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Living with Stories

William Schneider

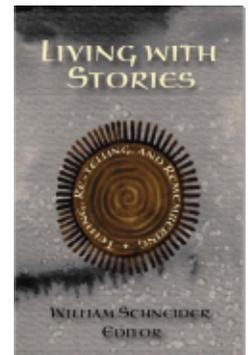
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The Representation of Politics and the Politics of Representation

*A Conversation with Sherna Berger Gluck and
Ted Swedenburg*

Sherna Gluck and Ted Swedenburg, both knowledgeable about Palestinian history and politics, share their observations about how the political climate in Palestine influences the stories that are told. Their discussion leads us to consider the tension between the “official narratives” that are promulgated to serve a cause and the personal accounts that an individual may choose to share over time. In a similar way to the Crowell-Clifford discussion, we are asked to examine how the individual is influenced by the master narrative and the openings they find to express their version of a story, a version that may provide insight on influences affecting their lives.

SCHNEIDER: I’d like to start this discussion by having us go back to the two quotes Sherna gave from interviews with Maha Nassar and her reference to an extended conversation with Nassar in 1994. As I understand the differences between the three sessions: in the first, 1985, Nassar is saying that the woman’s question has to be solved before there can be any solution at a society level. In 1989, she is saying that as women we cannot be liberated until our society is liberated, and then, in 1994, she is more explicit in indicting the prevalence of sexism and its effects on women.

GLUCK: It’s significant, too, that she wasn’t just talking to me in less equivocal terms. She clearly had become quite open and public in addressing taboo subjects like forced marriage and wife battering. That’s why she was getting phone calls “accusing” her of opening a shelter for women.

Ted Swedenburg is a cultural anthropologist at the University of Arkansas. He is an expert on the Middle East, but his interests also extend to musical expression, popular culture, and issues of domination and resistance. His publication *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (1995) is referenced in Gluck’s essay.

SCHNEIDER: So all three narratives can be true, even at all points in time, but the speaker chooses to emphasize one thing at one point in time and to place the emphasis differently at another point in time. Sherna, you have noted two dynamics operating here that influence how the story is told. I think we should explore (1) how the political climate can change the narrative and (2) how the evolution of a relationship with the narrator can influence what is shared.

GLUCK: In 1989, when I first interviewed the leadership of the various women's committees, the mass mobilization of the *intifada* was still in full swing and there was a great deal of coordination and communication among the various factions and their women's committees. Yet each of the factions guarded solidarity within their ranks and worked hard to woo new members. The progressive (leftist) women's committees played a central role in this process and also curried favor with the Western feminists who were visiting Palestine in order to gain their support for the *intifada*.

At the same time, however, they also resented what they perceived as Western feminist pressure on them to espouse feminism. I believe that this produced the kind of equivocation that was evident in the 1989 interview with Maha Nassar. It also marked conversations with other women leaders in her committee who argued for the primacy of the nationalist struggle.

By 1993–94, when I made my fifth return visit to Palestine, the shift away from nationalist unity and conformism was well underway and the women were themselves concerned about how their agenda was being undermined. At the same time, my five years of repeated visits and conversations with the women's committee's leaders led to greater trust and a more nuanced mutual understanding of the multiple forms of feminism—what I like to refer to as feminism in an effort to challenge the hegemonic Western definition. Nevertheless, I doubt that would have mattered had the political climate not shifted.

SWEDENBURG: I would also add that Sherna's 1994 conversation with Maha Nassar occurred during a time when Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, what was to become the Palestinian National Authority, were involved in what we might term state-building or proto-state building. The mass mobilizations led by the various political factions were over, and a different sort of national imperative was on the agenda. The atmosphere (in this era mislabeled

in the West as the “peace process”) created certain openings and made the espousal of feminist views much more respectable. In other words, what was on the agenda from 1994 to 1999 was building state structures, building an infrastructure, rather than the national liberation struggle. This contrasts with the earlier period of the national liberation struggle with its strong emphasis on national unity that discouraged articulations of “divisive” issues.

SCHNEIDER: Okay, so we are talking about some pretty strong political and social forces that can influence the way people express the story.

SWEDENBURG: Yes, and I’m very interested in the power of official narratives and their ability to marginalize and even remake popular memories. An interesting example is presented in H. Bruce Franklin’s book *Vietnam and Other American Myths* [2001]. He discusses the very prominent and militant role played by GIs in the movement against war in Vietnam. This critical aspect of the antiwar movement—documented in the new film *Sir! No Sir!*—has been mostly forgotten, largely due to a concerted effort on the part of the U.S. agencies of public meaning to create a very different “memory” of the relationship between the peace movement and the GIs. This official, preferred memory is encapsulated in the obsessively repeated story of soldiers who were spat upon by peaceniks when they disembarked at the airport upon their return from Vietnam. Hollywood movies like the Rambo films played a major role in creating and sustaining such a memory. Franklin shows that this pervasive story is a myth, because no GIs returning from Vietnam landed at civilian airports. Yet so powerful is the force of this myth that a number of GIs actually “remember” being spat upon at the airport by antiwar demonstrators upon their return.

SCHNEIDER: Of course, in our discussion of the feminist role in the Palestinian struggle, we are not dealing with a static story about an event in time but an evolving narrative where, as Sherna points out, there are “shifts in the political climate” and “opening of spaces” for new forms of expression about the role of feminism in the Palestinian struggle.

GLUCK: This discussion reminds me of an experience I had in my early work. As you know, Will, my work in U.S. women’s social history began with a focus on labor movement activists. I had done rather extensive interviews with Sarah Rozner, a rank-and-file organizer

in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA—now joined with the ILGWU in a single union, UNITE). Together with one of the paid staff of the union, Rozner had spearheaded the formation of a Women's Local (275) in Chicago. Women in other cities followed suit, and together they began to push for a Women's Bureau in the national union.

This period in the late 1920s was marked by internal strife in the union, and the women's efforts were defeated at the national convention, where the male leadership argued that this "separatism" would undermine the union. At the time, Mamie Santora was the only woman on the national Executive Board. The written record of the convention where the women's locals pushed their agenda seemed to indicate that Santora supported the male leadership's squelching of this effort. When I first interviewed Santora in 1975, she claimed that she agreed with and supported the position of the male leadership. However, when I went back and interviewed her again a few years later and returned to this discussion, she "spilled the beans," as it were. Indeed, she told me that she believed the women were right and that she had supported their effort in the deliberations. Her earlier telling was shaped by her belief that she thought that I was sent by the union.

The important point here is that if I hadn't returned and she had not retold the story, the record would have reflected her collaboration with the men rather than her support of the women—albeit behind the scenes. So, as critical as the political shifts are in opening spaces for espousing a range of often-divergent views, this garment worker illustration highlights how a growing relationship with a narrator also influences the narrative. Of course, this is always within a political climate—sometimes a very charged climate. In fact, the political context and the historical moment are part and parcel of the personal relationship and it is hard to extricate one from the other. In my work with and on Palestinian women, that relationship is perhaps more complicated, in contrast to the obvious influence of union politics in the case of the garment worker story.