Book review: Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory

Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1086/588532

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
Current Anthropology

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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
Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/588532
Accessed: 14/01/2014 04:55

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Memory and Trauma in the Middle East
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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 Nakba, 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 Nakba 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 Nakba created a particular politics of victimhood that still runs through Palestinian life. The fear of the Nakba 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 Nakba 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 Humphries 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


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


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


Clack, Timothy, and Marcus Brittain, eds. 2007. Archaeology and the media. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press. 304 pp. $69 cloth, $29.95 paper