

## REVIEW

Teresa Aranguren and Sandra Barrilaro, *Against Erasure: A Photographic Memory of Palestine before the Nakba* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2024), 240 pp, ISBN: 978-1-64259-980-0

Five young women stretch their arms upwards. The gesture resembles hands aloft in worship, like on the Mary Lou Williams *Black Christ of the Andes* album cover. But the action is not in prayer nor protest nor defence, rather in play. Above outstretched fingertips a black sphere in silhouette floats, a ball rendered flat, forever suspended midair close to the rim of a netless hoop and pole-mounted backboard. Standing close by, five, six, maybe more, women, girls, watch on with varying expressions: a beaming smile, furrowed brows of anticipation, excitement, intrigue. A caption to the joyful scene reads: 'Girls playing basketball at the Center for Women's Activities in Kalandia, West Bank, 1950s.'<sup>1</sup>

The picture expands a timeframe for when the range of images in *Against Erasure* were made (or taken). It appears as the last of 230 photographs printed in the book as well as on the front cover in a cropped format. It is one of ten photos picked from the archive of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), a selection that presents Palestinians surviving the immediate aftermath of 1948 when the Nakba began.<sup>2</sup>

This edition of the book, with text written and translated into English and Arabic, includes a foreword from poet Mohammed El-Kurd in which he notes the nuances embedded in the word *Nakba*:

[T]he Nakba breathes down our necks, invading our national identity and contorting our earliest encounters with self. It is relentless. It happens in the present tense, everywhere on the map. For some households, it began when a grandfather was dispossessed in Jaffa and sought refuge in Gaza, where

1 T. Aranguren and S. Barrilaro, *Against Erasure: A Photographic Memory of Palestine before the Nakba* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2024), 160.

2 Four of the UNRWA photos show the graphic and grim reality of people forcibly removed their homes, from 'Girls pushing their belongings in strollers and wheelbarrows and fleeing Jaffa, 1948' to adult Palestinians first 'displaced to the Gaza beach refugee camp [then] boarding boats to Lebanon and Egypt, 1949'. A further five images depict life inside refugee camps – Nahr al-Bared (Lebanon), the Gaza beach camp, Aida camp near Bethlehem, the Dikwaneh (Lebanon) – as well as a ration distribution point in Aqaba, Jordan. The familiarity of these scenes across place and time is troubling. Aranguren and Barrilaro, *Against Erasure*, 154–156.

it continues in the rumble of the warplanes and bombs on the blockaded enclave, introducing his grandchildren to their first — or perhaps third, or sixth — war. Not a corner of our geography is spared, not a generation.<sup>3</sup>

El-Kurd reminds readers that the Nakba is a continuum, not a moment. Such understanding echoes Isabella Hammad:

[T]he word Nakba is more than just genocide, more than just apartheid, more than just settler colonialism. It's all of these things, it's both a specific event in 1948 and it's an ongoing process of obliteration that incorporates all of these elements to different degrees and in different ways and in different geographies with different tools. So to use the word, to use the Arabic word is very important to conceptualise it properly.<sup>4</sup>

The UNRWA collection is one of five archives from which the wealth of images has been selected. Co-author of the book, photographer Sandra Barrilaro (whose activism led her to be a participant on the 2016 Women's Boat to Gaza, an initiative set up to challenge the Israeli naval blockade of the Gaza Strip) wrote of the process of choosing photos in one of ten accompanying texts.<sup>5</sup> Barrilaro elaborates on how the [Professor Johnny] Mansour Collection is mostly assembled from families in Haifa. These intimate images of self-representation and self-fashioning contrast with photos from the Matson Collection, which sometimes resemble social documentary and sometimes a colonial anthropological gaze.<sup>6</sup>

Although the conditions that led to the making of these archival records can be problematised — for example rarely are people in images named — remembering words of Fred Moten, I am inclined to try and maintain gratitude and generosity for these images having been made, kept, and accessible in a book.<sup>7</sup> Whether encountered with a romanticised or critical viewpoint (or in combination), the photos are superb documents displaying a range of social life and industry in Palestine dating from 1898 to the 1950s.

---

3 Aranguren and Barrilaro, *Against Erasure*, 19–20.

4 Isabella Hammad interviewed by David Naimon on *Between the Covers Podcast*, 'Isabella Hammad: Recognising the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative'. Original air date 24 September 2024. <https://tinhouse.com/podcast/isabella-hammad-recognizing-the-stranger-on-palestine-and-narrative>.

5 In addition to Barrilaro's text there are acknowledgements from the co-authors; forewords to the 2024 edition and original Spanish/Arabic 2016 edition; essays by Teresa Aranguren, Bichara Khader, and Johnny Mansour; a list of the 418 Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948–1949; and two poems – 'Enough for Me' by Fadwa Tuqan, and 'On This Earth' by Mahmoud Darwish.

6 The G. Eric and Edith Matson Collection was formally called the American Colony Photo Department and operated from the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem. It is archived by the US Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc>.

7 In a radio broadcast as part of the 'After Year Zero: Geographies of Collaboration Conference' in Berlin, 2013, Moten said with regard to the Alan Lomax prison recordings (from the American South): 'To be a good old-fashioned Marxist ... people make their own history but they don't necessarily make the constraints under which that history gets made. So, you know, obviously, um, there's a dialectic there, um ... But, my tendency is to work on the sort of more celebratory side, which is that, it's not to say we are to disregard or not pay attention to the conditions of production and distribution of, you know, of the music. Um, if you listen to say, you know, the prison recordings in Parchman Prison Farm in Mississippi that Alan Lomax made, obviously the conditions under which that music is made is horrific, um, and the conditions of a specific production and recording of that music is highly questionable, Lomax's own interventions they are, they are deeply problematic. But, at the end of the day I'm still so glad that I have access to that music because there's a whole lotta information carried in that music.' [https://archiv.hkx.de/en/programm/projekte/2013/after\\_year\\_zero/start\\_after\\_year\\_zero.php](https://archiv.hkx.de/en/programm/projekte/2013/after_year_zero/start_after_year_zero.php).

Many of the images are portraits. A great deal of these show groups, including musicians or employees at the Palestine Broadcasting Service; a delegation who travelled to London in December 1929 representing Arab and Palestinian national movements; boatmen and dock workers returning to work after a mass 14-month long strike action in Jaffa (from May 1936); the Haifa Salesians soccer team; and students from the Haifa Carmelite school and Schmidt's Girls School and Training College (Jerusalem).<sup>8</sup>

For the most part, the question of who made the photo is unanswered. However, there are a few exceptions, such as when Olga Kattan, a student from Schmidt's, is credited for a snapshot of her schoolmates standing with staff from the boarding school on a trip to the Jordan River. Made outdoors and with elements out of focus, it appears Kattan was an occasional photographer. This is in marked contrast to the studio portraiture of Karima Abbud. Identified as 'the first female Palestinian professional photographer, with studios in both Jerusalem and Haifa', a postcard from 1928 produced by Abbud is reprinted. One side shows 'Two Girls from Nazareth', on the reverse the stamp: KARIMEH ABBUD, LADY PHOTOGRAPHER.<sup>9</sup>

There is an abundance of imagery in *Against Erasure* which, with more time (and word count), can be studied closely to illustrate or challenge historical enquiries, for example the protests to the Balfour Declaration, the 1929 riots, or *The 1936-1939 Revolt in Palestine*.<sup>10</sup> The book also prompts me to wonder, when we, you, think of Palestine, of Palestinian life/lives, what are the images pictured? Has this changed since October 2023 and the sickening escalation of extreme violence by the Israeli military regime? Words Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh said at the International Court of Justice come to mind, that we are witnesses to: '[T] he first genocide in history where its victims are broadcasting their own destruction in real time in the desperate so far vain hope that the world might do something.'<sup>11</sup>

Returning to scenes such as the merriment of the 'Girls playing basketball' freeze-frame, when visualising Palestine, might we overlay or juxtapose photos from *Against Erasure* with the proliferation of images in the present? In recognising Palestinian life as everlasting, and to counter doomscrolling, (how) may these photographic memories provide hope?<sup>12</sup>

Ben Verghese

*Centre for Archive and Information Studies, University of Dundee*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4458-400X>

<sup>8</sup> Aranguren and Barrilaro, *Against Erasure*, 93; 132–133; 134; 136.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>10</sup> G. Kanafani, *The 1936–39 Revolt in Palestine* (London: Design Atelier, Kalimat Magazine, 2013). <https://www.dabdulla.com/1936-39-Revolt-in-Palestine>.

<sup>11</sup> 'World has failed Gaza in 'livestreamed genocide', South Africa's delegation says at ICJ – video,' *The Guardian* (UK), 11 January 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2024/jan/11/world-has-failed-gaza-in-livestreamed-genocide-south-africas-delegation-says-at-icj-video>.

<sup>12</sup> A. Masola, 'Poems for a broken world,' *ixhanti lam* (blog), 28 September 2024. <http://ixhantilam.blogspot.com/2024/09/poems-for-broken-world.html>.