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Return Migration and the Rise of the Palestinian Nouveaux Riches, 1870–1925



JACOB NORRIS

This article examines the figure of the returning émigré in late Ottoman and early Mandate Palestine. The wave of Palestinians who emigrated in the pre-World War I period did not, for the most part, intend to settle abroad permanently. Hailing largely from small towns and villages in the Palestinian hilly interior, they moved in and out of the Middle East with great regularity and tended to reinvest their money and social capital in their place of origin. The article argues that these emigrants constituted a previously undocumented segment of Palestinian society, the *nouveaux riches* who challenged the older elites from larger towns and cities in both social and economic terms. The discussion focuses in particular on their creation of new forms of bourgeois culture and the disruptive impact this had on gender and family relations, complicating the assumption that middle-class modernity in Palestine was largely effected by external actors.

THERE IS A PASSAGE in the childhood memoir of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra where he recounts a visit to his friend George's house. The two boys were around eight years old at the time, both residents of Bethlehem. Jabra recalls how George was beset with excitement on that particular visit. "Where have you been?" George asks, telling Jabra that he had looked for him everywhere. Jabra describes the scene upon entering his friend's house as follows:

I saw a young man wearing a hat and a suit of a strange cut. He said he had returned from Chile to see his family after a long absence. His name was Miquel, and he was Uncle Khalil's brother-in-law. This young man was extremely nice to us and began to tell us about his life in Santiago, mixing his Arabic with Spanish words so that we could hardly understand him.¹

Jabra, who would go on to become one of the most celebrated novelists in the Arabic-speaking world, lived through a childhood of struggle and poverty in 1920s Bethlehem. His encounter with Miquel is steeped in awe, the kind that might be felt by a boy whose horizons, until that point, had been confined to the small town of his birth. As Jabra describes how Miquel could bend an iron bar with his bare hands, "his muscles bulging like smooth rock," the young émigré is invested with almost superhuman powers.² He represents a new presence in Palestinian society: a decidedly

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masculine figure who has returned to his hometown after making a success of himself in some far-flung corner of the world.

Bringing the Palestinian émigré into the spotlight, this article charts some of the new social relations that began to emerge in late Ottoman and early Mandate Palestine as a result of migratory patterns during that era. Between the 1870s and World War I, hundreds of thousands of women and men from Greater Syria are estimated to have migrated overseas in search of new opportunities.³ Primarily directed toward the Americas, these emigrants included tens of thousands of Palestinians.⁴ Despite a wealth of new historical scholarship on the experiences of Palestinians in this diaspora, the effects of those migrations on Palestine itself have received surprisingly little attention. Most pre-World War I emigrants never intended to settle permanently outside Palestine, and they moved in and out of the Ottoman Empire in continuous fashion, making figures like Miquel an increasingly common sight in towns all over Palestine by the early twentieth century. They carried with them a range of influences that exerted a lasting impact on Palestinian society.

The Rise of the Small-Town Emigré in Palestine

This article looks at a distinct set of social effects by these migrations, charting what is termed here the rise of the Palestinian nouveaux riches. The term *nouveau riche*, which gained currency in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, has become closely associated with Thorstein Veblen's descriptions of "conspicuous consumption" in the wake of the second Industrial Revolution.⁵ Marxist sociologists have understandably deconstructed the term as a marker of liberal capitalism's need to police class boundaries in times of rapid wealth accumulation.⁶ But it is used here in a more historically contingent, and less theoretical, sense as a means of combatting the vagueness that often plagues descriptions of Palestinian elites. *Nouveau riche*, as well as its often-cited equivalent, *parvenu*, are classifications that only exist in relation to the idea of the *anciens riches*. The particular value of *nouveau riche* in the context of this paper is its ability to capture the sense of distaste, as well as threat, felt by longer established elites.

In her study of female social climbers in turn-of-the-century America, Stephanie Foote makes an astute distinction between *parvenu* and *nouveau riche*. The former, she argues, is a figure that elicits sympathy and empathy among audiences. *Nouveau riche*, by contrast, provokes no such sympathy: "They aren't victims but marauders. They haven't been unjustly excluded or misunderstood. They don't want to fit into a beautiful desirable world of taste and style, they want to make the world over as mere gaudy imitation."⁷ As will become apparent, returning émigrés in small-town Palestine challenged the old elites of the larger cities with brashness and confidence, rendering *nouveau riche* a useful descriptor. Above all, the term highlights the considerable socioeconomic mobility that existed in some sectors of Arab Palestinian society by the end of Ottoman rule. After visiting some of the new homes built by Bethlehem's returning émigrés in 1913, a correspondent from the newspaper *Filastin* remarked, "the likes of [these mansions] are rarely found in our biggest cities, such as Jerusalem and Jaffa, and it wouldn't be an overstatement to say Beirut."⁸

Key to challenging the notion of homogenous Palestinian elites is the type of urban environment under consideration. In contrast to the bulk of historical studies, this article brings the small town

into the limelight. Loosely defined here as settlements with populations of between 5,000 and 15,000 at the start of the Mandate period, small towns provided the bulk of Palestinian overseas migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Partly because of their lack of access to the spoils of Ottoman modernization and Palestine's incorporation into the world economy, it was merchants from small market towns in the hilly interior who struck out abroad from the 1870s onward.⁹ This article focuses on one of those towns, Bethlehem, but a number of others can be placed in the same framework: Bayt Jala, al-Bireh, Ramallah, Taybeh, and Ramla all experienced similar patterns of migration, not to mention dozens of small towns further north, like Zahle and Bsharri in the mountainous Lebanese interior. Certain key features distinguished these towns. In most, although not all, cases, their populations were predominantly Christian, allowing an easier passage to the New World thanks to language (usually acquired in European missionary schools), credit networks, and the religious prestige afforded Christians from the "Holy Land."¹⁰ Despite enjoying such advantages, migrants from these small towns had not previously constituted part of "notable society"—that somewhat woolly term used to characterize the urban elites who had benefited from Ottoman reforms to become powerful landed gentry in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Consequently, when they came back to their small towns and villages of birth with considerable capital, they constituted the nouveaux riches that could now challenge the urban elites, or *a'yan*, of Jerusalem and Jaffa. While many of the returning émigrés were Christian, the central social dynamic examined here is not sectarian. As Saleh Abdel Jawad's study of Muslim émigrés returning to al-Bireh in the same period demonstrates, the most salient trend was that of "new" money versus "old."¹²

Within this overarching narrative, the present study uncovers a series of subplots that bring wider changes in Palestinian society more sharply into focus. Most notably, a dramatic series of shifts in gender dynamics can be detected among Palestine's returning migrants. Experiences of dislocation and relocation, of widened horizons and rapid wealth accumulation, all point to a process of accelerated social change, whereby in a brave new world of movement and mobility, social rules, and constraints were cast aside or relaxed. The initial effect of migration was in fact to produce greater gender division. The predominance of men among the pioneer emigrant merchants meant that a new spatial separation emerged between a male world of work (carried out abroad) and a female world of domesticity in small towns and in villages where the workforce had previously been decidedly mixed. Jabra's recollection of Miquel, the émigré from Chile, provides a stereotypical rendering of the masculine associations of migration: a physically strong young man with "bulging muscles." Indeed this seems to have become a common trope among descriptions of Palestinian émigrés. The legendary wrestler, Abdel-Rahman al-Jizawi, who rose to prominence in Chile in the 1920s, for example, was well-known in Palestine for being able to bend metal bars with his bare hands.¹³

As with other global trends in bourgeois culture,¹⁴ Palestinian migration paradoxically created conditions conducive to challenging notions of female domesticity. By the turn of the twentieth century, the first practically all-male generation of migrants had given way to a second generation that included much larger numbers of women, as well as entire families. By the 1910s, women in towns like Bethlehem were transgressing gender boundaries in ways that threatened not only the

recently created ideal of urban feminine domesticity, but also much longer standing assumptions of patriarchal authority. Just as Akram Khater has shown in regard to the important role played by returning migrants in unsettling gender roles in Lebanon, so too must we start to build these émigrés into our understanding of social change in Palestine.¹⁵

These shifting dynamics of migration, class, and gender are traced here through a case study of Bethlehem, one of the towns most heavily affected by migration in pre-1948 Palestine.¹⁶ In particular, the article employs sources relating to two relatively obscure individuals from that town. In the first case, the unpublished memoir of Ibrahim Dabdoub is discussed as an example of the early generation of male emigrants, and is contextualized by visual and material sources. In the second instance, the article turns its attention to Katrina Sa'ade, a woman born in 1900 who, by the time she was seventeen, had lived in Palestine, the Russian Empire, Mexico, and the United States. These two characters were by no means the wealthiest or the best known of Bethlehem's migrants. Rather they are chosen as "ordinary" representatives of Palestine's small-town nouveaux riches—a class of people whose social horizons changed dramatically in the space of a few short years.

First Wave: Itinerant, Mostly Male, Merchants

From Argentina to Australia, Bethlehem's migrants are remembered as the pioneers of the wider Syrian Arab diaspora, or *mahjar*. Their ability to play this role emanated from the town's longer history as a globally connected center of pilgrimage and trade. If silk was the product that catalyzed migration from Mount Lebanon in the nineteenth century, in Palestine it was religious souvenirs that were made in Bethlehem. By the late 1600s, a distinctive style of artisanship had emerged in Bethlehem that produced a range of devotional objects (rosaries, crosses, models of shrines) made of mother-of-pearl for sale to pilgrims or collectors in Europe. The production and circulation of these items has been covered elsewhere,¹⁷ but the key factor here is the expansion of their markets that occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century, as Bethlehem merchants began selling the items abroad rather than through the locally based Franciscan community.

The unpublished memoir of Ibrahim Yuhanna Dabdoub, written in coarse, colloquial Arabic, provides a valuable window onto this first generation of all-male itinerant merchants. Born in 1853, Ibrahim had a modest upbringing and both his parents, who were illiterate, died when he was aged just fifteen. Left to care for his two younger siblings, he scraped a living in various menial jobs, forming a tight-knit male unit with his brothers that would later become an important feature of their ventures abroad. By the late 1870s young men all around them were setting off to sell Bethlehem's distinctive devotional objects. Ibrahim was well-placed to emulate these young merchants, having trained at one of the mother-of-pearl workshops as a young boy in the late 1860s.

For Ibrahim and his brother Anton, the story began in 1880 with a visit to France. The memoir describes this first trip as a difficult experience. Setting off in search of their brother Yaqub, who had left two years earlier, Ibrahim and Anton had no knowledge of French and initially struggled to sell any of the religious souvenirs they had taken with them. "We were at the point of tears," writes

Ibrahim, “asking God to make things easier for us.”¹⁸ They appear almost as roaming vagabonds in these early vignettes. Trying to locate their brother, they journeyed north to London where they were arrested for selling goods without a permit, spending several hours in a police cell. They then moved on to Belgium to “smell the air” (conveying a sense of leisurely wandering), eventually catching up with Yaqub in the then-German province of Alsace-Lorraine. Feeling sorry for them upon hearing of their ordeal, Yaqub gave his brothers forty “French lira” (presumably francs) for the journey home.¹⁹

This first trip had not been a great success, but the brothers persevered. They opened a small shop in Bethlehem, selling religious souvenirs made by local craftsmen and taking turns to travel abroad in search of new markets. From this point on, a sense of perpetual motion pervades the memoir as Ibrahim recounts one business trip after another. By 1882, his brother Yaqub was among the first groups of Bethlehemites to travel to the Philippines, while other cousins from the Dabdoub family moved westward to Central and North America.

In all these journeys, women remain remarkably invisible. Scholars of Middle Eastern migrations in this period have been careful to point out women’s widespread participation in the creation of the wider Syrian *mahjar*. Estimates show that around a third of migrants leaving *bilad al-sham* (Greater Syria) at the close of the nineteenth century were women, and scholars like Alixa Naff and Sarah Gualtieri have long since demonstrated their key role in the migrant economy as peddlers and shopkeepers in their own right, and not simply as spouses accompanying their husbands.²⁰ As stated earlier however, the very first wave of Bethlehem migrants reveals an overwhelmingly masculine domain. No cases have so far been found of women from Bethlehem traveling outside the Ottoman Empire prior to 1890. The highly gendered nature of these migrations is reinforced and reproduced in written sources, from memoirs to church parish records, all of which use patrilineal descent as a means of tracing a family’s history.

Ibrahim’s memoir is an exemplary case. It is only through brief descriptions of marriages, related in terms of their financial value without any mention even of the bride’s name, that we glimpse a female presence. Ibrahim and his two brothers all married during that first and most intensive period of overseas travel: Ibrahim in 1878 (aged twenty-five), Yaqub in 1881 (aged twenty-six), and Anton in 1885 (aged twenty-six). All three had begun to build their business credentials by the time they married, meaning that they were able to marry into other successful Bethlehem merchant families. But the brothers’ business trips continued unabated after these weddings, with no mention of wives ever accompanying the men. Typically, one of the brothers would remain in Bethlehem to tend the shop while the other two journeyed overseas, rotating the roles with each trip. Tellingly, the brother remaining in Bethlehem is described as “staying at home with his family” (*dall fi-l-bilad ma’ iltu*).²¹ As Ibrahim and his brothers gradually increased their earnings, they separated into smaller, nuclear family units. The overall impression is one of women increasingly confined to the role of housewives, something mirrored in Susynne McElrone’s observations of the male-dominated mobility of Hebronite merchants who traded in Egypt and Jordan in the same period.²² In Bethlehem, new sartorial rituals developed in response to the gendered migration of the late nineteenth century with women removing the decorative coins on their distinctive headdresses, the *shatweh*, until their absent husbands returned.²³

This new spatial separation between work and home was particularly noticeable in a small town like Bethlehem where the economy had long straddled the urban-rural boundary. Prior to the late nineteenth century, families supplemented income from trade by keeping livestock and cultivating small plots of land, rendering redundant divisions between home and work as women participated fully in the family workforce.²⁴ As Ibrahim Dabdoub relates in his memoir, his own parents grew wheat and kept livestock, including camels, although the patriarchal nature of the account reifies his father's role as a "merchant" (*tajir*) who traded in any surplus they produced. That notwithstanding, he also describes his mother as an active member of the family labor force, relating how "she would plough the land, grind the *muna* [dried legumes or grain] by hand and bring us firewood from the thicket on her back," painting a picture of a woman constantly at work outdoors.²⁵

By contrast, Ibrahim's generation of peripatetic merchants experienced a new type of family living. They built detached houses on the outskirts of town where they lived in smaller, nuclear units. A handful of surviving family photographs and paintings from the 1880s and 1890s provide a glimpse into this new bourgeois model of living, and women's more domestic role within it.²⁶ Father, mother, and children are pictured together, projecting a newly defined sense of the nuclear family. Married women are invariably dressed in colorful, traditionally embroidered wedding shifts (*thawb*), jackets (*taqsir*), and the distinctive, cone-shaped Bethlehem headdress (*shatweh*). Men from the older generation wear traditional cloaks (*'abayeh*) and striped damask coats (*qumbaz*) with a turban (*laffeh*) for headgear, but, individual items signaling urban sophistication are gradually added to the outfit, including the Ottoman *tarbush* hat, western-style jackets (worn over the *'abayeh*), and shoes. Most striking, however, is the occasional presence of young men dressed entirely in more generically global attire—typically a white shirt, cravat, and black frock coat. Standing in the back row, they appear as impostors from a different world.²⁷ They are the young men who had begun their forays abroad in the 1870s and 1880s.

This emerging separation between an internationalized, businesslike male dress code and the more showy colorful and localized female attire bears close resemblance to global trends in middle-class dress. All over the world in the late nineteenth century, men of the middle and upper classes were adopting the European frock coat and top hat as markers of modernity.²⁸ When Philippe Perrot wrote of nineteenth-century France that "the stiffness, austerity and asceticism" of male attire "would thereafter totally differentiate male from female," he might easily have been describing Bethlehem's merchant families in the same period.²⁹ It would be wrong to assume that women's clothing in Bethlehem signified timeless tradition in contrast to male dynamism. Shelagh Weir's study of Palestinian costume has shown that Bethlehem women were pioneers of ever more intricate styles of dressmaking in the nineteenth century, especially as new fabrics arrived from Europe and the Far East. Describing Bethlehem as "the Paris of Palestinian village fashions," Weir inverts the *nouveau riche* image, and relates that in the rural Palestinian landscape, the town's dressmakers held the status of "old rich" and "retreated into stately understatement" as a mark of their superiority while surrounding villages and localities competed to imitate and outdo the Bethlehem styles.³⁰ Still, this dynamic sartorial world reinforced women's role as domestic purveyors of status within a locally grounded visual language. The young men dressed in suits

were, by contrast, impossible to place geographically: they were “men of the world” whose sartorial tastes reflected their hypermobility and dedication to the world of commerce.

An equally useful indicator of the social changes produced by migration can be found in the houses that returning migrants built. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, Bethlehem’s urban development had been confined to what is today referred to as the “old city”: a dense cluster of dwellings making its way west to east along a steep ridge, culminating in the Church of the Nativity at its eastern extremity. These houses were built in the traditional *hosh* style, arranged around a central courtyard with a lower level for animal dwellings in the same complex. As families grew, so too did the *hosh*: new units could be added above or at right angles to the central cluster to accommodate younger generations of sons who would remain in the same structure once they married. These houses had been repaired, extended, and rebuilt periodically over the centuries, but they had always existed within the limits of the former city wall—a Byzantine relic that had been largely demolished in the late Mamluk period but still formed the outline of the town’s development.³¹

Beginning in the 1890s, an entirely new style of housing arose, altering the town’s urban landscape and extending its boundaries. Built far away from the cramped conditions of the old town, new mansions began to spring up constructed with money that returning merchants had earned abroad. These increasingly lavish villas broke the old *hosh* model of communal living, accommodating nuclear families with private bedrooms separating parents from children and grand drawing rooms providing space for entertaining guests. Both outwardly and inwardly these houses projected the wealth and ideals of Bethlehem’s nouveaux riches. Collectively, they form a coherent architectural genre in Bethlehem (roughly 1890 to 1930): they are built from locally quarried pink-hued limestone (*mizzi ahmar*) with ornate exterior designs—the Palestinian equivalent of the red-tiled rooftops dotting the Lebanese landscape in the same period. Perhaps the most impressive was the house built by Suleiman Jacir, one of Bethlehem’s most successful merchants, who had made his money in the 1880s and 1890s trading mainly in France and Haiti. Translating economic success into political influence, he served as the town’s mayor from 1899 to 1907, but his most lasting legacy was the extravagant villa he completed in 1914. Designed by a Parisian architect, the house reflects the global horizons of its original owner. It incorporates a number of European styles—medieval balustrades, Renaissance turrets, and exterior baroque sculptures—mixed with Islamic motifs such as scalloped arches, an Andalusian central courtyard, and Ottoman-style frescoes.³² Today the Intercontinental Hotel, the Jacir Palace is surrounded by reminders of the harder times Bethlehem has suffered under Israeli occupation: it is flanked by the Separation Wall on one side and Aida refugee camp on the other. A hundred years ago, the palace stood among a sea of olive groves, about a mile out of Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem. This was the first building visitors to the town would have encountered, standing as a beacon of its merchants’ newfound success.

In August 1913, the Jaffa-based newspaper *Filastin* devoted a whole article to Bethlehem’s mansions, paying special attention to the Jacir Palace. “Today the visitor is almost stupefied upon entering [Bethlehem] as the lofty palaces and great buildings come into view,” wrote the correspondent.³³ The article took care to enumerate the cost of building these mansions. By far the most expensive was the Jacir Palace, valued at 20,000 Ottoman lira, followed by another six

new villas, whose values ranged from 3,000 to 7,000 lira and the owners of which were also named. These were huge sums of money in late Ottoman Palestine, put into perspective by the monthly salary of a government official that came to between 5 and 8 lira.³⁴

Accounts such as that in *Filastin* provide an outsider's perspective on Bethlehem's newfound wealth, the view from Palestine's more established urban centers. They betray a creeping unease at the self-indulgence of the town's merchants in the way they spent their money. "I do not deny that the sight of these palaces pleased me and saddened me at the same time," wrote the *Filastin* correspondent. "They come with what they earned [abroad] to construct palaces," he explained, "but they do not reap any benefit from them . . . bringing to my mind the owner of gold pieces who buries them and cannot trade with them."³⁵ The criticism that Bethlehem's nouveaux riches did not know how to invest their money wisely also carried connotations of social responsibility. As the article explained, "If all the money that was spent on the building of these palaces was collected . . . they could serve their country in great ways."³⁶ Rather than simply showing off their money, then, Bethlehem's merchants were urged to invest in public works as well as buy agricultural land as a means of forestalling Zionist settlement.

There are signs that the merchants responded to these calls. Another *Filastin* article from October 1913 listed a number of families from Jerusalem and Bethlehem who had made contributions totaling 7,000 lira to the Commercial Bank of Palestine's bid to gain the electricity and tramway concessions in Jerusalem.³⁷ This was a major issue highlighted by the Arabic press at the time, reflecting wider anxieties over foreign control of Palestinian resources and economic development.³⁸ The Commercial Bank of Palestine was a local initiative and several Bethlehem families, including the Jacirs and the Dabdoubs, were praised for their contributions. Revealingly, however, *Filastin* treated these nouveaux riches as a species of donors different from the traditional Jerusalemite *a'yan* like the Husaynis, 'Alamis, and Nashashibis. Where the Jerusalemites were listed as "effendi," the Bethlehem names were all preceded by *khawaja*, a title associated with foreign merchants or their local Christian agents. Likewise, Jerusalem was a *medina* (city) whereas Bethlehem remained a *balda* (small town or locality). The opening words of the notice in the paper also hinted at this differentiation, stating that, "A number of Jerusalem and Bethlehem's wealthy (*ughnia*) and notables (*wujuha*) have signed up."³⁹ Presumably the Bethlehem donors were "wealthy" but not yet "notable."

Second Wave: Social and Gender Roles Disrupted

By the turn of the twentieth century Bethlehem's pioneer generation had given way to a much wider migration of people. As the town's mini-diaspora expanded, so too did the feasibility of relocating and even raising whole families overseas. Women also increasingly traveled abroad on their own terms, rather than as adjuncts to their husbands' merchant ventures. At the same time, Bethlehem maintained its gravitational pull on the social lives of its expatriates. Marriage remained a largely intra-Bethlehem affair, either in the town itself or among its expanding diaspora. In short, transnationalism had become a way of life by the early twentieth century, not just for a handful of young men, but for the town as a whole. Everybody had a relative of some kind living abroad even if they themselves were not.

Although it did not entail a return to Bethlehem's previously semi-rural economy, the widening of the migratory experience unsettled the very model of female domesticity that the first generation of emigrants had begun to construct. Women now assumed new roles as shopkeepers and merchants, as well as artists and intellectuals. The family portraits that previously projected images of the nuclear family show subtle differences from around 1900 onward. Women from the younger generations now frequently appear in the back row, dressed in western-style blouses, dresses, and shoes, their uncovered heads betraying years of exposure to global hairstyles. Other women, such as the renowned photographer Karimeh Abbud, played important roles in the town's newly emerging public sphere. Celebrated as the Arab world's first professional female photographer, Abbud created portraits of Bethlehem's inhabitants, particularly its women, which are a lasting testimonial to the rapidly changing ways of the town's population.⁴⁰

The life of one Bethlehem woman, Katrina Sa'ade, encapsulates many of these changes. Katrina was born in Bethlehem in 1900, and six years later her family moved to Kiev where they prospered as merchants selling devotional objects. The family returned to Bethlehem in 1913 due to political instability in the Russian Empire, but Katrina was again on the move later that year. Aged thirteen, she left her family behind in Bethlehem, journeying to Saltillo, Mexico, where a marriage had been arranged for her with Bethlehem émigré Jamil (Emilio) Kabande. By 1916, after the death of both her husband and her second child in Mexico, she moved north to California where she remarried in 1921, this time to a man from Ramallah, Suleiman Farhat. From this point, most of her life was spent in California, but she regularly moved between Mexico and the United States in the 1920s, and in 1933–34 spent a tumultuous nine months in Palestine.

Katrina left behind a valuable collection of letters and photographs, as well as taped interviews from the 1970s. These sources tell of a life lived in motion: not the chosen mobility of cosmopolitan intellectuals or wealthy merchants, but of a woman who had grown up knowing no different, enduring considerable hardship along the way. Katrina's very way of speaking reflected this. She spoke four languages without knowing which one was her mother tongue, sometimes blending them into a unique *mélange* of accents and expressions. In an interview conducted in English in 1971, she states, "I speak Syrian or Arabic, whatever you call it, (and) now English, broken English, let us put it that way, and Spanish. A little bit of Russian, but I forgot most of what I knew."⁴¹

Katrina's determination to shape her own destiny in the face of multiple challenges has been described elsewhere, most notably by her granddaughter, Kathy Kenny.⁴² But elements of her story, some of them not documented, deserve particular mention here. While never wealthy on the scale of the Jacirs or Dabdoubs, her family displayed many of the characteristics of the *nouveaux riches*. In one photograph taken in Kiev, the family seems to be flaunting its wealth to the camera, thrusting forward their jewelry, purses, and religious paraphernalia in an unruly fashion that would surely have offended the sensibilities of the old urban elites.

The Sa'ade family photographs also betray the shifting expectations of gender roles within second-generation emigrant families. Women are never dressed in Bethlehem's traditional *thawb* and *shatweh*. Instead, they wear a range of styles that cannot be attributed to any particular locale. This stands in stark contrast to the family of Katrina's second husband, Suleiman Farhat, who maintained the localized styles of their hometown, Ramallah. In a photograph of the two families

posing together as a wedding gift to Katrina and Suleiman in the early 1920s, Suleiman's parents are easily identifiable by their traditional Ramallah attire—notably the embroidered dress of his mother, Mariam, and the turban worn by his father, Jiryas. Katrina's relatives, by contrast, wear the more generic shirts, jackets, and trousers expected of a family that had spent many years living abroad. Her father, 'Abdullah, appears to be an exception with his long *'abayeh*, but even he wears a distinctly European-style overcoat.⁴³ While Ramallah was also experiencing high rates of emigration by this time (particularly to the United States), the process had begun around twenty years later than in Bethlehem, meaning that the generation of Suleiman's parents still adhered to localized styles in the early 1920s.⁴⁴

Katrina's own appearance was deeply shaped by the transnational context in which she grew up. At times this involved a transgression of gender norms, such as her decision in the late 1920s to have her hair cut in a bob, a style becoming prevalent among self-consciously "modern" women around the world at that time. As Mary Louise Roberts has documented in the context of rural France, the bob bred social anxieties in the 1920s concerning "the blurring or reversal of gender boundaries and the crisis of domesticity."⁴⁵ Likewise in interwar Palestine, the increasing tendency of elite urban women to adopt bob-style haircuts, as well as remove their veils and don western headgear, had produced distinct social tensions by the 1930s.⁴⁶ Katrina herself attributed little social significance to the haircut when later asked about it in the 1970s: "It was so long that I have a headache all the time from the heavy hair. That is why I cut my hair so that I no longer had a headache."⁴⁷ Katrina never self-identified as a feminist and was not part of the elite, urban Palestinian women's movement of the interwar years.⁴⁸ Yet this makes her life choices all the more compelling, providing insights into non-elite experiences, albeit from the particular angle of the small-town emigrant. It may well be that her headaches were the primary reason she cut her hair, but this is in itself revealing: headaches were reportedly common among rural Palestinian women, not only because of their long hair but also due to their ornate headdresses, laden with coins and other silverware.⁴⁹ Katrina was part of a generation of Bethlehem women who could act on their discomfort by removing the headdress and cutting their hair short.

The extent to which Katrina's styles, both visual and behavioral, represented a transgression of gender norms in Palestine became acutely apparent upon her return there in 1933. In Long Beach, California, a financially independent woman sporting a bob may not have stood out, but in a small Palestinian town like Ramallah it was quickly apparent she posed a threat to established notions of masculinity. Having been persuaded by her husband Suleiman to return to Palestine with their three children while he closed down the family business in California, Katrina quickly found herself in a different social world. Living with her in-laws in Ramallah, she was now expected to slot into the patrilineal family structures of small-town Palestine. The result was an inevitable clash that culminated in Katrina's decision to return to the United States, much against the wishes of her husband and his family. The crisis of masculinity she provoked was most acutely felt by her father-in-law, Jiryas Farhat. Much of the tension between Katrina and Jiryas revolved around her ability to control her own finances and ultimately have an equal share in the money she and Suleiman had earned in California. "She wants to share with you the proceeds of the shop," wrote Jiryas to his son in February 1934, "I say better to bring your money here and put it in your name."⁵⁰

The expectation among Jiryes's generation was that a married woman would become an integral part of her husband's family. In so doing, she would surrender her financial independence and conform to their expectations of female subservience and hard work. In Ramallah, this meant participation in the town's semi-rural, small-town economy. Katrina, by contrast, was accustomed through her experiences abroad to a certain level of financial and social independence, as well as a working lifestyle that revolved around shopkeeping rather than physical labor. Her refusal to participate in the annual olive harvest, a key social as well as economic ritual in rural Palestine, was viewed as a grave insult by her in-laws. For Katrina, it was simply a matter of choice: "All this trouble [*sharr*] started because I didn't go to the olive picking," she wrote to her husband in October 1933, "for I have no ability to pick olives and instead I stayed home to make food for them."⁵¹

The most poignant area of these conflicting values was childcare. For Katrina, it was self-evident that her children were under her care, especially while their father remained in the United States. By contrast, her father-in-law Jiryes assumed that the children were now an integral part of the Farhat family and that decisions about their future ultimately lay in his hands. The dramatic tussle that preceded Katrina's departure from Palestine in February 1934 brought these differences tragically to the fore. In the final scenes of the dispute, Katrina left with only one of her three children (which Jiryes described as a "kidnapping")⁵² while the Farhats hid the other two children to prevent her taking them back to United States. When Suleiman subsequently moved back to Ramallah and divorced Katrina, she continued to insist that their children should live with her in California. She was partially successful in this struggle, arranging for her daughter Mary, one of the children who had initially remained in Palestine, to join her in 1935. It was not until 1946, however, that she was reunited with her son George.

Despite the traumatic process Katrina had to go through to gain access to her children, her persistence reflected changing gender and family relations produced by the second wave of emigration out of Bethlehem. For the earlier, pioneer generation of emigrants, changes in marital status would have typically resulted in children remaining with the father's family. The memoir of Ibrahim Dabdoub, for example, relates the arrangements reached when his brother, Yaqub, died in 1890, aged just thirty-three. Initially Yaqub's widow moved in with Ibrahim's family and even remained there briefly after she remarried, along with her new husband. This arrangement soon turned sour, however, with Ibrahim describing how the new husband "lost his respect and got in her [Yaqub's widow's] mind."⁵³ But when the newlywed couple inevitably moved out, the woman's two young children by her previous marriage remained with their uncle Ibrahim and his family. Ibrahim considered it his natural right, and took pride in his ability to provide for the children: "We raised them and educated them in schools that were better than their mother and father would have given them."⁵⁴ Just a generation later, oral testimonies suggest numerous women had returned to Bethlehem from living abroad to raise children alone.⁵⁵ Likewise, scholarship confirms the increasingly common figure of the single, unmarried woman forging an independent career in towns like Bethlehem in the early twentieth century.⁵⁶ Katrina and her peers were willing and able to contest the old patriarchal assumptions, even when faced with stiff opposition from the children's paternal family.⁵⁷

How the Nouveaux Riches Challenged the Old Order

The early waves of Palestinian emigration were mostly made up of small-town merchants: first from Bethlehem, but later from similar sized towns in the Jerusalem hill country like Ramallah, al-Bireh, and Bayt Jala. When the more successful of these émigrés began to spend their money in the local economy, a challenge to the old order was mounted. In the period immediately after World War I, Bethlehem’s merchants invested heavily in citrus plantations in Palestine’s central coastal plain, reversing the former dominance there of Jerusalemite and Jaffan landowners.⁵⁸ Returning migrants from al-Bireh, meanwhile, bought up large tracts of land around their hometown immediately to the north of Jerusalem. As Saleh Abdel Jawad has noted, this reversed the nineteenth-century pattern of Jerusalemite notables buying up peasant-owned land.⁵⁹ The al-Bireh migrants even began purchasing property in the city itself, reflecting the wider emergence of the “Jerusalem fellah,” to use Rana Barakat’s turn of phrase when describing Jerusalem’s growth in the Mandate period.⁶⁰

Studying the migrant-based economies of small towns like Bethlehem and al-Bireh further complicates our understanding of middle-class modernity in Palestine—a subject now receiving renewed historical scrutiny.⁶¹ There is currently a consensus that the new bourgeoisie was largely the old elites reconstituted in the age of consumer capitalism.⁶² But when told from a small-town perspective, the story reads differently. The towns most affected by migration experienced a sudden boom in wealth that produced nouveaux riches with their own distinctive characteristics. With their highly transient and transnational lifestyles, they were deeply enmeshed in the very process of bourgeois cultural production. In their life stories, the lines between “home” and “away” increasingly dissolve, rendering it difficult to characterize their social habits as the adoption of an external culture. They were shapers, not passive recipients, of the consumer-driven globalization of the nineteenth century that produced new forms of bourgeois culture.

By acknowledging these globe-trotting emigrants as integral to Palestine’s own history and not as an external or extraneous element, new insights into the country’s richly textured social past can emerge. As we have seen, migration had profound implications for gender relations and constructions of family life. The predominance of young men among the first wave of emigrants meant that a clear spatial division between work and home took place, confining women to a newly domestic role as bourgeois housewives. Yet there are also clear signs that migration provided the tools for women from a second generation of emigrants to transgress those gender lines. Charting the tension between bourgeois notions of femininity and calls for gender equality is not new to Palestinian historiography. But looking at women from small towns who participated in migratory circuits helps broaden the discussion beyond the old elites.

By 1925, the Palestine Citizenship Order-in-Council enacted by the Mandate government was shutting down the possibilities for this type of return migration as thousands of Palestinians living in the Americas were excluded from citizenship.⁶³ A new era was now beginning in which Palestinian mobility would be increasingly curtailed under ever more restrictive systems of border control as the twentieth century wore on. But at the end of the Ottoman period the picture looked very different. A highly mobile sector of the population moved in and out of the country, bringing all manner of influences. However we interpret their impact, there is something unmistakably new

and arresting about their presence. To return to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's description of Miquel, the émigré from Chile, we find an aggressively masculine figure rupturing Bethlehem's parochial, more rural past. Miquel's stay in Bethlehem eventually ends in violence one evening at the Young Men's Club when he stabs a young man "until he collapsed in a pool of blood."⁶⁴ By the 1920s, the figure of the returning emigrant had become a common sight in towns and villages up and down Palestine, suggestive of new opportunities but also of new social tensions. As Jabra himself wondered as a young boy, "Did Miquel come from the other end of the world, from Chile, in order to implement the will of the demon living in our fig tree?"⁶⁵

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood*, trans. Issa J. Boullata (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 87.
- 2 Jabra, *The First Well*, p. 87.
- 3 For a summary of the numbers of people migrating and their reasons for doing so, see Kemal H. Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2 (1985): pp. 175–209.
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- 7 Stephanie Foote, *The Parvenu's Plot: Gender, Culture, and Class in the Age of Realism* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014), p. 201.
- 8 *Filastin* (Jaffa), 27 August 1913, p. 2 (author's translation).
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- 10 For an explanation of these factors in the Lebanese case, see Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 48–70.
- 11 See Johann Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 309–434.
- 12 Saleh Abdel Jawad, "Landed Property, Palestinian Migration to America and the Emergence of a New Local Leadership: Al-Bireh, 1919–1947," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 36 (2009): pp. 13–33.
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- 15 Khater, *Inventing Home*.
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- 17 See Jacob Norris, "Exporting the Holy Land: Artisans and Merchant Migrants in Ottoman-Era Bethlehem," *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East Migration Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013): pp. 14–40.
- 18 Ibrahim Yuhanna Dabdoub, "Mukhtasar tarikh 'ilat al-marhum Yuhanna Yaqub al-Dabdoub" (unpublished memoir, 1923), p. 4.
- 19 Dabdoub, "Mukhtasar," p. 5.
- 20 Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 160–75; Sarah Gualtieri, "Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis: Women and Syrian Transatlantic Migration, 1878–1924," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 1 (2004): pp. 67–78.
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- 25 Dabdoub, "Mukhtasar," p. 2.
- 26 A selection of similar images can be found in the Bethlehem section of the Palestine Remembered website: http://www.palestineremembered.com/GeoPoints/Bethlehem_536/#, accessed 12 June 2015.
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- 33 *Filastin*, 27 August 1913, p. 2.
- 34 As reported in *Filastin* on 18 September 1913, p. 3.
- 35 *Filastin*, 27 August 1913, p. 2.
- 36 *Filastin*, 27 August 1913, p. 2.
- 37 *Filastin*, 25 October 1913, p. 2.
- 38 As described in Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 174–81.
- 39 *Filastin*, 25 October 1913, p. 2.
- 40 See Ahmad Mrowat, "Karimeh Abbud: Early Woman Photographer (1896–1955)," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 31 (2007): pp. 72–8; and Issam Nassar, "Early Local Photography in Palestine: The Legacy of Karimeh Abbud," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 46 (2011): pp. 23–31.

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- 42 See Kathy Kenny, "The Power of Place: Katrina in Five Worlds," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 35 (2008): pp. 5–30. See also Nadim Bawalsa, "Trouble with the In-Laws: Family Letters between Palestine and the Americas (1925–1939)," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 47 (2011): pp. 6–27.
- 43 Photograph reproduced in Kenny, "The Power of Place," p.16.
- 44 Ramallah's experience of migration is discussed within more general histories of the town. For examples see Azeez Shaheen, *Ramallah: Its History and Its Genealogies* (Birzeit: Birzeit University, 1982), pp. 37–9; Yusif Qaddura, *Tarikh madinat Ramallah* (New York: Al-Huda Press, 1954), pp. 68–74; Nazmi Jubeh and Khaldun Bishara, *Ramallah: 'Imarah wa-tarikh* (Ramallah and Jerusalem: Riwaq and Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2002); and Lisa Taraki and Rita Giacaman, "Modernity Aborted and Reborn: Ways of Being Urban in Palestine," in *Living Palestine: Family, Survival, Resistance, and Mobility under Occupation*, ed. Lisa Taraki (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 1–50.
- 45 Mary Louise Roberts, "Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashion in 1920s France," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (1993): p. 661.
- 46 Ela Greenberg, *Preparing the Mothers of Tomorrow: Education and Islam in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), p. 101.
- 47 Katrina Sa'ade, taped interviews, 8 August 1971, audiocassette, track 1, 11:35.
- 48 The elite, urban nature of the women's movement is discussed in Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its "New" Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
- 49 My thanks to Shelagh Weir for sharing her fieldwork notes with me on this point. Iman Sacca made the same observation when curating an exhibition on Palestinian clothing at the Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago. See "Palestinian Women Used Clothes to Make More Than a Fashion Statement," news release, University of Chicago News Office, 9 November 2006, <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/061109.palestinianclothing.shtml>.
- 50 Jiryas Farhat, letter to Suleiman Farhat, 4 February 1934, Kathy Kenny private collection.
- 51 Katrina Farhat, letter to Suleiman Farhat, 13 October 1933, Kathy Kenny private collection.
- 52 Jiryas Farhat, letter to Suleiman Farhat, 16 February 1934, Kathy Kenny private collection.
- 53 Dabdoub, "Mukhtasar," p. 7.
- 54 Dabdoud, "Mukhtasar," p. 7.
- 55 Bethlehemites today relate numerous stories of women returning in the 1920s and 1930s after a marriage breakup or the death of a husband when living abroad. This is confirmed in the Latin Parish records of Bethlehem where it becomes increasingly evident that around the turn of the twentieth century women did not remarry after the death of a husband living abroad.
- 56 For examples see Taraki and Giacaman, "Modernity Aborted," p. 17; and Weir, *Palestinian Costume*, pp. 225–27.
- 57 Discussed in a wider context in Iris Agmon, *Family and Court: Legal Culture and Modernity in Late Ottoman Palestine* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 160–67.
- 58 This trend has come up in numerous conversations with Bethlehem families. It is also mentioned in Weir, *Palestinian Costume*, p. 225.
- 59 Abdel Jawad, "Landed Property," pp. 24–26.
- 60 Rana Barakat, "Thawrat al-Buraq in British Mandate Palestine: Jerusalem, Mass Mobilization and Colonial Politics, 1928–30" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2007), pp. 212–29; see also Barakat's "The Jerusalem Fellah: Popular Politics in Mandate-Era Palestine," *JPS* 46, no. 1 (2016): pp. 7–19. Salim Tamari explores a similar concept that he terms "urban ruralism" in the context of the post-1948 Jerusalem hill country in his essay, "From Emma Bovary to Hasan al-Banna: Small Towns

and Social Control,” in Salim Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 36–55.

- 61 For examples see Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*; and Mark LeVine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- 62 As argued in Sherene Seikaly, “Meatless Days: Consumption and Capitalism in Wartime Palestine, 1939–1948” (PhD diss., New York University, 2007), pp. 14–16; and Salim Tamari, “Factionalism and Class Formation in Recent Palestinian History,” in *Studies in the Economic and Social History of Palestine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Roger Owen (Oxford: St. Antony’s College, 1982), pp. 177–98. These two works approach the subject of class formation from very different perspectives, but both assert the continuities between older urban elites and the newer middle classes.
- 63 Discussed in Lauren Banko, “The Diaspora and the Meanings of Palestinian Citizenship: 1925–1931,” in *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918–1947* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). Also see Nadim Bawalsa, “Legislating Exclusion: Palestinian Migrants and Interwar Citizenship,” and Lauren Banko, “Claiming Identities in Palestine: Migration and Nationality under the Mandate,” which both appear in the current issue of *JPS*.
- 64 Jabra, *The First Well*, p. 88.
- 65 Jabra, *The First Well*, p. 89.