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Feeling connected across borders: haptic experiences of food and drink preparation among Palestinian women in Britain

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ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic research with Palestinian women in Britain, this article explores how the everyday sensations associated with food and drink preparation develop, maintain and transmit a sense of connectedness. Focusing on touch – the feel of foodstuffs and kitchen utensils – I show how continued connections with people and place are felt and narrated through moments of both familiar and unfamiliar haptic sensation. I argue that foregrounding these bodily sensations helps unpack the links between embodied experiences of place and *displacement*, at local, national and transnational scales. The empirical material in this paper therefore provides a unique perspective from which to examine connection and belonging across borders: challenging methodologically nationalist approaches even as it demonstrates the continued importance of “the national” in the Palestinian context. The embodied knowledges and memories presented here offer new insights into how culinary practice structures diasporic Palestinians’ relationships with Palestine and their sense of Palestinianness.

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Introduction

This article explores how everyday sensory experiences of diasporic women develop, maintain and extend a sense of connectedness across borders. Based on ethnographic research with Palestinians in Britain, it focuses on the haptic sensations of food preparation, especially the feel of cooking utensils and foodstuffs. It shows how, as they experience sensations that are both familiar and unfamiliar, embodied knowledge and memory emerge as central to the connections the women feel to people and places. I suggest that foregrounding such bodily sensations enables us to better unpack the links between the embodied experiences of place and *displacement*, thus generating new insights into how Palestinians in diaspora experience and narrate their Palestinianness.

To date, scholarship on transnationalism has lacked in-depth engagement with the experience of transnational practices and belongings at a bodily level (Nikielska-Sekuła

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2023). Research has only very recently begun to reflect on the possibilities that sensory ethnography can afford in complex experiences of home (Mata-Codesal 2023), such as those that might be experienced by diasporic subjects. In contributing to this nascent field of sensory scholarship within transnational studies, this article shows how a sensory lens can help move beyond methodological nationalism, even as it simultaneously demonstrates the continued importance of “the national” in Palestinians’ daily lives in diaspora. In particular, the analysis shows that belongings are felt and experienced in multiple ways and at multiple scales, from the nuclear family to the wider community, and from the hyperlocal to the transnational. These belongings both operate within and exceed the terms of the national frame. Taking a more relational and experiential approach to belonging allows us to shift the focus from territorial attachment alone, to consider it as a broader set of meaningful relationships, memories and aspirations (Bocagni 2017: xxiv). Using a sensory lens can therefore provide a new way to approach Palestinian diasporic belongings, emphasising the importance of affective connections at various levels, even as these may be essentialised as territorially-bound in Palestinian struggles for recognition.

After an exploration of the key concepts and existing literature, I detail the research context and methodology. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of the empirical material, which draws on participants’ sensory narrations of food and drink preparation to explore the relationship between people and place through a vocabulary centred on familiarity/unfamiliarity and presence/absence. Focusing on the haptic – understood here as multiple forms and ways of touching – can elucidate the ways that the past is used in the present (Paterson 2006) to (re)affirm connections between people and place. In particular, a sensory lens can elicit the intimate yet persistent violences of displacement, such as those evoked here by terms like unfamiliarity and absence. Simultaneously, illuminating the continued connections to territory remains politically vital, especially in a context of ongoing settler-colonialism, where one people’s claim to home/homeland seeks to actively *disconnect* another from that same land. Bringing to light those continuing connections, through a focus on the senses, can elucidate the power structures underlying displacement, making visible the geopolitical processes that impact upon individual bodies (Nikielska-Sekuła and Desille 2025, this issue). I conclude by offering some thoughts on how engaging with the senses might be of particular use in post- and/or settler-colonial migratory and exilic contexts, where notions of home and homeland remain central to individual and collective accounts of personhood.

Migration, food and the senses

A now extensive body of literature has considered the role of foodstuffs in migrant identity, and how foods – especially from “the home/homeland” – (re)orient people after migration or displacement (see for example Gardner 1993; Harbottle 2004; Ray 2004). However, the role of the senses in these processes has been less thoroughly explored, even though the sensory turn in the social sciences encouraged scholars to consider the role that our sensing bodies play in our epistemological and ontological constructions (Classen 1997; Howes 1991, 2005; Pocock 1993; Rodaway 1994). The “sensuous scholarship” (Stoller 1997) that has emerged has been used to detail the relationship between food and memory, with Sutton (2001) noting that the sensuous qualities of food make

it an especially strong carrier of memory. Changes in sensory experiences, occurring when particular foodstuffs and their associated tastes or aromas are unavailable after migration, are also important to consider. The memories and feelings these changes evoke reflect broader social changes, and can provide reference points between past and present, or one place and another (Choo 2004). Other analyses have explored the intersections of the senses and place-making, demonstrating that cooking and eating can be central to the (re)construction of homes and other places (Law 2001; Seremetakis 1994). In particular, Rodaway's (1994) call for "sensuous geography" pinpointed sensory experiences as central to our understanding of geography, at individual and collective, physical and cultural levels.

The transnational turn in migration studies (see Levitt and Jaworsky 2007) pushed scholars to more closely consider how and why people forge a sense of belonging across national borders. In particular, researchers were urged to move beyond methodological nationalism – the assumption that the nation-state is a "natural" delimiter for individual and collective identity – to explore how people actually conceive of, and act within and beyond, spaces and boundaries (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). One approach to overcoming methodological nationalism is to adopt a "transnational social structure" perspective, as this allows researchers to examine the ways in which social actors operate within transnational social fields or spaces, at once independent of nation-states yet embedded within them (Koinova 2018). In practice, this means attending to the fluidity of boundaries, to the way people, objects and ideas circulate within and flow through them. In their exploration of culinary culture and displacement, Cook and Crang (1996: 132–3) assert that culinary heritage is the outcome of "dis-placed materials and practices, inhabiting many times and spaces which ... bleed into and mutually constitute each other". Combined with embodied memories, sensory experiences of food and drink therefore emplace migrants in new places, and/or provide continuing connections to previous places; this is closely related to how migrants experience spatialities of belonging or not-belonging in their present-day lives. Moreover, they occur across multiple scales, often simultaneously. This means that our understanding of "home", identity and belonging for transnational subjects must include but also exceed understandings based on the nation (Long 2012).

This article takes as its starting point David Sutton's assertion that the taste of food "from home" can temporarily and symbolically restore the integrity of a migrant and their homeland, a move that Sutton refers to as a "return to the whole" (2001, 82–3). Rather than narratives of taste, I drawn on those of touch, of the ways in which the feel of ingredients and cooking utensils helps Palestinians in diaspora mediate between various spatial and temporal sites of belonging. Here, sensory memories and returns are not understood as a passive longing for the past, but as an active and productive site for the (re)figuring of identity and belonging in diaspora; a process that always occurs with reference to a multiplicity of times and spaces. In this way I extend transnational studies' traditional focus on cross-border social contacts and travel to a more affective form of movement, to felt moments of mobility (see Barkley 2025; Nikielska-Sekuła 2025, this issue; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 219). Moreover, I move beneath "the whole" as rendered at a national ("homeland") level, to emphasise that many returns are hyperlocal, often referencing family homes, kitchens and living rooms. Importantly, I push to conceptualise such wholes as encompassing the social:

the unity of the family or community as remembered from diaspora. Such an approach bolsters Palestinian claims to space, as well as to an enduring peoplehood despite displacement, and in the face of settler-colonial denials and erasures.

Haptic sensibilities

While food preparation is a synaesthetic process involving the body's full range of sensory capabilities, for concision I focus my attention on touch in this article. However, I do so with an understanding that the senses and our experience of them are fundamentally interconnected, a concept termed "intersensoriality" by Howes and Classen (2013). Indeed, it is the interconnectedness of the senses and sensory memories that confer an impression of temporal depth and connectivity to otherwise quotidian experiences (Seremetakis 1994, 28). Furthermore, embodied memories – memories constructed and reproduced in and by the body in specific social contexts (Connerton 1989) – provide us with recollections that are not just cognitive, but also physical and emotional in nature. Such remembrances, both of sensory experiences and triggered by them, emerged in my research as central to how participants constituted and narrated their identifications and belonging, at local, national and transnational levels.

In this article, I use the term "haptic" to refer to participants' experiences during culinary practice. This term relates to but exceeds a basic understanding of touch as being the contact of the skin with an object. Rather, a haptic understanding encompasses multiple, *active* forms of touch (Camp 2017; Rodaway 1994): not just an object's texture or temperature, but also the body's orientation and movement in relation to objects, spaces and places (Dixon and Straughan 2010; Rodaway 1994). This more expansive reading of touch is important in the context of my analysis, where participants' remembrances and narrations were sometimes triggered as much by the techniques and gestures used during food and drink preparation than by the simple act of touching a utensil or ingredient. Moreover, Paterson (2006) asserts that haptic experiences can both evoke an affective experience of the past and also, through embodied actions and movements, create a feeling of continuity between past and present.

This feeling of temporal but also spatial continuity, and its narration, is crucial in Palestinian accounts of exile and displacement, and is part of a politicised project of "keeping their place" in the world in the face of potential settler-colonial erasure (Rifkin 2017, 109; Swedenburg 1990; Serhan 2023, 55). In such a context, both discourse and practice are important to everyday experiences of being Palestinian in diaspora, and of remaining connected with people and places from that diasporic positioning. Analysing these within the dynamic localities in which they occur further ensures that we can apprehend the importance of national/ised narratives whilst also attending to other scales and forms of attachment that have shown to be important for Palestinians in diaspora (see Long 2011), thus avoiding a methodologically nationalist portrayal.

One further aspect of hapticity is of importance here, and that is its ability to transgress apparent boundaries, to bring near that which was far away (Dixon and Straughan 2010). It then becomes possible to understand how haptic experiences of Palestinian foods and culinary heritage can not only evoke a sense of connection to people, places and times, but can also bring these nearer to hand in the present. These connections are often the result of familiar sensations and actions, knowledge of foodstuffs and techniques of their

preparation that become habituated over time and return to us as sensory memories (see Connerton 1989, 95). Indeed, Boccagni (2023, 11–12) views feelings of familiarity as central to the production of a sense of home, but notes that achieving this familiarity is contingent on what is available in the present context.

Consequently, when something does not feel as it should – when it is unfamiliar or not considered “correct” – this can act to prevent a connection being formed or sustained. Moreover, when unfamiliarity breeds a feeling of absence or loss, an individual’s position in diaspora and the spatiotemporal boundaries between themselves and other people and places can be felt more acutely (Mata-Codesal 2023). Hetherington (2003, 1937) refers to such a sensation as “*praesentia*”, describing it as “an intimate and touching encounter with the presence of an absence”. This is a knowledge of *what should be*, a knowledge that can only be gained through repeated haptic encounters with foods, utensils and cooking techniques that over time establish our subjectivity, our relation to people and places in the world. The interrelation of presences and absences in diasporic lives also disrupts the neat boundaries that might otherwise be drawn between here and there, or now and then (Boccagni 2023), allowing us to better comprehend how deeply intertwined the spatial and temporal references of diasporic subjects can be.

This article therefore responds to calls for more critical attention to be paid to the work of touch in everyday place-making, especially across geographical scales and borders (Dixon and Straughan 2010; Hetherington 2003; Rodaway 1994). This is a theme I would also extend to the idea of place- and identity-*continuation*, the maintenance and perpetuation of a sense of these despite *displacement*, an idea that is central to Palestinian discourses of territorial ownership and rights. Although there has been some work on the embodied sensations of migration and food, most of this tends to focus on the familiar, particularly on tastes and aromas “from home” (Abbots 2016). I suggest that attending to both the familiarity and *unfamiliarity* of haptic experiences lends a greater depth to accounts of belonging and connection, especially in their ability to shed light on the specific and ongoing impacts of settler-colonialism on Palestinians in diaspora.

Research methodology and context

This article and its empirical material derives from ESRC-funded doctoral research that sought to understand the relationship between culinary practices and processes of home- and community-building among Palestinians living in Britain. Arising from a personal involvement in Palestine solidarity, my research emphasises the politicised aspects of these issues, and elucidates the linkages between participants’ practice in Britain and a refusal of the settler-colonial account that seeks to appropriate, deny and erase the Palestinian narrative. Ethnographic research – a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observation – took place with 32 Palestinians between 2015 and early 2020. Participants were identified via personal networks and snowball sampling, and represented a range of ages, genders, social situation and migratory/diasporic backgrounds, making their positionalities similarly varied.

As a white British researcher I was, to a certain extent, both “within” and “outside” my fieldwork sites and communities. Intersectional similarities and differences therefore existed between myself and the interlocutors, and being aware of the privileged and empowered position I hold as researcher made it imperative to centre individuals and

their stories in research outputs, allowing their words to guide the project's course as much as possible. Rather than being detrimental to the research, and following a feminist approach to ethnography, I believe my personal investment in the topic is ethically necessary in the context of scholarly interventions that seek to move toward social justice (Davis 2013, 36; Schrock 2013, 48). Being a female researcher allowed me greater access to female participants – whose culinary practice was often located in domestic space and learned within the family – and weighted the research sample in favour of women's voices.¹ As a result, this article focuses on women's experiences, and on sensory moments arising in the intimacy of the household. An analysis centred on knowledge and connections circulating through male interlocutors – many of whom were food professionals – would necessarily require a shift in analytical focus, and for their experiences to be located in a more public and commodified sphere (cf Bascuñan-Wiley 2025, this issue).

Interviews were audio recorded (where permission was granted) and transcribed, and extensive notes were taken during and after meetings. Transcriptions and field notes were open coded for analysis, using categorisations derived inductively from the data. Full ethical approval was granted by the University of Exeter's ethics committee and informed consent was given by all participants. Participants' names have been anonymised and the ages and locations noted here were correct at the time of our fieldwork encounters.

Palestinian displacement and migration has primarily been precipitated by the colonial history of the SWANA region (Southwest Asia and North Africa), especially the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, which resulted in the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians (Pappé 2007). As Wolfe (1999) notes, settler-colonialism is not a singular "event"; thus, subsequent wars and political instability, and the manifold pressures of ongoing settler-colonial practices have resulted in up to seven million Palestinians now living outside their historic homeland, making Palestinians the largest and longest-standing refugee population still denied return (Rayan 2024; Serhan 2023). The Palestinian population in Europe is estimated at approximately 200,000 people, with around 20,000 of these living in Britain (Shiblak 2005, 12). While the concepts of home, identity and belonging are highly heterogeneous among Palestinians in Britain, narratives that centre the homeland as the key site of attachment remain vital to Palestinian political discourses of territorial justice, ownership and return. However, as this article will show, more intimate sites of connection emerge in and through everyday practice. These do not undermine the importance of nationalised narratives, but rather support claims of belonging, emphasising the enduring and dense connections to people and places that Palestinians in diaspora exhibit (Rifkin 2017, 111, 166).

Following other scholars researching Palestinians living outside Palestine/Israel and beyond the proximate countries of SWANA (for example Lindholm Hammer 2005; Schulz 2003), in this article I use the term diasporic to refer to Palestinians living in Britain. "Diaspora" has been shown to be relevant to the study of Palestinians in Britain when it is used as an analytical tool to examine both the roots and mobility of participants (Loddo 2017). Choosing this term above others such as exile or refugee is not to subsume these important categories that reflect involuntary and violent displacement(s), but rather to select one term to encompass a multitude of movement types, and which can be used consistently throughout the article. Of special relevance in the Palestinian context is the "claim-making" aspect of some conceptualisations of diaspora (for example Brubaker

2005). This can direct our attention to the intersection of political struggles for territory and corporeal struggles for a sense of belonging (Hui 2020), including among the second generation and beyond. Additionally, diaspora emphasises the importance of geography in the formation of belongings. Whilst this focus on geography has frequently taken the form of a recourse to nation-state driven conceptualisations of homeland (see Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994), the material and experiential realities of diaspora are often located in different spaces of power (Bonnerjee 2023, 101). In particular, histories of displacement and experiences of dislocation and (not)belonging may come to be narrated at far more localised scales, as the empirical material in this article shows.

Echoing the findings of Azevedo (2025, this issue), participants in this research detailed how food's "*portable*"² nature makes it a particularly potent ingredient in creating and sustaining connections between individuals and (shifting) spaces of home, identity and belonging. For example, Sahar, a 25-year-old refugee from Gaza, explained that cooking Palestinian food in Britain is a way:

to connect me, to have that feeling of being back home even though it's something temporary and you're not there physically ... So I think part of it for me is just dealing with displacement, with not being there anymore.

Likewise, Hana, aged 20, born and raised in the United States by her Palestinian mother and American father and living in London since 2016, told me, "*Palestinian food carves a space for me of being able to have a changeable space of home*". For both Sahar and Hana, cooking and eating Palestinian food in their various places of residence becomes part of their affective processes of feeling at home where they currently are. Importantly in the Palestinian context, the construction of homely spaces in the present by these interlocutors does not foreclose the possibility of or their desire for return, but rather emphasises the manifold ways in which they actively orient themselves towards Palestine and Palestinian heritage and belonging from diaspora.

Building on these themes, the discussion in this article is primarily centred around two participant narratives, chosen from the wider data set because of their clear focus on haptic experiences. Additionally, the narratives provide a contrasting view of how sensory moments can evoke a sense of familiarity and/or unfamiliarity. In the first, Manal demonstrates how her cooking skills and practical technical knowledge can strengthen her connections to place and heritage, even if some haptic experiences are new or different in her kitchen in Britain. Conversely, in the second narrative we discover how preparing Arab coffee signals an absence of sociality for Hana, bringing to light a lack of connection that she struggles to overcome from her diasporic position. The narratives and supporting quotes presented here are not assumed to be representative of all Palestinians living in Britain. However, the specificities of the stories offer situated examples that direct our focus towards the importance of attending to sensory experiences, and to the crucial role of the senses in maintaining and (re)making connections across borders.

Narrative 1, Manal: the feel of the pestle and mortar

Manal was born and raised in Hebron, and moved to Britain in 2003. She is 38 years old and lives in Bristol with her husband and three young children. For Manal, the act of preparing certain foods is inextricably linked with memories of cooking with her mother and

grandmother as a child. Growing up in Hebron, she spent “*many happy hours in the kitchen with them, many ... It was my favourite place to be*”. When I visited her for dinner in September 2018, the embodied nature of her food knowledge became clear as she ground spices and cored potatoes to make *batata mahshiyyeh*³, as the following extended narrative from my fieldwork diary shows. To begin, Manal grabbed a handful of spice jars and began tipping small quantities of each into a white marble mortar:

So I don't actually measure anything, I just put in however much feels right. Sometimes it will have more of one thing or less of another, but basically it tastes the same every time I make it ... Anyway, I love this part,” she said, picking up the pestle and setting to work grinding the spices to a fine powder. “I think maybe because it was always one of my jobs when I was little. At home we had a huge one – huge”, she said, motioning with her hands to a diameter akin to a dinner plate. “It was so heavy I couldn't lift it, so they would put it down onto the floor for me to use. And the feel of it, it was so rough it would scratch my fingers if I touched the inside of the bowl ... I hated it! Actually this one is no good because it's completely smooth, so it doesn't work as well.

“When I knew you were coming I just had to do a mahshi [stuffed dish], it's such a traditional thing ... So we need to core the potatoes. I'll show you how to do one and then you can try! Just start in the centre of one end and turn [the corer] like this ... ” A few deft twists of her wrist later and a cylinder of potato emerged. “See? Just a bit more, it's still too thick. You can feel when it's just right, and when it's about to get too thin and break, so then you should stop.” Moments later I was presented with a perfectly hollowed-out potato, even in thickness all around, and the excavated scrapings were swept into a bowl: “I keep all this, I'll make mashed potato tomorrow, Palestinians don't waste anything!” Manal passed me a fresh potato and the vegetable corer, then laughed at my raised eyebrow. “It's fun!” she told me encouragingly.

The potato was hard and slippery, and stubbornly resisted my attempts to make any headway with the corer. After trying – and failing – to scrape away the insides, I admitted defeat and Manal quickly finished what I had started. “*I know I used to be much slower*”, she conceded. “*I remember watching Mum and Teta (grandmother) do it and thinking I would never be able to do it like them, but it's just practice. Well, and skill too!*” She tried to encourage me to complete the final potato, but it looked too fragile for an amateur's unskilled hands. “*The only way to learn is by doing it. And doing it and doing it ...*” she told me, laughing.

For Manal, preparing the daily family dinner is a chance to reminisce about and (re)connect with people and places from her past. Her narrative demonstrates that the haptic experiences of cooking a “*traditional*” Palestinian *mahshi* dish – the feel of ingredients and tools, and the physical gestures required to grind spices and core vegetables – are redolent of past times and places. The use of the pestle and mortar in the present, an action that Manal performed countless times during her childhood, has the power to return her to remembered moments of wholeness, when she was with her mother and grandmother in the family's kitchen in Hebron.

Additionally, her skill at coring potatoes, learned as a young woman and honed throughout her lifetime so far, is “*sedimented*” in her body. To actualise her skill she must draw upon the three kinds of memory identified by Connerton: personal, cognitive and habit memory (1989: 22-25). Her personal memories include knowledge of when, where and with whom she learned, and most closely evoke the spatiotemporal connections between Manal, her family and the kitchen in Hebron. In terms of cognitive memory, *mahshi*-making requires her to remember information such as the quantities of

ingredients, and habit memories established through years of repetition enable her to replicate the skill of vegetable coring. These include memories of the movements required to hollow out the vegetables, the correct positioning of the corer and the strength and delicacy needed to achieve the perfect result. Manal's socialisation into Palestinian culinary skills by her mother and grandmother therefore "directed" her body in certain ways, causing it to be shaped by its dwelling in the world (Ahmed 2006, 9, 15). Despite the highly localised nature of her remembrances, Manal's narrative – especially when she identifies *mahshi* as a traditional Palestinian dish and generalises about matters such as Palestinians never wasting food – situates herself within a felt global Palestinian community: an understanding of herself as being positioned within a transnational Palestinian social field that transcends her individual subjecthood (Blachnicka-Ciack 2018; Koinova 2018; Rayan 2024). Centering Manal's haptic experiences therefore helps emphasise the role of embodied moments in both her remembrances and her continuing sense of connection at various geographical and social scales.

However, her story also indicates the ways in which her migration from Palestine has wrought changes on her food practice, how once familiar haptic experiences are now rendered as unfamiliar. Thus, the marble pestle and mortar feels different beneath her fingertips than the rough, unglazed bowl in Hebron. Although Manal did not like the texture of the old mortar – which is also remembered as much bigger and heavier than the newer implement – it is judged in her memory to have been more efficient. Yet the new pestle and mortar provides a sense of *praesentia* (Hetherington 2003) during its use: Manal's grinding of spices being so familiar an action as to evoke the past and continuing connections between Manal, her mother and grandmother, and the family kitchen in Palestine. Changes to the ingredients used also reflect her movement away from Palestine; in Britain she uses beef rather than lamb, because "*the kids prefer it and ... it's not as fatty. Cheaper too!*". The quotidian pressures of life – economic and health concerns – along with the family's taste preferences therefore contour the adaptations Manal makes to the *mahshi* dish. These further emphasise her position in diaspora, even as her cooking practice keeps her connected with Palestine and the "*traditional*" culinary heritage she draws on. Further, she explained that "*potatoes keep everyone happy too ... They do use potatoes sometimes in Palestine, but the classic ones are courgettes and aubergines*". By choosing to cook food that "keeps everyone happy", Manal nourishes her family physically, and by passing on information about Palestine, in the form of culinary knowledge and cultural heritage, she also socialises her children and British husband into Palestinian tastes, history and belonging.

After hearing of my failed attempts to core potatoes with Manal, another participant – Ghada – was keen to demonstrate how to prepare courgettes in this manner:

Oh mahshi, I can do it, I do it all the time. I've got the implement: you have to have an implement, if you don't have the implement you can't do it! ... The implement⁴ ... goes into the kousa, the courgette ... And slowly, it's like drilling ... You can see it goes on and on ... But over time you can become very, very fast!

For Ghada, like Manal, coring and stuffing vegetables is a hallmark of Palestinian cuisine and Palestinian culinary skill. Although Ghada used a courgette to demonstrate this to me – one of the "*classic*" vegetables according to Manal – she suggested that the vegetables available in Britain are not the same as Palestine and thus confer a sense of unfamiliarity

even when prepared according to the traditional Palestinian method: *“The little aubergines, the little courgettes, things that like that ... The ingredients here are not accessible very much and they’re not as delicious and they’re quite expensive.”* Thus, Ghada will not cook her favourite dish of stuffed aubergines in Britain, preferring to wait until she visits her mother in Kuwait, who can source more familiar ingredients that Ghada remembers from Palestine.

The narratives of both women make clear the strong, embodied memories that are involved in preparing vegetables in this way, especially with regards to the feel of the corer and the ingredient in their hands. As they hollowed out the courgettes and potatoes, both women demonstrated their “practical intelligence” (Sutton 2001, 131), learned from their mothers and grandmothers but refined through years of practice. In Tim Ingold’s terms, this is a technique: knowledge of how to use a tool that is deeply embedded in the social and practical contexts in which it was learned (Ingold 1993). Their haptic experiences of such techniques in their daily lives in Britain keep them connected to other people and places in both the past and present, but can sometimes – especially in their unfamiliarity – also reinforce a sense of spatiotemporal distance.

Narrative 2, Hana: the press of bodies

The theme of spatiotemporal distance also emerged strongly in Hana’s story, where her descriptions of preparing Arab coffee indicate the multisensoriality of everyday life, and the capacity of sensory memories to return a person to a sense of wholeness but also make apparent a feeling of absence. Hana told me,

When I make Arab coffee, especially when I use the copper pot my grandmother gave me, it brings back very special memories of being with her. She had one like this and I used to like tracing the patterns on it so much that she bought me this one so I could have one of my own. If I run my fingers over the patterns on this one ... [and] the sound of coffee, when it bubbles, just reminds me of her every time. It was a big thing, when we would go and stay with her, that all the relatives, and her friends and neighbours would take turns coming round in the afternoons to visit with us. It would be so crowded – her apartment wasn’t big – with everyone there ... we’d be squeezed around the coffee table.

Hana was born and raised in the US but has lived (without her nuclear family) in London since beginning her undergraduate degree. Since her grandmother’s death several years before, the nuclear family has made fewer, and less frequent visits to Palestine. When they have travelled, they usually stay in a rented apartment instead of with other family members, and only once have they stayed in Haifa⁵, the city her grandmother lived in. *“Every other time we’ve stayed in Jerusalem and it’s like being a tourist – we travel round and look at places, instead of spending time with people. Yeah, it feels like I’m a tourist in Palestine now, not a Palestinian”*.⁶ The loss of her grandmother seems to have been accompanied for Hana by a weakening of social and familial connections within Palestine. Rather than being characterised by the renewal of such bonds, visits to Palestine became more focused on apparently trying to rekindle or maintain connections with Palestine as a place, rendered at a national scale; her search for a sense of wholeness seems to necessarily now centre on different foci. Hana’s narrative suggests it was the strong social bonds that most connected her to Palestine and represented what being Palestinian meant to her. Furthermore, her grandmother appeared as the glue that was holding the extended

family together, even across continents; without her as the anchor, Hana's (already complex) sense of belonging as a Palestinian and her relationship to Palestine have both been cut adrift.

By returning to Hana's narrative triggered by the haptic experiences of holding a copper coffee pot, we might better understand her current relations to place, people and belonging. Maurice Bloch's theory of commensality posits that certain foods have the ability to abolish separations between people brought about by time, especially when they provoke memories of previous times those foods have been shared (1999: 145). In Hana's case, the ritual of gathering to drink coffee in the afternoons also helped to abolish the *spatial* separations that existed between herself and her nuclear family, and the extended family and friends who remained in Palestine. Her narrative therefore demonstrates coffee's power as a "social conductor" because it (re)created closeness between people (Bloch 1999, 135). While the touch of the coffee pot temporarily returns Hana to the space of her grandmother's apartment, it is the act of drinking coffee *in the company of others* that becomes the focal point of her remembrances.

The social nature of Hana's sensory memories becomes apparent through her words. When she describes the apartment as being "*so crowded ... with everyone there*", and the visitors being "*squeezed around the coffee table*", she suggests a press of bodies, a literal physical closeness that could only be experienced in that small space of the apartment's living area during the afternoon social calls (see also Barkley 2025). Hana's story therefore represents what Sutton has termed a "narrative of *gemeinschaft*", a passage describing a time of easy sociality and closer-knit social relations (Sutton 2001, 54). Such narratives are "thick with the feel of embeddedness in a community", and according to Sutton, often serve as a commentary on the present and a planning out of one's relationship to a larger community (2008, 168, 171); indeed, Hana's story exhibits these qualities strongly.

The haptic associations of the coffee pot are therefore deeply embedded in a context of sociality, one in which connections between the extended family and friends were renewed through the afternoon ritual of gathering together. By extension, the feel of the coffee pot and the sound of the coffee bubbling have the power to recall the sense of wholeness that Hana felt in these moments; moments when she felt physically and emotionally close to so many others. Moreover, these were times in which she felt connected to Palestine *as a Palestinian*, rather than from the spatiotemporal distance of diaspora, or from the disembedded perspective of a tourist. Hana's remembrances are inseparable from the social context in which they were developed but are deeply contoured by her life in the intervening period. Thus, her narrative becomes reflective of her struggles for family and social relations in the present, and is inflected by the ambivalences of her own sense of belonging. Maintaining her affective connection to Palestine and her sense of Palestinianness is made more difficult by a twofold separation: from Palestine and the communities located there that she once felt part of, but also from her nuclear family in the US. Residing alone in Britain may cause Hana to feel the lack of remembered *gemeinschaft* more acutely. Additionally, the death of her grandmother has perhaps emphasised in retrospect the importance of the social bonding process as represented by the ritual of afternoon coffee enacted by her grandmother. Preparing Arab coffee with her copper pot in Britain therefore evokes for Hana a simultaneous sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity. This can provide traces of wholeness and connection

even as it illuminates the ways in which her sense of belonging as a Palestinian and her connection to Palestine have been altered in recent years.

Discussion

Although the participants cited in this article referred to the full range of sensory experiences during our research encounters, I have focused on the haptic elements of their stories here. These highlight the practical, embodied knowledge required to prepare foods according to “traditional” methods (de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 1998): the effort needed to effectively grind whole spices, the shape and texture of a vegetable in one’s hands, the technique and strength needed to remove its core. Furthermore, some haptic experiences, such as the tracing of a coffee pot’s etchings beneath one’s fingertips, provide us with clear ways in which the past is encountered in the present. Diasporic memories should therefore not only be read as transnational, but also as “*transtemporal*” (Coe 2016). Familiarity is a key part of how Manal, Ghada and Hana narrate their experiences of Palestinian belonging, and continued connections with place, people and identity emerge from this familiarity. These can act to emplace them into broader networks of connection that can span a range of scales and places (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2016). However, for Hana especially, while haptic experiences can provoke a remembered wholeness they can also bring to light the unfamiliar sensation of a lack of connection at social and geographical scales, and this can emphasise her current dislocation and displacement. For all of the women, culinary objects – the pestle and mortar, the vegetable corer and the coffee pot – contain within them reminders of both their Palestinian heritage and their personal migratory journeys.

By recounting connections with place at the most intimate level – the kitchen in Hebron and the apartment in Haifa – as evoked during their preparation of Palestinian food and drink in Britain, Manal and Hana are claiming these places as part of their individual histories, as sites upon which their identifications are founded. Their remembrances signal the spatial roots of their knowledge, and as a representation of their “enduring intimacy with place”, such stories take on a particularly powerful and politicised aspect with respect to Palestinian sovereignty and return (Rifkin 2017, 166). It is this continuity with place that Hetherington (2003) asserts is made real through *praesentia*, and engaging with presences and absences can be a productive approach to understanding not just the felt impacts of displacement, but also the ways in which these are negotiated and challenged in every life. Sensory experiences and memories can then be seen as rubbing against hegemonic Israeli narratives that seek to deny and erase Palestinian claims to territory and history. Further, they can provide an effective and alternative space of political participation for those excluded from more formal political platforms, and allow Palestinians in diaspora to express their ongoing relations with Palestine. Indeed, Ghada stated that “*it’s essential I cook Palestinian food [in Britain] ... I have to do it, I must do it ... because it is my heritage, the only thing I can do every day and remember who I am, what I am, and make people all around me aware who I am*”. This speaks to the weight that is attributed to culinary practice as a marker of identity, as well as the conscious, politically-motivated statements of belonging that might accompany it.

While the “people-land” bond represents a focal point around which Palestinian acts of memory proliferate (Bardenstein 1999, 148), I would also like to emphasise here the social

aspects of the narratives, the “people-people” bonds they evoke. These may be an equally important form of “narrative witnessing”, an assertion of peoplehood in the face of settler-colonial denials (Kaçandes 1999; Rifkin 2017, 184). Such efforts to “project oneself onto the world” (Vergès 2001, 170) are a crucial part of Palestinian struggles for recognition and rights, and embed personal experiences of displacement into the collective (hi)story. As both narrative analyses presented here show, haptic experiences of foodstuffs and utensils are not always “place-bound” – primarily narrated in reference to national identity – but they remain “place-conscious” (Blachnicka-Ciacek 2018). Examining practices through a transnational social field perspective allows us to define space not just geographically, but also *socially*, thus moving beyond analyses and descriptions that are circumscribed by the national signifier alone (Lubbers, Verdery, and Molina 2020).

However, it is important to note that those national identities and belongings may become a conscious part of a story’s retelling in diaspora, especially when that is told to “outsiders”. In such cases, transmission can be an agentic response to perceived endangerment originating both from the conditions of life in diaspora and from geopolitical strategies that seek to (further) dispossess Palestinians of culture, history and territory. Some elements of the women’s stories are therefore also suggestive of the ways they position themselves towards Palestine in a national sense. While Manal draws upon a notion of collective culinary heritage and the idea of continuing such traditions in diaspora, Hana’s words evoke a particular sense of uncertainty in her current relationship to Palestine. This occurs despite Hana’s self-proclaimed “*very political*” stance, and serves as a reminder that diasporic identifications can be conflicted and messy yet still adhere to the “national” orientation that is so often required in colonial contexts (Rifkin 2017, 6). Following Kearney (2009), we can therefore think of sensory memories as part of the “emotional geographies” that connect Manal and Hana to the specific social and territorial sites encapsulated within the concept of “homeland”. Rather than being reduced to a national/ised place alone, Palestine becomes a conglomeration of memory, experience and belonging that is part of Manal and Hana’s “mental territory” as Palestinians in diaspora (Hui 2020). Their sensory memories form part of their claims to space, culture and knowledge that speak back to the hegemonic settler-colonial narrative (Boccagni 2023, 3). The women’s memories, triggered by haptic experiences of foodstuffs and utensils, ultimately become affirmations of their history at individual *and* collective levels (Weir 2008, 16–7).

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to show the continued connections to people and place that Palestinians in Britain maintain, and to demonstrate how these are felt and narrated through the senses. Highlighting how haptic experiences can register as familiar or unfamiliar demonstrates their deeply embodied nature whilst also reminding us of the ways that people, objects and ideas move within and across borders. Touch and feel can then provide a sense of presence, moments of connection and wholeness, or evoke a sense of absence, loss and disconnection. These operate at individual and collective levels, and at various social and geographical scales from the hyperlocal to the transnational. Attending to sensory experiences can show how the nation and associated ideas such as (national) culinary heritage are lived, fluid and experiential; they encounter various boundaries and

may be altered by them, but are also not constrained by them. Rather, they take shape in the dynamic contacts between “old” and “new” locations and temporal moments, becoming anchored in place at local, national and transnational scales at once (Nikielska-Sekuła 2023). Sensory memories can therefore provide us with a way to navigate the muddled waters of diasporic life, a way to avoid a methodologically nationalist approach whilst maintaining the importance of the national signifier in post- and settler-colonial contexts.

Crucially, in their evocation of familiarity, haptic experiences of Palestinian food not only provide recollections, but also a sense of Palestinianness, an assertion of belonging to place and peoplehood that bolsters Palestinian claim-making. The narratives in this chapter should therefore be considered as inherently political statements, stories constructed and told in response to present circumstances, by subjects who constitute their sense of Palestinianness across spatial, temporal and even cultural divides (Hirsch 1999, 6). Although this article centres on the haptic, its wider research context leads me to believe that engaging with a range of sensory experiences can help us better understand the quotidian impacts of migration and diaspora, particularly when contexts of violence and displacement underlie the movement of people.

Notes

1. Twenty-three of the thirty-two research participants were female.
2. It was described as such by Rania, a 26-year-old participant who grew up between Ramallah and Italy, and who has subsequently lived in both France and Britain.
3. Stuffed potatoes: the stuffing mixture consists of minced meat cooked with onion and spices. The potatoes are usually fried once filled, to begin the cooking process, before being baked in a sauce, often made from tomatoes.
4. The specialised tool for coring vegetables is called a *munara* (Rowe 2012, 216).
5. It should be noted that although Hana refers to Haifa as being in Palestine, the city has been part of Israel since 1948.
6. The cited interview with Hana took place in April 2018, and thus she uses the present tense to refer to her visits; she has not visited Palestine since the current period of instability in the region began in October 2023.

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Statement of ethics

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