Student Im/mobility in Birzeit, Palestine.

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Abstract

This paper draws on research with students at the Birzeit University in Palestine to examine how their experiences of university are shaped by a range of im/mobilities. In particular I am interested in how students who rent accommodation in Birzeit and make frequent trips to the cities and villages where they grew up experience a range of im/mobilities that are heavily impacted by technologies and practices of the Israeli Occupation Forces that are designed to render Palestinians less mobile in the West Bank. After mapping how students understand these im/mobilities, I explore how these differently mobile practices create Birzeit as place, how they unsettle particular notions of home, and the micropolitical responses they embody and engender.

Keywords: Palestine, mobilities, immobilities, students.

Introduction

"All the world seems to be on the move" (Sheller & Urry 2006: 207).

Dina[i]: We used to go to Nablus, forty-five minutes, do some shopping … because Nablus is cheaper. Now, I wouldn't go because I would have to go through Hawara [checkpoint]… so now we would rather stay in our area.
    (Female villager, interview conducted on 6th April 2006, in English and Arabic).

While all the world might seem to be moving, the extent of these movements can vary a great deal depending on the subject(s) and place(s) under scrutiny. As Barker et al (forthcoming) note in the introduction to this collection, age is a key component in the construction of mobilities. In this paper I want to explore how the mobility experiences of one group of university students – a rarely researched 'older' group of 'young' people

(although see Kenyon 1999, Holdsworth 2006, Chatterton 1999, Long 2006a) – are entangled with their identities as Palestinians and their experiences of tertiary education. I hope to broaden debates around students' mobilities that have tended thus far to focus on social mobility rather than actual material im/mobilities (Kenyon 1999, Holdsworth 2006, Chatterton 1999, Long 2006a). Holdsworth (2006: 496) notes 'going to university is recognised as an important rite of passage for young people. Yet there is relatively little research on students' experiences of HE [Higher Education] and how this relates to wider issues about transitions to adulthood'. Hence this research may also indirectly offer an empirical account of one aspect of a transition from childhood to adulthood (Valentine 2003) in a non-first world context.

The empirical context for this research – Palestine – is crucial. Living with/through relative im/mobility has become an important issue for all people living in the Occupied Territories and, consequently, it has become an important analytical dimension for those writing about these spaces (see for example Hammami 2004, 2006, Gregory 2004, Halper 2001, Long 2006b, Weizman 2002, 2007). Certainly during my research in the village of Birzeit, just north of Ramallah in the centre of the West Bank, it was impossible to avoid (see figure 1)[ii]. While I was interested in how students who rented accommodation in the village made these spaces more 'homely', I was repeatedly told that their homes were elsewhere. I realized very quickly that for students renting accommodation in Birzeit, the experience of university is to a great extent shaped by mobilities between Birzeit and an elsewhere. It also became clear that even the time students spend 'in' Birzeit was saturated with different forms of im/mobility, ranging from the banal and quotidian to the more exceptional and arrhythmic movements.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE].

In what follows I begin by defining im/mobility as relational and differential movement, and then describe the politics of mobility in the West Bank as it is conceived geopolitically. I then introduce the methods I employed during my fieldwork in Birzeit to explore how Palestinians experience these im/mobilities in their everyday lives. The main body of the paper explores the range of relative im/mobilities that constitute Birzeit

students' daily journeys to and from the university and their regular journeys to and from 'home', and how students understand these relative im/mobilities. I then examine how these im/mobilities affect constructions of home and Birzeit as place, before drawing some conclusions about the broader consequences of contemporary student im/mobility in Palestine.

Defining im/mobilities

While readers of this journal are no doubt familiar with much of the recent work on mobilities (e.g. Hannam et al 2006) and arguments for the emergence of a mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry 2006), I want to briefly outline how I understand and use the terms mobility and immobility with respect to students at Birzeit University. Cresswell (2006: 2-4) suggests that the term mobility describes movements shot through with relations of power/knowledge (meaning). Mobilities, he argues, must be understood as simultaneously corporeal practices that are experienced and representations that (re-)iterate meaning(s). He is quick to point out that these materials and meanings are constantly in the process of intersecting and interacting, leading to dynamic and contingent mobilities. Furthermore, all mobilities must be understood in relation to one another (p9). Adey (2006) extends this point by unfolding the idea of 'relative immobilities', a phrase that emphasizes not only the relational, but also the *differential* ways in which mobilities interact. Summarizing a body of work on the politics of mobility, Adey makes the important point that these differences are politically charged. Mobilities are contested and contest one another. Certain mobilities require other relative immobilities to function and these relations are contingent. Cresswell (2006) exemplifies this point well in his discussion of the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union's (BRU) struggle and court case against the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), after the MTA sought to raise bus fares, which adversely affected poor residents, while simultaneously subsidizing a light rail system that predominantly benefited more affluent suburban residents.

The actions of the Bus Riders Union are remarkable in that they have enacted a politics of mobility based on the recognition that different people, in different places, are differently enabled and constrained in terms of their mobility… The Bus Riders Union insisted on a form of spatial justice, pointing out the inequities created by the production of one form of mobility at the expense of another. To the activists it is not possible to think of mobility in the form of public transit without thinking about race. While some, principally white and suburban, areas of Los Angeles were having their modes of mobility enhanced, the vast majority of poor, nonwhite, urban areas, were having theirs reduced (p172).

Throughout this paper I use the term im/mobilities to continually (re-)invoke this emphasis on the relational and differential nature of mobilities. Foregrounding im/mobilities as *relational and differential* movements is vital when trying to understand the experiences of Birzeit students. Nearly all Palestinians living in the West Bank, including students, face serious challenges to their relative mobility when trying to travel through the West Bank[iii]. While the Israeli Occupation has had a profound effect on Palestinian mobilities since 1948 (when 750 000 Palestinian refugees were exiled from their lands, see Morris 2004), the current mobilities regime in the West Bank is strongly linked to the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. These agreements chopped up the West Bank into Areas A (18% of the territory), B (22 % of the territory) and C (the remaining 60% of the territory), all divided by checkpoints, roadblocks and closures that are policed by the Israeli Occupation Forces (See Figure 2, also Makdisi 2008).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE].

Halper (2001: n.p.) uses the term 'Matrix of Control' to describe this state of affairs, a concept that is explicitly concerned with Palestinian *im*mobility.

The Matrix, an intricate and an interlocking series of control mechanisms, resembles the Japanese game of "Go." Instead of defeating your opponent as in chess, in "Go" you win by immobilizing the other side, by gaining control of key points of a matrix, so that every time your opponent moves he or she encounters

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another obstacle.

B'Tselem, The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, states that as of December 2007, there are 99 permanent Israeli checkpoints throughout the West Bank (B'Tselem 2007). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) also lists the number of flying ('surprise') checkpoints, which vary from an average of 69 a week in October 2007 to 141 a week in May 2007 (OCHA 2007), figures that in themselves demonstrate how arbitrary and unpredictable these barriers to movement are. In October 2007 there were also 387 obstructions (in the form of dirt piles, fences, locked gates and trenches) that closed roads, and Palestinian traffic was restricted from or forbidden to use twenty-four sections of roads in the West Bank, covering a distance of some 311 km (B'Tselem 2007). All of these figures fluctuate according to political developments and the inclinations of the Israeli Occupation Forces. The relative Palestinian immobilities that these checkpoints, obstacles and road closures enforce, must be seen in relation to the relative mobilities that they create for Israeli settlers living illegally on Palestinian land.

> Israeli settlements in the West Bank are dormitory suburbs, reliant on roads connecting them with the urban centres of Israel proper. So-called 'bypass' roads were a feature of the Oslo accord. The Israeli government was allowed (with specially allocated American money) to construct a network of fast, wide security roads that bypass Arab towns and connect the settlements to Israel.

> The bypass roads, some still in the process of paving, would become a massive system of twenty-nine highways spanning four hundred and fifty kilometres. They allow four hundred thousand Jews living in land occupied in 1967 to have freedom of movement. About three million Palestinians are left locked into isolated enclaves.

> (Weizman 2002: n.p.)

While materials and technologies such as checkpoints and the identity card system (see

Abu Zahra 2007) do allow for a range of mobilities, they also act as barriers, defined here as material socio-technical processes that render other bodies and materials (in this case Palestinian) less mobile (irrespective of the mobility they enable). These (relatively) immobile materials are therefore of a somewhat different nature than mobile phone masts and coaxial cable systems (Sheller & Urry 2006: 210-1), immutable materials that are designed to facilitate greater mobility. I think it is important to foreground these barriers because while Sheller & Urry (2006) urge an approach to studying mobilities that has differential power relations at its core, there is still very little work by those who have contributed to the 'new mobilities paradigm' that actually focuses on those rendered relatively immobile. In this paper I seek to redress this balance by highlighting a number of barriers that are material and/or imaginative, legal and/or socio-technical. This is not to downplay the relative mobilities that these relative immobilities enable and connect to. Rather I want to begin with relative immobilities and then move on to these more mobile connections, rather than the other way around.

The differential im/mobilities and their immersion in relations of power in Palestine, have also led to the unfolding of distinct spatial politics. Weizman (2002: n.p.) uses the phrase 'politics of verticality', to describe how three-dimensional space is crashed into six dimensions, three Jewish and three Arab (see also Weizman 2007, Gregory 2004). However, it is not simply a matter of three Israeli dimensions being overlaid on three Palestinian ones. Rather, Weizman suggests the spatiality of occupation is 'Escher like', as Palestinians and Israeli spaces pass through, around, below and above one another: Israeli tunnels dive into Palestinians mountains; Palestinian dirt tracks pass beneath Israeli highways. Hence roads, bridges and tunnels all becoming key processes through which Israel performs its occupation of Palestine. However, the politics of verticality is not something that is simply imposed on the Palestinian population by the Israeli Occupation Forces without response. The Israeli checkpoints and the relative Palestinian immobility that they cause have also become lightening rods for grass-roots activism. In addition to the statistics and monitoring produced by B'Tselem that I have already drawn on (see http://www.btselem.org/), Machsom Watch, a group of Israeli 'Women for Human Rights' produce frequent (in some cases daily) first hand reports of the conditions

and relative im/mobilities for Palestinians at the permanent checkpoints throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip (http://www.machsomwatch.org/). Their goals are threefold: (i) monitor the behaviour of the Israeli military, (ii) monitor/protect Palestinian human and civil rights, and (iii) bear witness in the form of reports after each observation (Machsom Watch 2008). The 'Right to Education Campaign' (http://right2edu.birzeit.edu/), an indigenous Palestinian organization set up within Birzeit University, seeks to address the difficulties Palestinian students face while trying to obtain tertiary education. A significant part of this campaign focuses on problems of access and mobility that many students and staff currently face at both Birzeit and other universities in Palestine (see Right to Education 2007a, 2007b, 2007c).

I highlight the work of these organizations here to suggest that im/mobilities in the West Bank are not only enforced and contested geopolitically, but also, simultaneously, by non-state actors. Due in part to the work of these activist groups, the instruments and techniques used by the Israeli Occupation to render the Palestinian population less mobile are relatively well documented (see also Abu Zahra 2007). I want to explore the im/mobilities of students because, while these instruments and techniques of occupation do have a great deal of impact on people studying at Birzeit University, student mobilities are not simply a series of encounters with technologies of occupation (what I described earlier as barriers) designed to render them (relatively) less mobile. As I will discuss, their mobilities are related to a number of other mobilities, some of which are occupation related and some of which are not. In examining some of the relations of mobility that students attending Birzeit experience, I am interested not so much in the politics that Weizman describes, but rather something closer to what Connolly terms 'micropolitics', techniques of the self organized and deployed *collectively*, which 'operate below the threshold of large legislative acts and executive initiatives' while nevertheless setting the 'conditions of possibility for these more visible actions' (2002: 20-1). Through this article I want to map some of these on-going micropolitical practices in order to examine how the different im/mobilities experienced by students at Birzeit University are understood, their effects on (among other things) ideas around place and home in Birzeit, and some of the potential spatial consequences for Palestinian population more broadly.

The research in this paper is based on eleven months of fieldwork in Birzeit, conducted over the course of three visits to Palestine between 2005 and 2007. During this time I lived in Birzeit myself, carried out participant observation and conducted interviews with people residing in village, which included students who were renting accommodation there while attending Birzeit University. Due to the social context in which my research took place – marked by a distinct separation of genders – the majority of my interviews were with male students. However, since the social space of the university is more liberal (something I comment on later in the paper), I was able to interview a few female students too. The interviews, which lasted between thirty minutes and one hour, were conducted in English or in colloquial Arabic with the use of a translator, who translated all the Arabic language quotations I use in this paper.

In addition to these linguistic differences, I think it is also important to foreground the fact that my observations and conversations are saturated by my own relative mobility within and between Palestine and Israel (where most Palestinians are currently prohibited from traveling). However, while my subjectification in the West Bank as a non-Palestinian British passport holder enabled me to travel without (much) fear of being arrested or prevented from traveling somewhere by the Israeli Occupation Forces, I nevertheless traveled in the same public buses and communal taxis as most Palestinians, walked or rode through the same checkpoints, and consequently sat or stood in the same queues and experienced many of the same delays. My research also took place exclusively within the village and at the university, and hence while my research participants occasionally asked me about my relative mobility, none of the mobile experiences that I shared with Birzeit students were marked *explicitly* by our different relative mobilities. This was because the journeys we made never exceeded the confines of the Ramallah region in which a higher degree of mobility (relative to the rest of the West Bank) was possible during the time I was doing research. This lack of travel elsewhere is also indicative of the movement restrictions in the West Bank.

An Im/mobile Student Body?

Birzeit University is a private institution located on the edge of Birzeit. The university is the oldest in Palestine, and also demands the highest *tawjihi* (or high school leaving certificate) score of any of Palestine's eleven universities. Beginning life as a school in 1924, the first bachelor degrees were awarded in 1976 (Birzeit University 2007a). At present the university offers a number of Masters degrees in certain subjects, but those wishing to do doctoral research must still study in other countries. Recently, this has become an increasingly difficult task to accomplish (Hass 2007a, 2007b). The university is the largest employer in the town of Birzeit, and its many trickle down effects include triggering the town's currently booming student-housing market.

At the time of writing, almost 7800 students attend the university (Birzeit University 2007b), and it is estimated that around 500 of them rent accommodation in Birzeit. The majority of these students now come from villages and cities around the West Bank. Prior to the *Al Aqsa* (second) *Intifada* in 2000, there were 350 students who came from the Gaza Strip (Right to Education 2007a). However since that time students from Gaza are no longer permitted to travel to the West Bank, and hence there are currently less than fifteen students from Gaza currently attending Birzeit University, all of whom have been residing 'illegally' in the West Bank since 2000 (Right to Education 2007a, Hass 2007a, 2007b).

Students who come from cities and villages around the West Bank have also faced increasing travel difficulties since the beginning of the *Al Aqsa Intifada*. The restrictions on movement imposed by the Israeli Occupation Forces included a checkpoint built in 2001 in the village of Surda, which lies on the main road between Ramallah and Birzeit (Hammami 2004, Right to Education 2007b). This delayed and sometimes prevented students and staff who lived in Ramallah, its surrounding villages and other cities and villages south of the university from reaching the campus. Hammami's (2004: 26-7) ethnography vividly describes what the Surda checkpoint was like:

Commuters would disembark from the transit vans that jammed both ends of the no-drive zone. Skirting rubble and concrete blocks, they would trip down the valley and hold their breath as they passed Israeli soldiers, before finally trudging up the incline to the vans on the other side. Thousands made the walk every day. In the morning, the flow of fashionably dressed students on their way to the university crossed the flow of villagers heading into Ramallah for work and the services that can only be found in a city. In the afternoon, the pattern would repeat in reverse. Those who got thirsty along the way could grab a drink from a roving peddler. Other who had forgotten groceries could stop at one of the makeshift stands nicknamed "the duty free".

On the worst days, trigger-happy soldiers suddenly prohibited pedestrian traffic, and students and villagers were stranded on the wrong side of getting to work or home. More commonly, soldiers would drop in at the checkpoint for a few hours, to toy with the droves of walking commuters, stopping all – or a select few – for interminable identity card and baggage checks. As often, they would "organize" the drivers and peddlers by ramming their vans or stands with their jeeps. Over three years at the Surda checkpoint, three Palestinians were shot to death by the Israeli military, another two died in accidents among the crush of vans, at least one man died of a heart attack as he was wheeled across on a stretcher, two babies were born behind a rubble mound and untold numbers of young men were beaten by soldiers, often in full public view. No one has counted the numbers of injured at the demonstrations staged in futile attempts to clear the checkpoint away.

Another effect of the Surda checkpoint and the relative immobilities it created was to force more students than usual to rent accommodation in the village of Birzeit.

Anais: There was a great deal of pressure on the rental market, because lots of people wanted to live there [in Birzeit] and there weren't many apartments at that time. During the closures it was very difficult. There were checkpoints at Atara and Surda. People from everywhere were trying to live in Birzeit. From Khalil

[Hebron], Areeha [Jericho], Jenin, the North, even Ramallah. Even people who live in Ramallah were taking lodgings in Birzeit, so you can imagine how crowded it was. Even from Atara [the village right next to Birzeit].

(Male student, interview conducted on 13th May 2006, in Arabic).

While the Surda checkpoint was removed in December 2003, many other checkpoints around the West Bank remain (Hammami 2006), including the Atara checkpoint that was built on the northern edge of Birzeit. In September 2006, the month after I finished the majority of my fieldwork, the UN OCHA (2006: 3) estimated that 2,317 Birzeit students, over a quarter of the university's enrollment, pass through the Atara checkpoint on a daily or weekly basis (see figure 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE].

Even students renting accommodation in Birzeit can face restrictions on movement that affect their journey from their residence to the campus. The University, which was closed by the Israeli Occupation Forces for just over four years between 8th January 1988 and 29th April 1992 (Birzeit University 2007a), is still periodically affected by flying checkpoints and/or temporary road closures at the entrance gate, both of which happened while I was studying there in the summer of 2005. The *potential* of closures can also be just as problematic as closures themselves. Khader, a twenty-seven year old student who studies business and administration doesn't like to visit the village north of Hebron where he grew up because he has been issued with five summons by the Israeli Occupation Forces, asking him to report to the Israeli security services for 'questioning'[iv]. Since he has not reported voluntarily for fear of incarceration, he is worried that he will be summarily arrested at any minute. These summons therefore cause problems for him when he wants to move between the village of Birzeit where he rents accommodation and the campus.

Me: How many classes have you missed at university because of your problems?

Khader: I don't know, but sometimes I only go to university two days of the week. I prefer to pick my classes in the middle of the day, between eleven and two o'clock… At three o'clock the Israeli patrols change… Most of the students go home at that time, so they [the Israeli army] take advantage of that.

…

Khader: They [the Israeli army] also raid the university during final exams because they know we can't miss them.

Me: Did you miss exams?

Khader: Yes… I failed some of my classes and I have to make it up.

…

Khader: The thing I worry about is not being able to go to university. If I finish university, then going to prison would be like a vacation. I would have peace of mind and wouldn't have to worry about anything.

(Male student, interview conducted on 22nd February 2006, in Arabic).

Khader's movement not only takes into account the Israeli army patrols, but also the Israeli legal-security apparatus that issued the summons. His relative immobility is not simply a product of physical barriers but also legal/bureaucractic and imaginative barriers. As I have suggested earlier, these barriers are important to note because while relative immobilities are frequently alluded to theoretically (Hannan et al 2006, Sheller & Urry 2006) they are often invoked simply to play the foil to a more comprehensive discussion of relatively more mobile processes. Discussions in which relative immobilities have been given more substantive empirical focus frequently revolve around international borders (see examples in Adey 2006, Cresswell 2006), which in the case of Israel and Palestine would implicate the de facto border that is the Occupation wall. However, while Khader's life is undoubtedly affected by this highly visible border/barrier, his testimony suggests that more local, less visible and frequently more intangible (rather than material) barriers are currently of greater consequence to him.

Khader's case also draws attention to perhaps the most severe form of relative immobility that can affect Palestinian students, incarceration, frequently done without charge or trial. 349 Birzeit students have been arrested since 2003, and 87 are currently incarcerated (Right to Education 2007c), although this figure fluctuates frequently. The Right to Education (2007c: n.p.) campaign also report that 35 detainees (of the 87) have yet to be found guilty of any charge, and '21 out of 40 cases represented by Birzeit University's lawyer… are serving time solely for their belonging to student societies or political parties, many of whom held positions of leadership in the Student Council at the time of their arrest'. Due to the frequency with which students are arrested, the university has developed a pastoral system specifically for such occurrences, which includes fee remittances and methods for completing courses once students have been released even if they have missed classes.

Students Going Home

Apart from the journey between the university and their accommodation, perhaps the most important and in some cases most frequent movement students at Birzeit University make is the journey between Birzeit and their home. While many students who grew up in the Ramallah area stay at home while attending university (c.f. Holdsworth 2006), my research focused on students who rented accommodation in Birzeit. In order to understand these students' mobilities between their homes, their rental accommodation and the university, it's important to first understand how home is defined by these students. Unlike the students Kenyon (1999) interviewed in England, who imagined their university accommodation as a transitional home between parental and future homes, university students who were renting accommodation in Birzeit do not consider their lodgings to be a home space. Home is instead located in the *balad* (their village of origin), the place where they grew up and where their family lives.

> Jalaal: I look at home as the place I was born in, and the place that I have family in. It will always connect me to my brothers and sisters. When there are holidays or some religious occasions, we all go to that house and meet again. It gives you a

good chance to remember when you were a child, when you used to work around the house… It reminds me of my childhood, which was the best period of my life till now.

(Male student, interview conducted on 19th April 2006, in English).

Yacob: The first thing is stability. The social moorings of your life. You feel relaxed. You feel like a human being. You feel like a member of society. It's the place where you live your life, where you pray, where you can experience your own values, culture and traditions. You think about the place where you grew up.

(Male student, interview conducted on 22nd May 2006, in Arabic and English).

These definitions of home fit within more broadly held notions of home that I encountered as I talked with other members of Birzeit society, which constructed home as a simultaneously material space (*baladi*, village of origin) imbued with familial and emotional ties. Most of the students I talked to who rented accommodation while studying at Birzeit, preferred to live at home.

Osama: My home in Hebron has more going for it than my lodging here. The difference is that no one likes to live as a stranger. At home in Hebron, my clothes are cleaned for me, my food is prepared, it's very relaxing there. There's no work. But here I need to wash, cook, clean. I need to do everything in the house, all the chores. This is the advantage of living in Hebron as opposed to living here. The advantage of living here is that I'm able to make more connections with people from other villages, and learn about responsibility. Living here teaches me how to look after myself and be responsible for myself.

(Male student, interview conducted on 29th April 2006, in English and Arabic).

Rasha: I miss my mother, especially when I'm hungry… And my father when I don't have money [laughs].

Tania: She's [Rasha] a good cook, but she likes her mother's cooking more than her own.

These ideas are very similar to Morris' (1996: 386) understanding of home as neither origin nor destination, but rather being 'in the middle of things… a way of going outside', (see also Blunt & Dowling 2006). Yacob expresses a similar idea when he uses the word moorings (see Urry 2003), which emphasizes how home allows the other movements of his life (praying, experiencing culture, etc) to occur. This understanding of home as somewhere to venture from and return to manifests itself in the desire that many students have to travel home regularly, which some are able to do. Osama, who comes from a village near Hebron, told me he visits home every three to four weeks, which is more frequently that in previous years because he is bored of Birzeit and his brother now drives up to Ramallah on business so he is able to catch a ride home. This allows him to save a great deal of the money he would have to spend on *services* - communal taxis that nearly every student (and indeed most other Palestinians) use to travel between towns, villages and checkpoints in the West Bank. Tania, from Tulkarem, and Rasha, from Nablus, both use *services* to visit their families every two weeks, despite the fact that in Tania's case the journey can last anywhere between two and six hours, depending on how many barriers to movement are encountered[v].

> Tania: It varies. Sometimes five hours, four hours. In the worst case, six hours. In the best case, about eighty minutes.
>
> (Female student, interview conducted on 4th May 2006, in English).

Students make sense of the relative immobility these barriers cause when traveling between their home and the university in two ways. The first way is through a more temporal understanding. In Tania's case, her experiences of im/mobility are related to the different repetitions of the journey she makes every two weeks, and the different times this journey takes. She understands and explains her relative immobility through reference to other temporal frames – such as the best case ('eighty minutes') or the worst case ('six hours') – or what I will call an '*else when*'. Many other students used the

beginning of the *Al Aqsa Intifada* (in September 2000) to indicate a temporal rupture, separating a time of relative mobility from a subsequent time of relative immobility.

The second way immobility is understood is spatially, as in the following example with Jalaal, who is not able to make frequent visits home.

> Me: So how often do you visit Jenin then?

> Jalaal: Once every three or four months.

> Me: Do you choose to go that often, or is it, you can only go that often because of the difficulties?

> Jalaal: It's only because of the checkpoints. There are too many checkpoints on the road, especially in Jenin. Also I have a lot of studying to do. Another thing is that I prefer to live in this environment. The only reason I go to Jenin is just to see my parents.

> Me: What do you prefer about this environment?

> Jalaal: No checkpoints! (Laughs). No checkpoints, you can go to Ramallah at midnight. In Jenin, you have to be asleep by 8 [when the checkpoint closes].
>> (Male student, interview conducted on 19th April 2006, in English).

Here we can note that Jalaal's account of immobility is more spatially based, as his experiences of traveling from Birzeit to Ramallah provide a more mobile contrast than his experiences of traveling from Birzeit to Jenin. His immobility is understood and explained in relation to an elsewhere.

However, while experiences of immobility can be understood relative to an elsewhere and an '*else when*', in practice they are usually experienced simultaneously. In other words immobility is relative to other time-spaces.

Me: When you go to Jenin [from Birzeit], you have to go through Nablus, is this right?

Jalaal: Yeah, it was this way before the Intifada. It used to take one hour. When you go to Nablus and then to Jenin, it will only take you one hour. But now you have to go through other roads… When I began studying at Birzeit, we used to go through Jericho. We'd go to Jericho, and then we'd come to Ramallah. Then we started to go through Tulkarem. [See figure 4]

Me: The opposite way.

Jalaal: Tulkarem, and then…it was so difficult.

Me: Wow. So how do you get to Jenin at the moment?

Jalaal: Through Tulkarem, but not the ordinary roads. We have to go through the fields. Roads have been established in the [olive] fields.
(Male student, interview conducted on 19th April 2006, in English).

[INSERT FIGURE 4].

Jalaal's journey is slower because of both the different routes he must take, which cover an ever-greater distance, and the increasing time it takes to travel these routes. The fact that *services* now cross olive groves not only illustrates the extent of the relative immobility imposed by the Israeli Occupation Forces through their control of the Palestinian road network, but also the creative, albeit environmentally damaging ways in which Palestinians pursue their relative mobility. Jalaal's story also illuminates some of

the consequences of this relative immobility. The journey to and from home has become far less routine for Jalaal, both spatially and temporally, and consequently unpredictability itself has become routine (c.f. Adey 2006): Jalaal told me that the Israeli Occupation Forces are constantly on the lookout for drivers who circumvent checkpoints, and hence there is always the possibility that a *service* driver will be caught, turned back and heavily fined. Unpredictability can function as another barrier to movement, as it does for Dina, a Birzeit resident.

Dina: We used to go to Nablus, forty-five minutes, do some shopping because Nablus is cheaper. Now, I wouldn't go because I would have to go through Hawara, I have to carry a lot of stuff and then get checked by Israelis. Maybe we stay there for one hour or two at the checkpoint and so now we would rather stay in our area.
(Female villager, interview conducted on 6th April 2006, in English and Arabic).

The unpredictable space-times of these contorted journeys also extract an economic cost, and like the journey times, the cost is also unpredictable. Osama describes his journey from Birzeit to his village in Hebron:

Osama: From here to Ramallah. From Ramallah to Kalandia.

Me: And you go through the checkpoint?

Osama: Yes. After the checkpoints there are cars [*services*] to either Abu Dis or Bethlehem. I go to… Al Khader, which is a village near Bethlehem. Then from Al Khader there are buses that travel to the city of Hebron. Then I'll take a car [*service*] from the city to my home. [See figure 5]
…
Me: And that takes three hours.

Osama: If there are no flying checkpoints[vi], I go through five places. If there are checkpoints, I'll go through eight or nine places… On the normal route, there are five checkpoints.

Me: How long does it take if there are flying checkpoints?

Osama: Five and a half hours. Can you imagine coming and going every week? Do you want to know about the cost: forty or fifty shekels[vii] [approx. US $10-12]. And sometimes seventy, sometimes one hundred [approx. US $25], if there are many checkpoints. The Israeli Occupation plays a role in this situation.
(Male student, interview conducted on 29th April 2006, in English and Arabic).

[INSERT FIGURE 5].

Osama's question, 'can you imagine coming and going every week', is a rhetorical one, since most people cope with the predictably unpredictable time-spaces of relative immobility between home and university by simply making the trip far less frequently, like Jalaal. However, as I mentioned earlier, Osama suggested that he now travels home more often because he is bored of Birzeit. I make this point to stress that while the Israeli Occupation barriers heavily impact the relative immobility of students, there are also other (non-Occupation) factors that determine each student's movement. In practice, it is very difficult to separate the different determining factors[viii].

Accommodating Students: Constructing Birzeit as Place

Some of these differential and relational student mobilities that I have examined affect not only the students who experience them, but also – economically, ecologically, materially and socially – Birzeit as place. I now want to trace how these journeys to and from the University, and to and from home also have very particular consequences for the village of Birzeit and the villagers. The most obvious way in which these relative

immobilities between university and home manifest themselves in Birzeit village is through the demand for rental accommodation. Greater movement restrictions have led/forced students to live closer to the university. As the earlier quote from Anais suggests, the demand for lodgings has placed considerable pressure on the village, particularly since the outbreak of the *Al Aqsa Intifada* in 2000.

This increased demand for living space has affected a number of transformations in the material fabric of the village. During the 1980s the university campus relocated to a new site in an area known as *Il Majj*, on the edge of the village that borders with the neighbouring village of Abu Kash. Since the campus' move, a number of large apartment buildings have been constructed around the 'new' campus in *Il Majj*. The new apartment buildings in *Il Majj*, which house migrants working in Ramallah as well as students, are being built on land considered the most fertile in the village (due to natural water springs). While this shift from a farm based to property based economy may be profitable for some villagers, the loss of agricultural land is of serious concern[ix]. The movement of the campus and student accommodation within Birzeit has also led some villagers who own businesses in the older parts of town (near the site of the 'old' campus) to complain that students no longer visit their coffee shops, restaurants and shops because they don't live near enough them.

> Ahmad: In the eighties and before, the university was amongst the buildings in the village. You can find prosperity in the village, cafeterias all around, people walking till midnight, students [walking] till midnight… The minute they started moving to the other spot, building, it killed the village.
>
> (Male villager, interview conducted on 12th February 2006, in English).

While the number of students renting accommodation in Birzeit has increased, complaints like Ahmad's, that the students are now 'mixing' less with villagers than in the past, are frequent. This is another consequence of students' daily mobility routines. Most students (unlike Khader) suggested they preferred to spend as much time as possible at the university. Aside from lectures, the campus (as anyone who visits will

notice) affords a greater range of social opportunities compared with both their lodgings and their *balad*. This is particularly true with regards to the ability to interact with members of the opposite sex, which is strictly regulated in most other social venues, but, due to the nature of mixed gender classes[x] and the university's liberal ethos[xi], tacitly promoted in the social space of the university. After the campus closes at 4pm, students renting accommodation in Birzeit will return to the village (although this can often be delayed by a trip to Ramallah), and evenings can be spent studying or relaxing in their lodgings.

> Tawfiq: We were all friends and there was no time to study. It was all laughing and talking. Forget reading!
> (Male student, interview conducted on 8th April 2006, in English and Arabic).

> Osama: I mean, when friends live with each other, it's all laughter, playing chess, talking… I didn't use to smoke, but after I came here I started. I'm addicted.
> (Male student, interview conducted on 29th April 2006, in English and Arabic).

Students' rootedness in their flats or houses can be understood as one source of villagers' complaints that many students no longer frequent places such as restaurants and coffee shops and provide them with custom, as they reputedly did prior to the relocation of the campus. However, my participant observation suggested that the relative poverty of students since the outbreak of the *Al Aqsa Intifada* also played a determining role. This poverty was accentuated during my fieldwork in 2006, after the international economic boycott following the election of Hamas to head the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). At this time many students (and by implication their families) weren't even able to afford the university tuition, leading to a heavily scaled back group of course offerings and the non-payment of the entire university staff's wages. During this crisis landlords in Birzeit also complained that rent was frequently either partially or totally unpaid, which built on more longstanding complaints that students don't take care of the properties they are renting.

Tarek: Before I used to rent the apartment for 180JD [Jordanian Dinars, or approx. US $250], regardless of how many people were in it. I had to get 180JD at the end of the month. But now each student has to pay for himself, like 50JD [approx. US $70], and he won't care about the other person who doesn't have money. He'll just pay his share of the rent. So I can't work like that, because some people have their rent money and others don't.

…

I was thinking about building another building for students, but now, why should I? You even have to fix stuff after the students leave, because they wreck everything, so it's a bad investment. You need 15000 dollars to fix stuff after the students leave.

(Male villager, interview conducted on 25th June 2006, in Arabic).

Laila: There are girls upstairs. Girls are really tough to deal with these days too. They don't clean anything. I don't know how they live like that. They are from Jenin and Tulkaren. And before that the Beit Sahur girls - they're disgusting. They didn't clean and they were dirty. It costs me more to repair the house than I take in rent.

(Female villager, interview conducted on 30th April 2006, in Arabic).

One Birzeiti complained to me that students even stole her family's patio furniture. The mayor of Birzeit, a former lecturer at the university who in his current office is trying to find solutions to the conflict between landlords and tenants, suggests that while the landlords' complaints are often valid, they are often at fault too.

Nasser: The landlords are not that benevolent either. Sometimes they put apartments on the market that are not suitable for habitation, kitchens are not properly functioning, toilets are not properly functioning. The place is a dump and they want to charge an arm and a leg for it. And the excuse of the landlords is, they run away without paying, what do they expect.

(Male villager, interview conducted on 16th August 2006, in English).

While these problems may be germane to short-term renting everywhere, in Birzeit I argue that they can be viewed as a consequence of student im/mobilities between their rental accommodation in Birzeit and home (*balad)*. As I have suggested, rather than the transitional role that university 'digs' provide for students in Britain as they move out of their parents' homes and into their own after university (Kenyon 1999), student accommodation in Birzeit functions more like a lodging which they stay in while attending university. Hence what one person (the landlord) often considers a home, is treated as just a living space by other people (students). While residents of Birzeit may appreciate the business that students bring, in this instance the students' mobility or lack of rootedness (Hannan et al 2006) leads to a series of tensions that literally take place through the conditions of living spaces that are rented and the (non-)payment of rent. This also creates a situation in which these Birzeit University students, who otherwise experience manifold relative immobilities, are also simultaneously more mobile (in their living arrangements) than other village residents, and for this reason are partially out of place (Cresswell 1996). Many students suggested during informal conversations that if traveling through the West Bank was easier and quicker, they would live at home and commute to university as was done in the past (prior to the start of the *Al Aqsa Intifada* in 2000) and as students who live in the Ramallah region still do. Perhaps most importantly this would keep them 'in place' (Cresswell 1996) by keeping them in 'their' village. This unsettling effect is further compounded by a number of students who, after graduation, remain in Birzeit or the broader Ramallah region.

> Samir: I consider the whole of Palestine my home. When I was a child, my father taught me that the land was very beautiful and I should love all the land. So I love all of Palestine, and I don't care if I live in Jerusalem, Jenin or Tulkarem. It's all my home. I can learn to adapt to anything and live with anyone, and treat it like home. Of course Tulkarem is my home, where I can return. It's beautiful memories, where I spent my childhood and I miss it a lot. I love it a lot. If I didn't have one I would be no one, but in the end I will adapt my life.
>
> (Male immigrant, interview conducted on 22nd August 2006, in Arabic).

Wejdan: The people who are originally from Birzeit are the majority, but if you want to look at Birzeit as a whole, there are now strangers who are living here who call themselves Birzeitis, but they are not Birzeitis. Like maybe a student at the university will get married, work in Ramallah and they'll stay here.

…

Hana: Before you were walking in the street and every second you would say hi to someone you knew, and you knew him pretty well. But now sometimes you see people who you've never seen before. So it's a bit different you know.

…

Dina: You know sometimes it's hard to cope because even if they're Arabs and from Palestine but from different regions, they come from a different background, they're not the same.

(Male and female villagers, interview conducted on 6th April 2006, in English and Arabic).

The frictions stemming from the differential mobility of students vis a vis other residents of Birzeit challenge a sedentary equation of home as *balad*. This unsettling can be traced in diverging meanings of *baladi*, to mean both my place (village of origin) and my nation, a linguistic marker of the movement away from village life to a large imagined community. Students/immigrants like Samir are able to blur the line between these two meanings. However although these student-migrants are from the same nation, some villagers such as Dina still script them as 'other' as if they were transnational migrants from another nation (Ahmed et al 2003, Pratt 2004). This process of othering is built on a less ambiguous use of *balad* to mean either village of origin *or* nation, which maintains rather than deconstructs the distinction between these two spatial scales. This tension between villagers and those they construct as 'outsiders' is one example of the agonistic and antagonistic processes that continually make Birzeit as place. Massey (2005) uses the term 'throwntogetherness' to describe the event of place and the political process it embodies. While Massey uses this term to talk about place ontologically, using this specific phrase in the context of Palestine, where some people throw and others are

thrown, runs the risk of sounding studiously neutral and down playing the unequal power relations that have constituted the historical and geographical trajectories that intermingle to create this place[xii]. As Kraftl & Adey (2008) note, there are a number of practices and processes, such as architecture, that determine quite forcefully what gets thrown together, including the geopolitical processes that I touched on earlier in the paper. Many people are moving and/or staying Ramallah because of the closures that have affected cities like Jenin, Tulkarem and Al Khalil (Hebron) in other parts of Palestine, forcing people to move to the relatively prosperous centre where the Palestinian ministries are located, and people can still do business (Taraki & Giacaman 2006).

Conclusion: Future Mobilities?

This paper has stressed the importance of studying relative *im*mobilities by arguing that student mobilities in the West Bank are heavily impacted by barriers, imposed by the Israeli Occupation, specifically designed to render these students (and other Palestinians) less mobile. These im/mobilities also affect the village of Birzeit, through property that is uncared for and damaged, rents that are unpaid, and disruptions to hegemonic imaginations of place. The immobilities students experience are relative not just to other peoples' mobility (e.g. Israeli settlers), but also to prior experiences of mobility (an '*else when*') and to experiences of mobility in other spaces (an else where). Students experience the brute fact of their relative immobility through barriers that are material (checkpoints), legal-bureaucratic (the ID and permit system) and imaginative (e.g. Khader) in nature. These immobilities and barriers are constituted, albeit asymmetrically, through the ongoing practices of both state and non-state actors - including the students themselves.

I also argued at the outset that the relative immobility of Palestinians moving through the West Bank has become an important site of political contestation. High-level diplomatic negotiations frequently include demands that the Israeli state should reduce or remove barriers to movement[xiii]. This geopolitics of im/mobility is intimately tied to the more everyday micropolitical activities. On the one hand there are the activities of human

rights organizations (B'Tselem), activist groups (Machsom Watch) and Birzeit University's own 'Right to Education Campaign' that monitor and discursively challenge material occurrences of immobility. However, the performances of mobility enacted by students tend to respond more pragmatically rather than morally/ethically to the restrictions on movement. In other words, students tend to travel less, and consequently stay in Birzeit (and Ramallah) more. This has also contributed to a series of tensions between students and villagers (particularly landlords) due to the differing ways in which they make place. These tensions are one milieu in which a micropolitics of im/mobility emerges (Connolly 2002, 2005) as more sedentary notions of home (as *balad*) are agonistically challenged and in some cases redefined by students who continue to live in Birzeit after they have completed their tertiary education. Since Ramallah is the most prosperous city in the West Bank, or as one Palestinian friend put it to me the least deprived, the relatively greater number of jobs encourages graduates to remain in the area (Taraki 2008). This influx of graduates and other work migrants is intertwined with the closure of other cities throughout the West Bank, and Ramallah's development as the de facto political capital of Palestine (Taraki & Giacaman 2006). The conflicts that I witness in Birzeit over notions of being in/out of place, which are tied intimately to definitions of home and mobility, seem to be occurring across the Ramallah region.

Another point of contact between a politics and micropolitics of im/mobility occurs when graduates use their education to make themselves relatively more mobile, and seek work abroad in Dubai (e.g. Jalaal and Osama) or America (e.g. Tania). By November 2006, fifty thousand Palestinians had applied to foreign consulates to emigrate from Palestine, a form of mobility described by Israeli demographer Arnon Sofer as 'voluntary transfer' (Makdisi 2008: 8-10). I hope it is clear after reading this paper that Sofer's description completely ignores (among other things) the types of relative immobility that I have discussed in this paper, which actively encourage Palestinians to leave. In other words, the quotidian micropolitics of mobility practiced by Palestinians - both students and others - in response to the geopolitical and micropolitical practices of immobility enforced by the Israeli Occupation Forces, has led to more extensive migration towards Ramallah and emigration abroad that both contest and avoid the Israeli Occupation

Forces' efforts to immobilize the Palestinian population in the West Bank or encourage them to leave. This point emphasizes once again why it is vitally important to account for these immobilities.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[i] Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees. I have also indicated whether the interviewee is a student or a villager (or both), and their gender for readers unfamiliar with Arabic names.

[ii] When viewing maps in this paper, it is vital to remember that these static cartographic representations really do struggle to represent the fluid spaces of im/mobility in the West Bank, particularly barriers like flying checkpoints and the different routes *service* drivers take, sometimes on a daily basis, when traveling from place to place. This is reflected in the fact that the UN OCHA, which produced the base maps, update them every six months.

[iii] Palestinians also face a range of related but different problems moving outside the West Bank, but this lies outside the scope of this paper. See Weizman 2007, Barghouti 2000.

[iv] Khader told me that such summonses are issued when someone is accused of doing something for which there is no evidence. He asserted that any accusations against him are not only false, but also not very serious, a claim he backed up by stating that three summons were given to him in person, when he could just as easily have been arrested.

[v] While I was only able to interview a few women, it seemed as though female students visited home more frequently than their male counterparts, perhaps because of gender ideals that locate women in the space of the house. I would also suggest from observation that women are seen as less threatening by the Israeli Occupation Forces and therefore able to travel with less scrutiny. For instance, larger checkpoints, such as Kalandia and Huwara, have separate aisles for women.

[vi] A flying checkpoint is an impermanent one, and usually consists of an army jeep parked in the middle of the road, with Israeli soldiers slowing down or stopping traffic. If known about in advance, Palestinians may take alternate routes to avoid these

checkpoints, although as Osama suggests ('eight or nine places'), this is usually involves a much more circuitous journey.

[vii] Israeli Shekels, Jordanian Dinars and US Dollars are all used as currency through out the West Bank; the first two because of the Jordanian (1948-1967) and Israeli (since 1967) occupations, and the last one because dollars are considered a much more stable currency than shekels.

[viii] While I did not explicitly research methods of coping on the journeys themselves, I did notice during trips I made through the West Bank the frequent use of mobile phones, and a system of hand gestures between taxi drivers are used to communicate the location and relative speed/slowness of Israeli checkpoints. These forms of coping gesture at a highly adaptive, embodied, (and specific) knowledge economy, although more research needs to be done to delineate this area (Hammami 2004).

[ix] Interview with Nasser (Mayor of Birzeit), conducted on 16th August 2006, in English. Agricultural land is in particularly short supply because a great deal of Israeli colonization since 1948 has stolen fertile agricultural land, which has obvious consequences for indigenous food provision.

[x] Most secondary schools in Palestine are gender specific.

[xi] See for example the University's mission statement: "The University is committed to excellence and encourages creativity, experimentation, innovation, accomplishment as well as team work and democratic practices anchored in pluralism, freedom of expression and respect for others. The University endeavors to excel in higher education, scientific research, and service to the community. Since its establishment, the University has remained committed to providing equal learning opportunities to qualified individuals and to prepare students to become good citizens active in their society and committed to its advancement and well-being. The University provides the appropriate environment for students to develop their personalities and realize their potentials in an open and liberal atmosphere that stresses the Arab-Islamic heritage". (Birzeit University 2007c)

[xii] This point ties in with my earlier observation that studies in the new mobilities paradigm focus to a much greater extent on the relatively mobile.

[xiii] For instance, just as I have finished writing this paper, Tony Blair has announced the removal of four roadblocks. See Ravid 2008.

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