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CHICAGO JOURNALS



Memory and Trauma in the Middle East (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod's *Nakba*)

Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory by Ahmad H. Sa'di; Lila Abu-Lughod

Review by: Tobias Kelly

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who had tortured his wife? What about Maritza's life in the aftermath of her ordeal? How did she maintain her *conciencial* commitment, given that some guerrillas considered her a traitor for surviving, and how did it affect the next generation (the fourth in her family to be forced into exile)? In an overall profoundly readable and ethically responsible book, there are two unfortunate lapses. One is claiming that highland indigenous people made "a fatal mistake" (p. 72) by channeling their aspirations for liberation through the EGP, and the other is characterizing the sclerotic President Jorge Serrano Elias as "a volatile genetic cocktail of Arab, Jew, and Spaniard" (p. 112). Blaming indigenous people for miscalculating the risk in resisting an illegitimate government or someone's genes for his personality is not trivial. Human rights activism depends on accountability and making perpetrators responsible, which means getting blame right. The Nuremberg trials seemed to clarify the relation of singular actors to aggregate systems, but to this day we struggle via human rights in action to adequately connect these. Saxon is skeptical of the CIA's analysis of the kidnappers as "rogue elements" in the army but seems to accept a similar story about the CIA within the embassy; he seems a bit too sanguine about the U.S. role, especially the economic system it supports. Maritza dedicated her life to transforming that system. What does it mean to have saved that life?

Memory and Trauma in the Middle East

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Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory. Edited by Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod. New York: Columbia University Press.

In the spring of 1998 I made frequent visits to Jerusalem, which was full of parades and flag waving as Israelis marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of their state. The same spring of course also marked another, parallel anniversary, that of the *naqba*, or disaster, which saw the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes in what would become Israel. During these anniversaries I was staying in a refugee camp whose original residents had fled their homes in 1948. Since their initial flight, three generations of children had been born and brought up in the ever more crowded conditions of the camp. However, in stark contrast to the events in Jerusalem, there were remarkably few public events of commemoration in the camp. On one evening the UN-appointed camp administrator organized a showing of a film of the events of 1948. Only two people turned up. The unwillingness or inability of the residents of the camp to commemorate the events of 1948 goes to the heart of the paradoxes of Palestinian

memory. Why, in the context of a conflict in which historical injustices seem to be given such priority and the implications of 1948 are physically present in the shape of the gray and crumbling concrete walls of the camp, did the residents not want to take part in this public memorial? The answer to this question lies in the profound ambiguity with which many Palestinians approach the act of remembering 1948. The violence and trauma of 1948 make its remembrance both necessary and problematic. The anniversary of 1948 represents both the birth of Israel as a real and undeniable presence in their daily lives and the creation of the "Palestinian refugee problem." For many Palestinians the events of 1948 are a source of shame and regret, but at the same time they act as a focus for contemporary political mobilization. Although the anniversary of the *naqba* passed with little public acknowledgment in the camp in which I was living, elsewhere in the West Bank its commemoration sparked violent clashes that left several Palestinians dead in confrontations with Israeli troops.

The tensions involved in remembering 1948 are the focus of *Nakba*, a thought-provoking collection of essays edited by Ahmad Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod. In many ways memories of 1948 lie at the heart of the contemporary Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Just what happened in 1948 and its moral implications in the present divide the two sides like no other issue. Although celebrated in Israel, for many Palestinians 1948 marks the "original sin" through which Israel was born. While the majority of Palestinians had not yet been born in 1948, the causes of their contemporary legal, political, and economic insecurities can be traced back to this year. The essays collected here suggest that 1948 was the year in which Palestinians, both individually and collectively, "entered history." It was the year in which personal trajectories became fused with national history in intricate and often contradictory ways. Palestinians still divide themselves according to years, with "nineteen-forty-eighters" referring to those Palestinians who reside inside the 1948 boundaries of Israel. As the essays also suggest, the *naqba* created a particular politics of victimhood that still runs through Palestinian life. The fear of the *naqba* repeating itself marks contemporary political engagements, whether the commitment to *sumud* (steadfastness) or the fears created by ongoing Israeli military operations. Many Palestinians saw the massacres in Jenin in 2002 as the *naqba* repeating itself. Some commentators suggest that an Israeli acknowledgment of wrongs inflicted on Palestinians during this time is essential for any long-term and durable peace agreement. This is not simply a material restitution but a moral recognition of past injustice.

This book therefore explores the multiple and often contradictory ways in which memories of 1948 are experienced by Palestinians. It examines what is said and what is unsayable and how memories are created and silenced. In doing so, it also relates the diverse experiences of 1948 to the manner in which these events are currently remembered. The contributors are predominantly anthropologists but also include

filmmakers, activists, lawyers, cultural critics, and political scientists. They draw on oral history, poetry, cinema, legal evidence, maps, and written narratives to make their arguments. The collection starts with a wide-ranging and insightful introduction that puts debates into context, in some cases by drawing provocative but sophisticated comparisons with the literature on Holocaust memory. The different chapters explore the politicized memory of rape (Slymovics), memorial books for pre-1948 villages (Davis), narrative and presence (Jayyusi), the gendered nature of memory (Sayigh and Humphires and Khalili), trauma in Palestinian cinema (Bresheeth), generational change (Qattan), legalized forms of memory (Esmer), and the relationship between memory and forgetting (Allan). The book also contains an afterword that draws wider political conclusions about Palestinian memory (Sa'di). At the heart of the book lies a beautifully written and moving narrative essay by Abu-Lughod that explores her memories of her father, the late Palestinian intellectual Ibrahim Abu-Lughod. The older Abu-Lughod was born and educated in Jaffa and forced into exile by the creation of Israel. Holding an American passport, he was able to return to the West Bank to work in the 1990s and was eventually laid to rest in his hometown. Lila Abu-Lughod explores the ways her father's return led him to reassess his own memories of place and reminds us that memory cannot simply be reduced to an instrumental manipulation of ideas but is embedded in objects and lived experiences.

Although undeniably sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, this book is also critical and reflexive. It goes beyond pointing out the obvious romanticization of the past to explore why remembering the past might matter. It explicitly sets itself up as a form of resistant "countermemory" to the forms of history that would silence Palestinian experience. However, it also asks whether there might be a danger in reproducing a therapeutic model of memory that assumes that speaking truth to power about historical wrongs is all that is needed to combat contemporary injustices. While not all chapters are of the same quality, taken together they constitute an insightful, provocative, and thought-provoking contribution to an important discussion.

Books Received

- Anderson, Sheldon, Jeanne A. K. Hey, Mark Allen Peterson, Stanley W. Toops, and Charles Stevens. 2008. *International studies: An interdisciplinary approach to global issues*. Boulder: Westview Press. 470 pp. \$50/CAN\$60
- Atlani-Duault, Laëtitia. 2007. *Humanitarian aid in post-Soviet countries: An anthropological perspective*. New York: Routledge. 160 pp. \$150
- Baulch, Emma. 2008. *Making scenes: Reggae, punk, and death metal in 1990s Bali*. Durham: Duke University Press. 248 pp. \$21.95
- Bender, Barbara, Sue Hamilton, and Chris Tilley. 2008. *Stone worlds: Narrative and reflexivity in landscape archaeology*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press. 304 pp. \$89 cloth, \$39.95 paper
- Berdan, Frances F., John K. Chance, Alan R. Sandstrom, Barbara L. Stark, James Taggart, and Emily Umberger. 2008. *Ethnic identity in Nahua Mesoamerica: The view from archaeology, art history, ethnohistory, and contemporary ethnography*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press. 280 pp. \$50
- Beriss, David, and David Sutton, eds. 2007. *The restaurants book: Ethnographies of where we eat*. New York: Berg. 252 pp. \$29.95
- Birth, Kevin K. 2008. *Bacchanalian sentiments: Musical experiences and political counterpoints in Trinidad*. Durham: Duke University Press. 280 pp. \$21.95
- Bohmer, Carol, and Amy Shuman. 2007. *Rejecting refugees: Political asylum in the 21st century*. New York: Routledge. 304 pp. \$39.95
- Brower, Barbara, and Barbara Rose Johnston, eds. 2007. *Disappearing peoples? Indigenous groups and ethnic minorities in South and Central Asia*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press. 288 pp. \$65 cloth, \$29.95 paper
- Brown, Vincent. 2008. *The reaper's garden: Death and power in the world of Atlantic slavery*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 368 pp. \$35
- Burger, Richard L., Craig Morris, and Ramiro Matos Mendieta, eds. 2008. *Variations in the expression of Inka power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 640 pp. \$55
- Cheney, Dorothy L., and Robert M. Seyfarth. 2007. *Baboon metaphysics: The evolution of a social mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 358 pp. \$27.50
- Clack, Timothy, and Marcus Brittain, eds. 2007. *Archaeology and the media*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press. 304 pp. \$69 cloth, \$29.95 paper
- Cliggett, Lisa, and Christopher A. Pool, eds. 2007. *Economies and the transformation of landscape*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group. 340 pp. \$72 cloth, \$29.95 paper