporate hundreds of still images either taken by the young people themselves or assembled from newspapers. The photo-narratives provide evocative glimpses into the disruptions in the everyday lives of young people, their families, and community. Yet, the young people do not seek the viewer's sympathy; rather, they demonstrate steadfastness (*sumud*) and resilience in the face of atrocities. Children and youth participants at Lajee pursued a series of media and photographic workshops over an extended period of time. After receiving training and mentoring from Rich Wiles, the young people undertook several photographic projects to document life in the refugee camps where they lived; interviewed their own grandparents about the villages they were forced to flee during the *Al-Nakba* in 1948; later traveled to these depopulated villages to take pictures of the empty places, rocks, streams, cactus and olive trees, and the landscape; and talked about their dreams and nightmares. With this method, Wiles pointed out, it is not just the act of photography but the entire process of collaborative thinking and creating media together that constituted learning and education. Children began to write and sketch out their deep-seated feelings, hopes, and anxieties and gradually began talking to other participants and peers about their feelings and emotions. According to Wiles (2006: 1), initial workshops discussed the ideas of the project and what it was that participants wanted to say with their work. Basic notions of composition and light were discussed along with creative ideas about visual storytelling and photographic documentary work. Participants then worked daily, shooting images around Aida refugee camp and also the neighboring Al Azzeh camp.

The photography project created by young people at Lajee, *A Window to Our World*, a series of still images with short captions, was exhibited at several centers around the world. The photographic exhibits were also used in British schools to familiarize school children about the lives of Palestinian children. Developed and published in a photo-essay format, the images depict life inside a Palestinian refugee camp, showing cramped lanes and cluttered houses with adults and children working and playing. For instance, Nimer Al Azzeh's photo of a girl standing in front of her home and Miras Al Azza's photo of two girls playing in a narrow street of Aida camp were placed next to each other with commentary in English and Arabic (Figures 3.1 and 3.2). In English it reads: "I want to take photographs again. I want to take pictures of a park with people playing in it. I would also like to photograph a beautiful city with wide streets that isn't crowded with narrow streets like the camp." Although the images render the palpable misery and suffering of people, the gestures, sighs, and bodily dispositions of people in those images evoke steadfastness and fortitude that resemble what many have characterized as *sumud*, a Palestinian approach to life. The photo project, *A Child's Rights in Palestine*, explored the idea of human rights among the Lajee participants. The children, eight boys and twelve girls, all students from the United Nations Refugee Welfare Association schools, participated in several sessions on children's rights. Later, the

young participants took pictures that portrayed different aspects of children's rights. Describing the irony of the situation and the accompanying pain and anguish, Wiles (2006: 50) stated, "a couple of hours after the exhibition had opened in Aida Camp a 13-year-old child was shot in the head with a rubber coated steel bullet by the Israeli army less than 100 meters from the gallery in which children had proudly showed their work discussing human rights protection for children, a child's rights in Palestine."

Another project, *Dreams of Home*, is based on children's interviews with their grandparents who lived through the *Al-Nakba* events of 1948.<sup>165</sup> Following the interviews, the children visited the eight villages around Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron to take pictures of the now depopulated villages. Thus, each child explored his/her grandparents' village and compared its present state with the grandparents' recollections. The project was published in the form of a photo-book. Ahmad Ibrahim Al-Aaraj, a fifteen-year-old visiting his ancestral village Al Walaja, in North Jerusalem, writes:

The visit revived my tired feelings, and empowered my hope and belief that we will return. I drank from Ein Al Hanieh, one day my grandparents drank from this spring. I ate from the big fig tree that was planted by my great grandfathers. I will never forget this. I filled a bottle of water and gave it to my grandfather, Abu Fahmi, he was very excited. I felt proud and said to myself: how could he bear all this pain being a refugee in a camp that is located only 5 kilometers from Al Walaja.<sup>166</sup>

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