'The People Are Missing': Palestinians in Kuwait

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Abstract

This paper explores the effects of the Iraqi invasion on the Palestinian community in Kuwait. Specifically, it considers Gilles Deleuze's notion of the 'missing people' in relation both to the Palestinians deported after the 1991 Gulf War and to the majority of Kuwaitis who have not acknowledged the effects of this disappearance on either the Palestinians or themselves. The first section revisits the circumstances surrounding the deportation of approximately 380,000 Palestinians from Kuwait, while the second considers what was lost as a result. The final section proposes an 'ethics of the missing' as a possible means to engage and transform some of the ensuing problems.

Keywords: Deleuze, Palestinians, Kuwait, ethics, missing people, virtual, becoming

1991 is the year the Palestinian community in Kuwait went missing. Of the 380,000–400,000 Palestinians that lived and worked in Kuwait before the Iraqi invasion, only about 70,000 remained by the end of the year (Lesch 2005: 172). The consequences of the Gulf War on Palestinians deported from Kuwait to Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank are ongoing (Le Troquer and al-Oudat 1999). While the economic and, to some extent, political effects of this event on Palestinians can be calculated, the psychological, social and cultural effects are harder to tabulate. Twenty-two years on, between 55,000 and 70,000 Palestinians remain in Kuwait. They maintain a low profile, understandable given their precarious legal, socio-political and economic status. Kuwaitis tend

to remain silent regarding what can be described as the 'overlapping yet irreconcilable experiences' of living with and without Palestinians in Kuwait (Said 2004: 143). The effects of the untimely disappearance of this once vibrant and dynamic community on Kuwait and its citizens are generally not recognised as worthy of investigation by Kuwaiti scholars or the general population.[1] As it turns out, the people who are missing are not only the deported Palestinians but also a community of people in Kuwait who register this deportation as a mistake and this absence of Palestinians as a loss. This Kuwaiti silence can be read as a symptom of a greater tendency to brush aside singular histories, cultures and experiences in the name of the majoritarian, monovocal narrative of the Islamo-Kuwaiti nation. I contend that the disregard of such singularities as well as the highly partisan manipulation of national and historical memory keep Kuwait at an impasse. A move towards the figuration of a less monolithic and more ethical community to come necessitates acknowledging or remembering these missing singularities, the missing Palestinians not least of all, and, in the process, becoming worthy of the event that happened.[2]

I. Disappearance

The causes and circumstances of the disappearance of the Palestinian community in Kuwait after the Gulf War have been well documented (Abed 1991; Human Rights Watch/Middle East 1991; Lesch 1991; Mattar 1994; Amnesty International 1996; Ghabra 1997b). Nonetheless, I would like to revisit some of the details relevant to my analysis. Kuwait's production of oil coincided with the Nakba (setback) of 1948, and the first major wave of Palestinians to Kuwait was a direct result of this coincidence (Ghabra 1987: 33–80; Pappe 2004: 141–82). This group of migrants consisted of urgently required teachers, engineers, doctors, civil servants, scientists, technicians and labourers (Ghabra 1987: 33–80; Brand 1988: 110–15; Lesch 2005: 163). The second wave of Palestinians came after the June 1967 war (known as the Naksa or catastrophe). This group consisted mainly of families of men already in Kuwait or new families deciding to leave behind the intolerable conditions of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (Ghabra 1997b: 326; Lesch 2005: 164). The population of Palestinians in Kuwait grew from 15,173 in 1957 to 77,712 in 1965 and 147,696 in 1970 (the latter increase linked to the civil war in Jordan) (Lesch 2005: 163). In terms of percentage of the entire population, Palestinians went from 7.3 per cent in 1957 to 20 per cent in 1970 (Lesch

2005: 163). By 1990, the Palestinian population had reached between 380,000 and 400,000 (17–18 per cent of the entire population).

The complex and contradictory history of Palestinian – Kuwaiti relations attests to the often irreconcilable position of Palestinians in Kuwait. On the one hand, this community was organised, productive, rooted and relatively secure. As the largest and oldest expatriate group in Kuwait, the Palestinian community played a special role in the country's economic, political and social development. Palestinians occupied important positions in various ministries (notably the Ministry of Electricity and the Ministry of Public Works), in government bureaucracy, in the field of education (at primary, secondary and university levels) and in the media (Brand 1988: 111–12, 122). Kuwait's political and financial support of the Palestinian cause was strong. Abdul-Reda Assiri has outlined Kuwait's financial contributions to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) from 1961 until 1989 (Assiri 1990: 40). Government cash grants for this period amounted to approximately $892 million (Assiri 1990: 147–50). In addition, starting from 1965, a 5 per cent 'liberation tax' was deducted from the salaries of Palestinians working in Kuwait and contributed to the Palestine National Fund; from 1965–89, this amount totalled $122.5 million (Brand 1988: 122; Assiri 1990: 40). Aside from financial aid, Kuwait had been both politically and ideologically supportive of the Palestinian cause, often against other Arab states and, at times, the United States. The PLO established its first headquarters in Kuwait in October 1964, and Palestinian political activity was generally well supported by the Kuwaiti government. Palestinian cultural and social activities were popular and widely recognised. In 1967, with the new influx of Palestinians and overcrowding in government schools, Kuwait's Ministry of Education agreed to allow the PLO to operate its own schools using government school buildings and facilities at no expense (Brand 1988: 118–19).

On the other hand, despite their relative security, Palestinians in Kuwait had serious grievances that generally went unacknowledged by the Kuwaiti government and population. For example, while the Ministry of Education's decision to allow the PLO to operate its own schools may seem accommodating, in fact, singling out Palestinian students for different treatment would have exacerbated their sense of alienation from the Kuwaiti community. The PLO schools were closed in 1975 (for, as Laurie A. Brand explains, 'educational, financial, and political reasons'), and Palestinian children were 'reintegrated into Kuwaiti government schools' (Brand 1988: 120). But because overcrowding at government schools remained an issue, new regulations passed

in the 1980s once again threatened Palestinian students – especially those whose parents could not afford to register them in private schools (Brand 1988: 120–1). Even at the university level, Palestinian students encountered serious restrictions. Only 10 per cent of students accepted to Kuwait University – the only university in the country at the time – were permitted to be non-Kuwaiti. But, as Brand notes, 'this does not approach the number of Palestinian high school seniors seeking to continue their education' (Brand 1988: 121). Ann M. Lesch states that 'these restrictions, intended to discourage Palestinians from bringing their families to Kuwait, caused enormous resentment' (Lesch 2005: 166). For Palestinians, education has become a means of survival, and any threat to the educational process was, and continues to be, taken extremely seriously (Ghabra 1987: 76; Lesch 2005: 167).

On top of the uncertainty faced by Palestinian students and their parents, all Palestinians faced a threat to their residency in Kuwait. Very few Palestinians, even those born in the country and never having resided or worked anywhere else, had any hope of acquiring citizenship. Kuwait's naturalisation laws are notoriously restrictive. The nationality law of 1959 defined as 'first category' Kuwaitis those men and their descendants established in Kuwait since 1920. The children of Arab or Muslim fathers born in Kuwait could no longer obtain citizenship and neither could Arabic speakers who had worked and resided in Kuwait for ten years (as both groups had been allowed to do according to the 1948 nationality law). Nonetheless, tens of thousands of individuals, including hundreds of Palestinians, continued to be naturalised by the government after 1959, although, as per the law, naturalisation limited some of their rights. Further amendments to the nationality law over the years restricted rather than opened up opportunities for naturalisation. In 1960, for example, the number of individuals from outside the Gulf that could be naturalised was fixed at only fifty a year. Furthermore, non-Arab applicants had to reside in Kuwait for at least fifteen years before their applications were even considered. In 1981, naturalisation was restricted to Muslims only. In addition to Kuwait's own laws, Arab League resolutions which prohibited Arab countries from granting citizenship to Palestinians – purportedly in order not to weaken Palestinian political resolve and territorial claims – further reduced the chances for Palestinians to gain Kuwaiti citizenship (Shiblak 1996: 39). Unlike other migrant workers in Kuwait, who could return home once their contracts were up or they reached retirement age, most Palestinians had nowhere else to go.

Along with its restrictive naturalisation laws, Kuwait's *kafala* or sponsorship system was an added burden for Palestinians. The *kafala* system, introduced in 1975, requires that any non-Kuwaiti entering Kuwait must be sponsored by an individual Kuwaiti or a Kuwaiti-owned company. The Kuwaiti sponsor (*kafil*) must sign a form issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour to confirm that the non-Kuwaiti works for him or her; that any change in contract will be reported to the Immigration Department; and that the sponsor will pay for the worker's repatriation once the contract ends. Children below the age of twenty-one can be included on a working parent's residency (if that working parent's salary reaches the required minimum amount for inclusion). In practice, the *kafala* system is often abused, with sponsors selling sponsorships to the highest bidders and terminating or threatening to terminate sponsorships as they see fit. For the sponsored (especially those illegally sponsored), this results in a precarious residency. For Palestinians without citizenship in Kuwait or anywhere else, the *kafala* system was especially difficult. Male children above the age of twenty-one of parents living and working in the country could not remain on their parents' residencies. This meant that if they could not find a job or secure illegal *kafala* in Kuwait, they could be deported.

The economic downturn of 1986, caused by a serious drop in oil prices, led to unemployment in Kuwait (Ismael 1993: 162–3; Lesch 2005: 166). This, combined with a policy of 'Kuwaitisation' – a push to replace non-Kuwaiti workers with Kuwaitis – further restricted residency, entrance visas and employment opportunities for Palestinians (and other non-Kuwaitis). In 1989, due to its budget deficit, Kuwait drastically reduced its foreign aid in general; it halved aid to the PLO in particular, from $49.8 million in 1988 to $24.9 million in 1989 (Assiri 1990: 150). Political tensions in the country having to do with, among other things, the ongoing effects of the Suq Al-Manakh financial crisis of 1982, the Iraq – Iran war, recent terrorist attacks on Kuwaiti soil (linked to Kuwait's partisan support of Iraq), as well as pressure from Kuwaiti political activists for increased democratisation and a restoration of the National Assembly (unconstitutionally dissolved since 1986) contributed to a general atmosphere of unease. The government worried that the Palestinian community could trigger violence in Kuwait, as it had in Jordan and Lebanon. Finally, the Palestinian intifada was to become a cause for concern for the Kuwaiti government. As pro-intifada demonstrations in Kuwait became more political, leading to clashes with police, the government began to fear the effects on the local prodemocracy movement and on communal divides (Crystal 1992: 131).

In short, then, increasingly unequal education and employment opportunities in the 1970s and 1980s, together with restrictive practices against Palestinian social, political, residency and civil rights meant that life in Kuwait, while perhaps better for Palestinians than in other places, was far from perfect. It created a situation that can be described, in Edward Said's sense, as 'irreconcilable' or, in Deleuze's terms, as 'intolerable' (Said 2004: 143; Deleuze 1995: 171).[3] For Deleuze, the only viable response to the intolerable is through a 'people's revolutionary becoming', a process of becoming-minoritarian that invents or constitutes the people who are missing (Deleuze 1995: 171). This has been an ongoing process for Palestinians since their expulsion from Palestine in 1948. In Kuwait it resulted in the creation of an active and dynamic minor community. However, this hard-won state of affairs – precarious and problematic though it was – would not last.

The complex conditions of life for Palestinians in Kuwait described above make the response of some of these Palestinians to the Iraqi invasion understandable. Palestinian-Kuwaiti political scientist Shafeeq Ghabra has argued that Palestinians in Kuwait consisted of 'Iraqi sympathizers, opponents or protesters of the invasion, and neutral bystanders' (Ghabra 1997b: 328). He concludes that soon enough any 'sympathy for Saddam among Palestinians turned to feelings of fear and disgust' and that the at least 200,000 Palestinians who left Kuwait to Jordan 'could be classified as protestors' (Ghabra 1997b: 336–7). Add to that the 30,000 Palestinians who were already outside Kuwait for their summer vacation, this meant that only between 150,000 and 200,000 Palestinians remained in occupied Kuwait (Lesch 1991: 46; Mattar 1994: 41–2).

This is not to deny that some small groups of 'thugs, looters, opportunists, and ideologues' – Palestinians among other nationals – may have tried to benefit from the occupation (Ghabra 1997b: 336). Furthermore, some vulnerable and impoverished Palestinians – with no other recourse to income – may have participated in the workforce following Iraqi commands in order to survive (Ghabra 1997b: 331 – 2; Abu-Baker 2000: 53–4). Finally, as Ghabra has discussed, a small number of Palestinians did collaborate with the Iraqis and indeed acted violently against Kuwaitis (Ghabra 1997b: 334). However, based on the analyses and numbers provided by Ghabra, Lesch, Philip Mattar and Tawfiq Abu-Baker, among others, it is unlikely that most Palestinians in Kuwait supported the invasion.[4]

The position of the majority of the Palestinian community in Kuwait must not be confused with that of the PLO leadership, Palestinians

outside Kuwait, and Palestinian militants sent into Kuwait from Iraq (Lesch 1991: 46; Mattar 1994: 38–42; Ghabra 1997b: 333; Abu-Baker 2000: 56).[5] Examples of Palestinian resistance to the Iraqi occupation and assistance to Kuwaitis during the occupation are numerous. For example, several key leaders of Fatah were assassinated for their pro-Kuwait stance; some Palestinians worked with the Kuwaiti resistance, while others assisted their Kuwaiti friends to acquire food and supplies; Palestinians at Kuwait University helped salvage important papers for Kuwaiti professors; Palestinians who worked in the medical services and in the ministries of water and electricity helped to ensure that these essential services continued to operate; Palestinian bankers protected crucial bank records; and so on (Ghabra 1997b: 338–42).

The Kuwaiti response after liberation to the perceived Palestinian betrayal was disproportionate and, in Deleuze's Spinozist sense, unethical.[6] Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch/Middle East (formerly Middle East Watch), among others, have documented these widespread abuses, which included arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, summary executions, torture, detention, beatings, kidnappings and mass deportation (Human Rights Watch/Middle East 1991; Amnesty International 1996; Ghabra 1997b: 342–7; Lesch 2005: 170–2). The brutality of the initial Kuwaiti reaction subsided by June 1991, thanks to the efforts of the Kuwaiti Association to Defend War Victims, the Kuwaiti Bar Association, international pressure, a Palestinian committee organised to help resolve the volatile situation, and the intervention of then Prime Minister Saad Al-Abdallah Al-Sabah (Ghabra 1997b: 344). However, social, political and economic pressures against the remaining population of Palestinians in Kuwait continued, making it almost impossible for them to reside in the country. Palestinian students were banned from government schools and Kuwait University; Palestinians were restricted from working (both in the government and private sectors) and their residency permits were not renewed; rent, water and electricity bills for the period of occupation were enforced on Palestinians while such bills were cancelled for all Kuwaiti citizens; among many other forms of constraint and harassment (Lesch 2005: 171). 'It was', as Ghabra puts it, 'clear that Kuwait would no longer tolerate a large Palestinian community, and would have preferred that none stayed' (Ghabra 1997b: 346).

Today only about 55,000–70,000 Palestinians remain in Kuwait. A small percentage of these are Gazans with Egyptian documents who lack the Israeli permits needed to return to Gaza and, through international pressure, have been allowed to stay.[7] The rest, citizens

of various countries, are in Kuwait on residency permits that must be renewed annually or once every two years, but only if their employment contract is also renewed. Many parts of Hawalli, once the heart of the Palestinian community, are still eerily desolate. In autumn 1991, Michael Dumper came to the following prescient conclusion about the Palestinian community in Kuwait: 'Pockets of Palestinians will survive as restaurateurs, managers, and technicians, dependent as never before upon government and Kuwaiti approval. But the large, vibrant, challenging, virtually self-sustaining community has gone, probably forever' (Dumper 1991: 123).

II. Aftermath

As a result of the events described above, the Palestinians have become, once again in their modern history, a people who are missing. But what exactly is it that has gone forever and what are some of the implications of this loss to Kuwait? In terms of Kuwait's economy, the loss of the Palestinian community has meant a loss in rental and consumer spending. Unlike South Asian workers, who remit most of their earnings, Palestinians spent much of their income in Kuwait (Cordesman 1997: 62). Furthermore, the mostly unskilled, non-Arabic-speaking labour force that has replaced the Palestinian 'managers, professional and technical workers, and senior civil servants' is ill-equipped to manage financial capital or to move the country 'into the strategic development stage of a capital-intensive economy' (Ismael 1993: 177–8). The policy of Kuwaitisation has also contributed to this problem. While, in theory, Kuwaitisation aims to make the country more self-sufficient by replacing foreign labour with Kuwaiti labour, in practice, a government-imposed quota that forces private companies to hire a specific number of Kuwaitis is detrimental to productivity and discourages foreign investment.[8] It perpetuates an environment of non-professionalism, where Kuwaitis in the private sector are made to feel as though their positions are secure regardless of their performance (Al-Moosa and McLachlan 1985: 35–6). The situation is even worse in the public sector where firing Kuwaitis is prohibited.

In terms of Kuwait's demographic, the deportation of the Palestinians did nothing to reduce the ratio of Kuwaitis to non-Kuwaitis. If, as has been argued, Kuwait had hoped to use the circumstances of the invasion to reduce its reliance on foreign labour and balance the ratio of Kuwaitis to non-Kuwaitis, this plan has failed (Russell and Al-Ramadhan 1994). Based on the latest census in 2005, Kuwaitis are estimated to make up

39.5 per cent of the population today, with expatriates estimated to make up the majority 60.5 per cent (Kuwait Central Statistical Bureau 2011: 43). Of the expatriate population, at most 6.6 per cent are Palestinian. Had Kuwait considered naturalising a larger portion of this productive population (based on merit, contributions to the state, length of residency or other considered criteria), which for over forty years had helped to build the modern state, it might not have been in the demographic quandary it remains in today. The decision to naturalise mainly Bedouin was made primarily because it was believed they would be more supportive of government interests than others (as they had been historically) and because the government hoped it could count on their political support (Ghabra 1997a: 366).[9]

In the early decision to exclude Palestinians (and most other nationals) from citizenship, what was forfeited, in addition to highly skilled, educated and nationally loyal potential Kuwaitis, was an opportunity for diversity within the community and the chance to cultivate a sense of openness toward plurality and difference. As non-Gulf Arabs with a distinct cultural identity, their own specific social norms, dialect, culinary traditions and religious practices (Christian as well as Muslim), the large community of Palestinians in Kuwait contributed substantially to the country's heterogeneity. Because Palestinians and Kuwaitis shared educational experiences (most teachers in Kuwait were Palestinian and many Palestinians attended government schools), work (Palestinians were both employees under Kuwaiti bosses and bosses of Kuwaiti employees) and space (though the majority of Palestinians lived in Hawalli, shops, restaurants, streets and other communal spaces, obviously, were shared), differences were experienced at close range and, in most cases, comfortably. Citizenship would have legitimated this de facto heterogeneity of the country, helping to prevent the consolidation of a divisive national, social, cultural and religious logic.

Today, as was the case before the invasion, Kuwait remains sharply divided between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis, both politically and in terms of identity (Longva 1997: 43–54; Al-Nakib 2000: 202–6).[10] Instead of a heterogeneous, open, 'experimental nation', Kuwait has become a closed, limiting, homogeneous and intolerant place (Bensmaïa 2003: 8). The 'virtual' presence of the missing Palestinians expresses this post-invasion striving for homogeneity (Deleuze 1989: 78). Réda Bensmaïa points out that 'under today's postmodern conditions, it is not geographical or even political boundaries that determine identities, but rather a plane of consistency that goes beyond the traditional idea of nation and determines its new transcendental configuration'

(Bensmaïa 2003: 8). Experimental nations are, for Bensmaïa, 'nations that writers have had to imagine or explore as if they were territories to rediscover and stake out, step by step' (Bensmaïa 2003: 8). Such experiments are 'transversal'; they 'assemble multiplicities, yet in such a way that the differences among entities are not effaced but intensified' (Bogue 2007: 2).

Transversals connect the seemingly separate without obliterating singularities.[11] As Ronald Bogue points out, they can form what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a 'people to come' (those who are, for now, missing) (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 110; Bogue 2007: 3, 14). Kuwait's categorical divisions and politics of exclusion not only prevent experimental, transversal people-as-nations from actualising. They also prevent any active recognition of the potential benefits such experiments could have for everyone in the country. The seeds of this outcome were sown, I would argue, when Kuwait did not have the foresight to recognise the Palestinian community as anything other than a potentially threatening outside. To regard those Palestinians born in Kuwait, educated in Kuwait, working in Kuwait, often speaking Kuwaiti dialect, familiar with Kuwaiti customs and culture, and with nowhere else to go as outsiders displayed a short-sightedness and paucity of imagination for which certain segments of the population continue to pay today (among them women, naturalised citizens, immigrant labour and the *bidoun* – that is, those without citizenship, not to be confused with Bedouin).

With the loss of the Palestinian community, Kuwait also lost its ethical standing among its non-Gulf Arab neighbours. Before the invasion, Kuwait was financially and politically supportive of the Palestinian national movement (Assiri 1990: 40; Crystal 1992: 129). In addition, the Kuwaiti population was generally sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Palestinian leaders were permitted to organise themselves politically in Kuwait, and, as mentioned, the PLO opened its office there in 1964. The Fatah movement, led by Yasser Arafat, established its headquarters in Kuwait, where it remained until 1966. Military training, myriad organisations, social and cultural programmes, union work, fundraising and demonstrations were all sanctioned activities for Palestinians in Kuwait before the invasion. Jill Crystal states that 'all that was explicitly forbidden was a military presence. Implicitly forbidden was the use of Kuwait as a battleground for internal Palestinian divisions and involvement in domestic Kuwaiti political issues' (Crystal 1992: 131). Crystal identifies the first intifada as the turning point away from full government support of Palestinians, since the government began to fear

both the potential of a more militant Palestinian community within its borders (especially given past events in Lebanon and Jordan) and the effects this could have on the prodemocracy movement among Kuwaitis themselves (Ryan and Stork 1977; Crystal 1992: 131). But despite these concerns, Kuwait's support of the Palestinian national movement financially, diplomatically and morally continued mostly intact. Kuwait's support of the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian community within its borders provided a bridge, a way to connect itself with non-Gulf Arabs politically and emotionally aligned with the cause. Had the deportation of Palestinians from Kuwait not occurred, this connection might have provided Kuwait with a valuable means to establish stronger relations with countries in the region other than those in the Gulf. By opening itself up in this way, it may have been able to expand its political influence, increase its national security and overcome its dangerous 'siege mentality' (Assiri 1990: 129). Assiri attributes this 'sense of encirclement' to the fact that 'the state's immediate environment frequently has been politically inhospitable to its existence and survival' (Assiri 1990: 129). As it stands today, Kuwait is more alienated than ever from its Arab neighbours – the citizens of these countries, if not their governments (Joffe 1993: 187). In addition, for reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper, Kuwait's political standing in the Gulf has also waned. Saudi political influence and social pressure now dominate a once fiercely independent Kuwait, while Qatar and the UAE, specifically Dubai and Abu Dhabi, have replaced Kuwait in attracting financial investment, garnering international prestige and in terms of sheer cultural clout.

Despite these negative repercussions for Kuwait, it took the Kuwaiti government thirteen years to normalise relations with the Palestinian Authority and twenty-two years to reopen a Palestinian embassy in Kuwait in 2013. In 2004, the government announced that it was no longer seeking an apology from the PLO and that the Palestinians were forgiven; nonetheless, Mahmoud Abbas apologised 'to Kuwait and the Kuwaiti people for what [the Palestinians and the PLO] did' (BBC 2004). There have been a number of visits by Palestinian delegations to Kuwait since then, and, officially, Kuwait's support of Palestine and its cause is solid. In August 2008, the government donated $80 million to the World Bank to support the Palestinian Reform and Development Program (PRDP) (El Naggar and Assaf 2008). Kuwait has continued to support the PRDP, contributing a total of $230 million to date (World Bank 2012). During the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in December 2008, Kuwait's National Assembly strongly condemned

Israel's 'genocide' of unarmed civilians (Kuwait Times Staff Writer 2008). The Arab Economic, Social, and Development Summit, already scheduled to be held in Kuwait in January 2009, coincided with the events in Gaza, and Kuwait was in a position to take a leadership role among the Arab delegates over the issue, which it did (KUNA 2009). The Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah, described Israel's attack as a 'war crime and a crime against humanity' (Al Jazeera Satellite Network 2009). Public sympathy was strongly expressed for the Gazans in Kuwaiti newspapers, during a number of demonstrations, and through both public and private financial support (Taleb 2008). More recently, sixteen Kuwaitis – including Salafi member of the National Assembly, Walid Al-Tabtabai, and Deputy Secretary General of the Union of NGOs of the Islamic World, Mubarak Mutawwa – were part of the flotilla which attempted to breach Israel's naval blockade of Gaza in May 2010. On this occasion Mutawwa stated, 'Kuwait suffered the injustice of the Iraqi invasion in 1990. At that time of need we had the support of peace-loving nations. This is what Gaza needs now' (Kholaif 2010; translation modified). In addition to such financial and political support, the ongoing social and cultural work of the Kuwaitis for Jerusalem Committee, formed in 2000, has been a welcome development.

These positive steps by the Kuwaiti government are promising and should not be ignored. However, most average Kuwaitis today still do not express regret over the post-liberation events. At best, they are indifferent to or ignorant of the issue; at worst, they continue to hold a grudge. There remain voices in Kuwait that actively express anti-Palestinian sentiment, though none as virulently as Fuad Al-Hashim of *Al-Watan* newspaper in his daily column, 'Exclamation Point!!' For example, on 29 December 2008, two days after Israel's attack on Gaza, Al-Hashim had the following to say:

> I ask the Palestinians one question: How would the residents of Gaza and the West Bank feel if they saw the entire Kuwaiti population out demonstrating and shouting, 'With chemicals, Olmert, from Ramallah to Gaza?' Or, 'With nuclear weapons, Levy, from Jineen to Rafah?' [...] If they have forgotten the slogan, 'With chemicals, Saddam, from Kuwait to Damman', we have not!! (Al-Hashim 2008: 6, 21; my translation)

Not only is Al-Hashim's ill-timed tutorial to a besieged population struggling for survival in poor taste; it reveals that at least some in Kuwait have not learned from their post-liberation mistakes. Rather than accounting for the pre-invasion ambiguities that existed in the

relationship between Kuwait and the Palestinian population living within its borders and reading the reaction of those few Palestinians who collaborated with the Iraqis within the terms of such ambiguities, Al-Hashim continues to respond as reactively and indiscriminately as some Kuwaitis did immediately after liberation. The general lack of response to Al-Hashim's anti-Palestinian bent in Kuwait suggests that his position may be an extreme version of the norm.

Twenty-two years on, even those who follow a less vicious strain of Al-Hashim's thinking still have not taken responsibility for Kuwait's own role in constituting the reactive responses of those few collaborating Palestinians, have not apologised for the violence done to Palestinians in Kuwait after liberation, and have not accounted for the damage done both to Palestinians and Kuwaitis with the disappearance of this once integral community. In fact, in the conclusion to his recent study, Falah Abdulla Al-Mdeiris states that while official relations between the governments of Kuwait and Palestine may be on track to normalisation, the majority of the Kuwaiti population have no inclination to normalise relations with Palestinians (Al-Mdeiris 2008: 98). However, without a nuanced recognition of Kuwait's own complex role in past events, the conditions for an ethical polity are, I would argue, gravely undermined.

III. An Ethics of the Missing

In the context of the Israeli occupation and 'ethnic cleansing' of Palestine, there is a serious danger in describing the Palestinians in Kuwait or anywhere else as missing (Pappe 2006). To state that the Palestinians are missing in Kuwait is not in any way to suggest that this population no longer exists; nor is it simply to mark their absence in Kuwait as a result of the post-liberation events of 1991. For Deleuze, an absence of the people is no cause for sorrow or alarm but, rather, an opportunity for invention and experimentation. He declares, 'The missing people are a becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute' (Deleuze 1989: 217). This process of invention intensifies the instant power proclaims: ' "There have never been people here" ' (Deleuze 1989: 217). It is as though, paradoxically, the emphatic denial of a people's existence uncovers their presence. Nowhere is this denial more evident than in the well-known Zionist declaration: 'A land without a people for a people without a land'. Deleuze describes this as the Zionist tendency to act 'as if the Palestinian people not only must not exist, but had never existed' (Deleuze 1998a: 30).

In the context of this denial of Palestinian existence, it may seem a dangerous move to consider utilising Deleuze's notion of the missing as an ethical apparatus. However, Deleuze makes a distinction between the actual Palestinians thrown out of Palestine – those Israel claims are missing who clearly are not – and the Palestinians who then begin to resist this event and Israel's denial – those who begin to constitute themselves as a people (Deleuze 1995: 126).[12] If the former Palestinians are not missing (they exist despite Israel's denial), the latter are, in fact, missing and will remain missing as long as a transformative struggle continues.

Therefore, to say that the Palestinians of Kuwait are missing, in Deleuze's sense, is to mark their ongoing virtual presence. Every present moment involves both an 'actual' present and a mirror-image 'virtual' present (Deleuze 1989: 79). The virtual component of the present is both what the actual present once was and some iteration of what it might still become. Virtualities may or may not be actualised at any particular moment, but they are always real and present (Deleuze 1991: 96–7). Deleuze explains this somewhat paradoxical understanding of time this way: 'The past does not follow the present that it is no longer, it coexists with the present it was. The present is the actual image, and *its* contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror' (Deleuze 1989: 79). In conventional terms, the Palestinians were a part of Kuwait's history, its past, and with their disappearance, they are no longer a part of its present. But understood from the perspective of a Bergsonian conceptualisation of time, the missing Palestinians currently maintain a virtual presence in Kuwait; they coexist with the present they once were and could yet become.[13]

What would an actualisation of this virtual presence look like? The outcome of any actualisation can never fully be predicted in advance. Regrettably, the likelihood of reintroducing a thriving Palestinian community within Kuwaiti borders is small. Nonetheless, an actualisation of the currently virtual Palestinian presence in Kuwait may have other effects. Today, as I have argued, it is rare to find Kuwaitis who acknowledge the rich history of Palestinians in Kuwait, the many contributions of Palestinians to the development of their country, and Kuwaiti complicity in tearing this important community apart. Such Kuwaitis are, in other words, themselves missing. Constructing a viable ethics in Kuwait necessitates an elaboration of the relationship between these two missing peoples, a transverse reconstruction, in other words, between minoritarian and majoritarian forces.

Understandably, as a 'democracy' in progress, Kuwait has made and continues to make mistakes.[14] To actualise the virtual presence

of the Palestinians in Kuwait might provide a means to negotiate the irreconcilable issues and crises that plague this small nation-state.[15] It may, for example, help actualise Kuwaiti recognition of its spotted recent history and, through this memory, a way towards an alternative future. Deleuze describes this kind of memory as 'the strange faculty which puts into immediate contact the outside and the inside, the people's business and private business, the people who are missing and the I who is absent, a membrane, a double becoming' (Deleuze 1989: 221). Putting the inside into contact with the outside through memory transgresses the divisive structuring of national identity and practice Longva and others have identified as dominating and disrupting Kuwaiti society, politics, and economics (Ismael 1993: 129–50; Longva 1997: 43–147). Paradoxically, the very existence of Kuwait – or a certain version of Kuwait – depends on its remembering the Palestinians who are missing as well as the history of their disappearance. This process can be described as a becoming-Palestinian of all Kuwaitis. It would involve the counter-effectuation of the event of Palestinians in Kuwait – that is, for Kuwaitis to recognise in terms other than those they have been rehearsing for the last twenty-two years what happened and what they helped make happen (no longer someone else's fault) (Deleuze 1990: 149; Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 158–9). This is not to say Kuwait will cease to be without this counter-effectuation, without such an ethics of the missing.[16] What it does mean is that the potential for a Kuwait open to differences, singularities and multiplicities, a Kuwait more capable than it currently is or ever has been of finding ethical and equitable resolutions to problems faced by those residing within its borders – both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti – will diminish.

During a recent conference about Arab feminisms held in Beirut, Kumkum Sangari commented that to remove or to forget the past means that we are reduced to the temporality of the present, which would indicate either that we are in survival mode or that we are deeply embedded within the capitalist world system (Sangari 2009). Unlike Palestine, Kuwait's survival is not immediately under threat, although it has been in the past and, given its volatile location and its rentier status within the global economic system, it might be again. Kuwaitis may choose to ignore the past (that is, the virtual present) because they continue to feel threatened and under siege. Or, they may have unwittingly forgotten the past because the capacity to think critically required for such an engagement with memory has been thoroughly overwhelmed and liquidated by capitalist consumption. Either way, the Palestinians remain missing from Kuwait history,

Kuwaiti consciousness and Kuwaiti conscience. Without this memory of the actual past and the virtual present, however, the country is in danger of losing its ethical bearings.[17] What is at stake in this call to memory is the difference between a Kuwait open to the virtual potentialities of the future perfect and a Kuwait trapped in the present with no way back and only a distressingly restricted and one-dimensional way forward.[18]

Notes

1. The fine work of Palestinian-Kuwaiti political scientist Shafeeq Ghabra is exceptional in this regard (Ghabra 1997b). For a recent study more representative of the Kuwaiti stance, see Al-Mdeiris 2008.
2. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze declares, 'Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us' (Deleuze 1990: 149). My argument is that majoritarian Kuwait has not become worthy of the event of the Palestinians in Kuwait – not of their historical presence and participation in the country since the early twentieth century, not of their alleged 'betrayal' of Kuwait in 1990, and not of their ongoing or virtual presence as a missing people. This inability to transmute circumstances and occurrences into something worthy has precluded (and continues to preclude) an ethical outcome and polity in Kuwait.
3. Said states, 'Overlapping yet irreconcilable experiences demand from the intellectual the courage to say that *that* is what is before us' (Said 2004: 143). He adds, 'Only in that precarious exilic realm can one first truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway' (144). Said arrives at his notion of the irreconcilable in part through his assessment of the Palestinian – Israeli impasse – the elusiveness of any fair resolution to this conflict. His own work exemplifies how the intellectual tries anyway and, in the attempt, manages to create opportunities again and again. That such chances are often ignored or, in the worst case, bring punishment to those who dare to produce them does nothing to diminish their exigency. Said's proposition, while perhaps more tempered than Deleuze's enthusiasm over the missing, remains intransigently persistent.
4. In an interview conducted in 1990, during the Iraqi invasion, Kuwaiti political scientist Hassan Al-Ebraheem stated: 'Contrary to what some have reported, our information is that the Palestinian community in Kuwait has been especially supportive both of the resistance and of persons in hiding, and has manifested little collaboration with the Iraqi forces. In fact, the reports of Palestinians who have themselves witnessed the character of the Iraqi occupation are now being felt in Jordan' (Al-Ebraheem 1991: 98).
5. For an analysis of some of the reasons behind the 1990 Palestinian position on the Gulf crisis, see Hallaj 1991; Husseini 1991: 99–101; Finkelstein 1992; Abu-Baker 2000: 92–105.
6. Deleuze would describe the Kuwaiti response as a form of *ressentiment*, unethical because unworthy of the event (of the Palestinian community in Kuwait in all its historical complexity). He puts it this way: 'To grasp whatever happens as unjust and unwarranted (it is always someone else's fault) is, on the contrary, what renders our sores repugnant – veritable *ressentiment*, resentment of the event. There is no other ill will. What is really immoral is the use of moral notions like just or unjust, merit or fault' (Deleuze 1990: 149).

This incapacity on the part of most Kuwaitis to grasp the event of Palestinians in Kuwait (and the actions of some of them during the invasion) in any terms other than 'betrayal' or 'fault' or 'injustice' reveals a majoritarian rigidity that continues to choke invention and experimentation in Kuwaiti society and politics today (recent debates in parliament focused around so-called 'morality' issues, at a time when the economy, education, healthcare and environment are in serious crisis, exemplify this narrow-minded rigidity).

7. Lesch put the number of Gazans in Kuwait in 2000 at 7,000 (Lesch 2005: 172). It is difficult to confirm the total number of Palestinians in Kuwait in 2013, in part because the majority hold passports from other countries. The Office of Palestinian Affairs in Kuwait estimates the total number of Palestinians in Kuwait today at anywhere between 55,000 and 70,000 and those with *laissez passer* between 6,000 and 7,000.

8. A recent brief published by the National Bank of Kuwait reports that Kuwait 'lag[s] significantly behind the rest of the [Gulf Cooperation Council states] as the least attractive destination for [foreign direct investment] in the region' (Al-Nakib 2010: 2). Reasons commonly identified for this low rate of investment include Kuwait's 'bureaucracy, stringent regulations, limited foreign ownership, and inflexible labor laws' (2). The policy of Kuwaitisation is one such inflexible law.

9. Between 1965 and 1981, about 220,000 people were naturalised, most of which were Bedouin (Ghabra 1997a: 364). This rate of naturalisation continued until the invasion in 1990 (Longva 1997: 72).

10. Anh Nga Longva identifies two additional classificatory dichotomies that structure Kuwait's politics of exclusion: Arabs and non-Arabs, and Muslims and non-Muslims (Longva 1997: 45). These oppositions divide the community into a complex set of insiders and outsiders, with some non-Kuwaitis (Arab Muslim men, for example) at times more inside than some Kuwaitis (women, among others). However, such categorical ambiguities in Kuwait today are as unacknowledged as they were before the invasion. The split between insiders and outsiders remains entrenched, to the disadvantage of those who happen to occupy the wrong side of the divide and to the detriment of the country's potential diversity.

11. For a discussion of transversality as intercultural experimentation and its potential benefits to collaborative struggle in Israel–Palestine, see Svirsky 2012.

12. For a sample of his comments on the Palestinians, see Deleuze 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2006: 194–200, 333–4.

13. Philippe Mengue suggests that this missing 'people' as virtual is 'condemned to be *forever* "to come", that it cannot have any historical existence. Always thought, never present' (Mengue 2008: 229). For Mengue, this creates a problem with regards to politics 'because peoples in their political actuality and reality have already been deserted' (234). Mengue resolves this problem by arguing that 'although the people [...] is necessarily virtual as Deleuze will have it, it must coincide with the plane of immanence proper to politics and to democracy, the plane that rightly *traverses* all "communities", all social formations, and is the sole guarantor of a veritable and effective "democratic future"' (238). My sense is that the missing people in Kuwait (both as the virtual Palestinians and the yet to come ethical Kuwaitis) can launch a process of 'becoming-democratic' – pointing 'towards future as yet unrealised forms of democracy' – that may not be politically efficacious immediately or actually but is nonetheless urgently required (Patton 2008: 180).

14. Despite its ostensibly democratic political institutions, it would not be correct to classify Kuwait as a 'democracy' as it is theorised by Deleuze and Guattari

in *What Is Philosophy?* (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 108–9); see Patton 2008 for a lucid analysis of Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of democracy. 'Becoming-democratic' involves struggling on various fronts against 'democracy' as it currently exists (Patton 2008: 193). In Kuwait today, becoming-Palestinian would contribute to such a process.

15. In addition to the Palestinian problem discussed here, some of the intractable issues Kuwait faces concern the rights of the *bidoun* (stateless), expatriate labour (especially female domestic labour) and women; the discriminatory *kefala* (sponsorship) system; the tribal system and sectarianism; and the environment, among many others. In confronting such issues, Kuwait (by which I mean the government, the National Assembly or parliament, and citizens in general) tends not to look to its own past (that is to say, its virtual present). Instead, in the last two decades at least, Kuwait has turned to an atavistic Islam and to its role as a dependent oil supplier in a capitalist world system for solutions. Neither has proven to be especially beneficial to an ethical democratic practice in the country (if the last six dissolutions of parliament since 2006 are anything to judge by).

16. Audronė Žukauskaitė labels this Deleuzian understanding a 'minor ethics' (Žukauskaitė 2011: 193). Because I want to emphasise the component of the missing people in my analysis of the case of Palestinians in Kuwait, I choose to use an 'ethics of the missing'.

17. Along with the commendable efforts of the Kuwaitis for Jerusalem Committee (active since 2000), the more recent MinRASY Projects has also worked in innovative ways to generate this form of active memory. Formed by a Palestinian couple in Kuwait (both with long-established families in the country), MinRASY Projects since 2011 has organised a series of public interventions in Kuwait specifically as a means to trigger a local recollection of the Palestinian community, their history and their contributions. In May 2012, MinRASY sponsored a successful exhibition titled *Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence* (*MoMRtA*) as an intervention at the Museum of Modern Art in Kuwait. Curated by Ala Younis and, significantly, under the official patronage of the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters of the State of Kuwait, *MoMRtA* commissioned over twenty artists to produce objects in response to the historical presence and absence of the Palestinian community in Kuwait. The exhibition catalogue states: 'In light of the lack of collective images, narratives, and archives, memory is taken as the main point of reference for the museum's objects. Fragile and fragmented, this is a memory that has been accumulated, dismantled, reassembled, and at times lost. The museum's objects conflate pieces from this recollected past in order to recognise and make sense of the present, an act that bestows them with an appearance of being at once real, impossible and unreal, and that addresses, imagines and reclaims the story and legacy of Palestinians in Kuwait' (*Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence* 2012). This compelling exhibition conveys a sense of the golden age of Palestinian–Kuwaiti collaboration and coexistence, as well as the trauma and regret over its untimely loss. That *MoMRtA* as well as the simultaneously displayed sound installation piece *Unplified* by Tarek Atoui (inspired by Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Men in the Sun*) were both exhibited under the patronage of the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters at a government institution (the Museum of Modern Art) may signal a meaningful shift in official discourse and attitude toward the past. MinRASY's active engagement with the public – through commissioned installation pieces in public spaces, film screenings and panel discussions, as well as exhibitions specifically dealing with Palestinians in Kuwait – can encourage Kuwaitis to revisit an otherwise forgotten

past and to engage with it constructively towards the amendment of its outcome. For more on MinRASY Projects, see < http://www.minrasyprojects.com > .

18. The activities of Zochrot – an Arab-Jewish NGO in Israel that aims to remember the Nakba and spread awareness of its history among Jewish-Israeli people – provides an excellent model for the kinds of memory practices that could be of use in Kuwait (see < http://www.zochrot.org/en >). On the productive uses of traumatic memory from a Deleuzian perspective, see Parr 2008.

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