

Book Review

Ariella Azoulay, *Constituent Violence 1947–1950: Genealogy of a Regime and “a Catastrophe from their Point of View”* (Resling: Tel Aviv, 2009), 270 pp. (Hebrew).

Al Nakba:

- **noun** the Palestinian term for the events of 1948, when many Palestinians were displaced by the creation of the new state of Israel.

- ORIGIN Arabic, literally “the disaster.”

With the above words, the Oxford dictionary defines the *Nakba*. Such a commonly accepted and descriptive definition is problematized in a recently published book: *Constituent Violence 1947–1950: Genealogy of a Regime and “a Catastrophe from their Point of View,”* by Ariella Azoulay, a leading critical scholar in the field of visual culture. The book’s starting point is that colonial projects are characterized by the use of violence. This violence enters the culture of the settlers in various ways that normalize the colonial situation: through education programs, art, music, political speeches, legislation, ceremonies and monuments, to mention just a few. These processes often construct colonial space as a product of violence, as an outcome of uneven power relations and a subject of destruction, but not as an actor in itself. Yet, Azoulay manages to describe and critically analyze the ways in which Israeli space has been produced not just as a result of the *Nakba*, but rather as an inherent component in its denial.

Azoulay’s book is based upon a fascinating visual study of hundreds of archival photographs, most of them from Israeli official archives. What is extremely symbolic in this context is that several photographs from the archive of *Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael* (The Jewish National Fund) appear in the book in the form of drawings, as the author was unable to receive permission to publish them. This validates Azoulay’s argument that a visual document such as a photograph contains more information than the photographer may have originally intended. The text that accompanies the photographs is produced on the basis of more archival documents and academic research that shed light on the years 1947–1950 when “...the disaster itself [the *Nakba*] happened, and then its footprints were a presence in the public space in a relatively explicit manner” (p. 15).

Years later, the *Nakba* was denied in the Israeli public discourse and, as recently as May 2009, the Israeli Ministerial Committee for Legislative Affairs approved a motion barring the marking of Nakba Day. According to this proposal

anyone marking Nakba Day could be punished with up to three years in jail. This denial constitutes what Ann Stoler has defined as “colonial aphasia”—the inability to name and conceptualize the *Nakba* in Israeli space, culture and politics (cited in Azoulay, p. 19). Indeed, Azoulay’s book, which is based on an exhibition she has curated, is an attempt to overcome this aphasia—to name, illustrate and conceptualize the *Nakba* not as “their” catastrophe, but rather as a founding source of the production of the current Israeli regime (p. 9) and space. This effort is apparent in the structure of the book, whose seven chapters are organized around categories such as “The military governmentality,” “Architecture of expulsion” and “Borders and strategies of expulsion.”

This book documents two parallel spatial processes—deterritorialization and reterritorialization—both of which demanded constant surveillance and control of the Palestinians in 1947–1950. As Azoulay explores, such demographic and spatial engineering characterized the Military Administration period, which included control over the movement of populations, as well as the transfer of Palestinian property into the hands of the state. Following Azoulay’s argument concerning the centrality of the *Nakba* in shaping the Israeli regime, I suggest that it created the basis for the surveillance and control of those Palestinians who remained under the Israeli regime, which became even more significant in later years.

The visual documents selected by Ariella Azoulay throughout this book are accompanied by three different styles of texts. The first is descriptive, in which the viewer is directed to look at small details of each photograph that add a different meaning to the visual. An example is a photograph from Dir Yaseen (p. 155), where Azoulay guides the viewer to look at the bullet markings on the sabras plants, one of the popular images of the “new Israeli,” on the one hand, and the remains of the Palestinian villages, on the other. Secondly, Azoulay uses external documents to provide an additional interpretive context for the photographs she analyzes. A very telling example is the deconstruction of a caption on the back of a photograph describing the image as that of “Arab citizens yielding...” (p. 242). Azoulay’s investigation contextualizes the image through historical and geographical fact checking, and reveals that these “Arab citizens” were not “yielding,” but rather digging graves for other Palestinians who had been killed. In the third style of textual commentary, Azoulay voices her reading of the photograph as an author, using Israeli cultural codes, such as in a paragraph that cynically describes “girls and boys who are not told from their early childhood about ‘*Dod Hayal*’ [uncle soldier]...” (p. 181).

All the texts, I suggest, ignore the Palestinians’ reaction to the violence, leaving them as passive subjects. I mention this point, since a careful study of this period shows that Israeli decision makers were bothered by the reaction of the remaining Palestinians. For example, the infiltration of Palestinian refugees who sought to return to their abandoned homes and agricultural fields was an important issue to the Israeli authorities who dealt with it. Attempts to cross the new borders back to their homes were followed by a reaction of the Military Administration that initiated, in

addition to military ambushes, a special operation that documented the remaining Palestinian population (see, for example: "An ambush on the night of December 12, 1948," December 15, 1948, IDF archive 31/50/1860; "The security conditions in Lod," December 23, 1948, IDF archive 31/50/1860). However, it seems that, despite the registration and control, infiltration into the Israeli new territory did not end:

On January 5, 1949, at 23:45, an army patrol encountered two Arabs who crossed the barbed wire fence that surrounds the "*Sakne*" of Lod.... Following an order to shoot, one Arab was killed and the other escaped. One should assume that in Saknat Lod, in the abandoned houses, there are still many Arabs who have infiltrated the city ("Infiltration of Arabs in Lod," January 6, 1949, IDF archive 31/50/1860).

Following Azoulay, I also suggest that Israelis attempted to block the return of the Palestinian refugees not only because of demographic considerations, but also out of concern that such a return would cause irreversible demand for the refugees' properties, such as land and houses. Indeed, the violent footprints of the *Nakba* are visible in the present time, at least to those who want to see them—thus, this book is an essential text in its efforts to see the *Nakba* as a constitutive concept for understanding not only "their disaster," but also the foundation for the production of Israeli space, culture and politics.

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