

The Imperial Condition of Photography in Palestine: Archives, Looting, and the Figure of the Infiltrator

ARIELLA AZOULAY

In front of many cameras and representatives of the international community that surround him, unexpectedly, and outside of any protocol that was prepared for this occasion, an elderly Palestinian man dares to stop, to withdraw his consent to leave his home and ceases to move. This old man is my companion in exploring the archives and attempting to understand its implication in the invention of the figure of “infiltrator.” Together, we refrain from studying his figure, as defined by the nation-state that forced him out of his home. Halting precisely where many cameras were present, this person threatens to spoil the orchestrated spectacle of Arabs “leaving of their will.” Together, we study the linkage between the expulsion of several hundred thousands of Palestinians and the looting of a vast treasure of books, documents, and photographs from Palestinians in 1948 and their transformation into “abandoned files” in the newly constructed Israeli archives at the same time. The article proposes to relate to the ongoing looting of archives not merely as a violation of Palestinian property and rights, but rather as a continuous performance of national sovereignty. Sovereignty is performed as the continued project of partition of populations into distinct, differentiated groups, whereby violence among the two groups is both the pretext and the effect. [archives, citizenship, companion, infiltrator, Israel, looting, Palestine, photography, repatriation]

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Let me start with a screenshot of a photograph, one of twenty-five images that I selected from the Archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and was not authorized to include in an exhibition I curated several years ago. [Figure 1: Photograph of the man sitting on the ground] In the archive, this photograph of an elegant elderly man is captioned: “Kfar Yona, Jewish front line. A former prisoner of war is interrogated in the presence of a delegate from the ICRC.” When I first saw the photograph, I recognized some of the figures from other images kept in Zionist archives. [Figure 2: Photos by Beno Rothenberg] I knew, even before examining the photograph more closely, that this old man was not, and could not be, a prisoner of war. The young men between 15 and 40 were the first to be removed from their communities.

This guy has stayed behind with the women, children, and other men of his age group. Relating to him as an embodiment of a neutral category—POW—reflected the way that agents of the ICRC either on the ground or in the archive interacted with the subject’s actions, or more accurately, with his avoidance of action, with the embarrassing situation that he created by not moving on. The expulsion was supposed to keep going. Contrary to many other operations of expulsion conducted in Palestine during the years 1948–49, this one in particular was open to photographers and international organizations such as the ICRC, since it was conducted under the aegis of the normative category of the post-WWII-era “repatriation”—when millions were forcibly displaced in Europe. Palestinians who were transferred from their homes during these years could not be repatriated to other places, as Palestine was their homeland. It is only with the creation of a sovereign nation-state—Israel—with the UN endorsement that terms such as *partition* and *repatriation* could be used as neutral markers of policy. These terms are used factually in the captions



FIGURE 1. Screenshot of a low-resolution image from Palestine, 1949, viewed at the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross), courtesy NIA (Non-Imperial Archive). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

of several photos taken in the same situation. At this particular expulsion, approximately 2,000 Palestinians of Arab origin—mostly women, children, and elderly people—were left with little choice but to sign papers

proving that they agreed to be evacuated to Jordan as part of “family reunification” (their relatives having been expelled already a few months earlier or incarcerated in labor camps).¹

Ariella Azoulay is Professor of Modern Culture and Media and Comparative Literature, Brown University, a documentary film director, and an independent curator of archives and exhibitions. Her books on photography include From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-1950 (Pluto Press, 2011), Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography (Verso, 2012), and The Civil Contract of Photography (Zone Books, 2008). She is curator of Enough! The Natural Violence of the New World Order (F/Stop festival, Leipzig, 2016), Potential History (2012), Untaken Photographs (2010, Igor Zabel Award, The Moderna Galerija, Lubiana; Zochrot), Architecture of Destruction (Zochrot, Tel Aviv), and Everything Could Be Seen (Um El Fahem Gallery of Art). She is director of Civil Alliances, Palestine, 47-48 (2012), I Also Dwell Among Your Own People: Conversations with Azmi Bishara (2004).



FIGURE 2. Screenshot of album pages from photographer Beno Rothenberg series of photographs taken in Palestine, 1949, titled "Arab women from Tantura going to Jordan," courtesy NIA (Non-Imperial Archive). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Out of the 2,000 women fated for "transfer" through this kind of expulsion, conducted "willingly," about 800 refused to evacuate in spite of being threatened by the Jewish forces.²

What lies were these women told in order to make the term *repatriation* sound plausible? What kind of pressure was put on them? To which types of violence were they exposed, so that they would give their consent not only to leave their homes—they were already forced to leave them when they were evacuated from Tantura—but now, to also leave their country? In the absence of photographs from this phase, we cannot say much about the means employed to obtain the women's consent, nor about the fate of those who refused. We can only say that this preparatory phase had to be concluded before the scene was opened to photographers, who were invited to affirm with their cameras the success of the repatriation operation. Convening a sort of press conference in the field was not about

those who refused, nor was it an opportunity for the expellees to showcase their demands. At the Israel State Archives, photographs of the same event are classified under the handwritten caption of another photographer, Beno Rothenberg, "Arab women from Tantura going to Jordan." Rothenberg, like the Israeli journalists who attended the expulsion, knew that the expellees are not the inhabitants of Fureidis from where they are being expelled, but rather those who have already been expelled from Tantura.³ Rothenberg's caption played a pivotal role in understanding that this expulsion was actually a second expulsion. Included in this category of "women" were elderly men and children; at this point, military-age men from Tantura had already been either incarcerated or massacred.

In front of the cameras and representatives of the international community, unexpectedly, and outside of any protocol that was prepared for this occasion, this elderly man dares to stop, to withdraw his consent to

leave his home and ceases to move. Halting precisely where many cameras were present, he threatens to spoil the orchestrated spectacle of Arabs “leaving of their own will.” Not much work is required in order to argue that were he a prisoner of war, representatives of various NGOs and military forces would not be seen gesticulating around him, trying to find the right words and gestures to force him, without direct violence, to accept his fate, respect the consent form he signed, and leave his homeland of his own free will, forever. Yet the ICRC, rather than offering a provisory caption, requires its workers to protect the caption from revisions and preserve it as if it were fused with the photograph, since the latter can only be shared with others on the condition that it is accompanied SOLELY by the ICRC’s caption. As I already mentioned, my request for permission to include the photograph in an exhibition was denied. Hence, rather than showing this photograph, I can share with you its substitute, what I call an unshowable photograph. [Figure 3: Unshowable photo of the elderly man] This had nothing to do with what is in the photograph, which is still accessible in the ICRC archives. Nor did it have to do with me, since they could not have known in advance what I planned to write. Rather, it was about my stated intention to append my own caption to the ICRC’s. It was about questioning the way that the photograph endured in the archive through language that made of this man a prisoner of war and of the entire operation one of repatriation, or return to a

patrie, while it was actually a transfer from one’s homeland.

The ICRC’s implied anxiety, however, was not ungrounded. I did indeed intend to study those photographs together with my companion—the photographed person—even if, according to the archive, our worlds—as well as our political roles—were meant to be kept apart. Looking at the photograph of him taken at the moment he was forced out of his homeland, especially when one knows how much of Palestinians’ archives are incorporated into Israeli archives, I invite you to see also the moment he was dispossessed of his material culture and of the protection that archives provide. This protection occurs not through the document archives as legal proof of ownership or identity, but rather for their contributions to what Hannah Arendt called “worldliness.” Since he was not deported alone but together with hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians, the moment of his deportation was also the moment in which Palestinian archives lost the protection of the people—that is, Palestinians themselves—who recognize their existence as meaningful, and hence in need of protection. Their transfer is the moment in which archives became vulnerable to looting. His expulsion, and the foreclosure of his refusal to be expelled, is sanctioned by the looting of Palestinian archives and the entitlement of Israeli Jews to study Palestinian culture in and through archives, in the absence—or in the differential presence—of Palestinians and their archives.



FIGURE 3. Unshowable photograph, traced by AA, courtesy NIA (Non-Imperial Archive).

With the mass expulsion of Palestinians, their archives were partially destroyed and partially converted into a pile of appropriable segments by the newly established sovereign state and the international organizations that collaborated with it. Nothing of this drama, the heart of the story, is meant to be archived through the imperial categories used by nation-states. Sovereign nation-states are predicated on archives that they shape in correspondence with the violent policies they pursue toward segments of populations that even though they govern, they do not relate to as part of the body politic of the governed. In their demographic fantasies, the body politic consists of governed citizens and expulsion is a means to shape it, rather than a device of ruling. Being such a citizen, that is, a privileged citizen by definition, I refrain from going to archives where such images are preserved without my companion, the one who was denuded of his life within a community and made a vagabond, then a dweller of a refugee camp, and soon after an “infiltrator,” until another brutal category was made his, that of a stateless person, carrying only flimsy travel documents or no documents at all, holding none of the papers without which one can hardly move between nation-states’ gates. It is only when one forgets, as one is taught from birth, to think about one’s citizenship as unrelated to one’s state, that one can continue to enter the archive, as a matter of fact and of civil status, without him (or her in other cases), without recognizing the violence of which one’s citizenship is made. Since asking about him and his like in the archive is always already suspicious, there is no other way to go to the archive than with him, making sure that his understanding of the meaning of expulsion, body politic, citizenship, accountability, rights, worldliness, and so on—encapsulated in his firm presence there, kneeling and holding his stick as an anchor in the ground to which he belongs, and rejecting these men’s threats and pleas calling him to move on—is not dismissed for something else, but rather magnified into one of the rare accessible photographs (so far at least) in which, against the military operation of controlling the image of the destruction of an entire culture, a small gesture of opposition was captured as a reminder not of how Palestinians comply with the destruction of their world, but of how much the apparatus of a totalitarian regime made even the possibility of the existence of such gestures unimaginable for several decades.

Exploring the archive with a Palestinian companion became part of my archival routine, a constant attempt to make our actions coincide in space and time, even though he is still forced to live outside of the body politic of which I’m a part, not only because he is no longer alive, but also because his gesture of refusing to leave

Palestine dates from 68 years ago, hence obsolete. The temporality and spatiality imposed and epitomized by imperial archives doom his claims to appear as either over or always coming from a post-ness and an outside that mark his grievances as violations of the law, and mine to be at best expressions of solidarity with his ancient plight. Only as co-citizens of a non-imperial imagination can we enter the archive together, share in common those claims to stop the ruination of Palestine that became “his” claims, and together reject differential citizenship and its implication in the perpetuation of violence against those whose belonging to the body politic was denied by displacing them beyond the state’s borders. It is only in his presence that I could rewrite several versions of this and other sentences until I was able to force the language to produce the affirmative one about his belonging to the body politic.

Entering an imperial archive with a Palestinian companion is part of unlearning imperialism and having access not to what is *in* the archive but to this invaluable option of seeing in a non-imperial way and partaking in the actualization of non-imperial archival modalities. After all, my companion did not have to go through processes of unlearning the past and struggling with political lies in order to disclose, from underneath the ICRC language, that he was not a prisoner of war and that even if he gave his consent to be uprooted from his home, this formal consent was achieved against his will and against any common sense, and it was from start to end an act of sheer violence and not an agreement based on an acceptable exchange.

Let Me Pause Now and Ask, What Is an Archive?

In his influential book *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida analyzes the archive and reveals its secret: violence, “the violence of the archive itself, *as archive, as archival violence*” (Derrida 1995, 7). He starts with the figure of the *archon*, the guardian of documents, the sentry: “The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law” (Derrida 1995, 2). The archon is the first of the three pylons supporting the archive. The law, as Derrida argues in this passage, is the second, and the Greek *arkheion*, the house, the place, is the third. In locating *Arkhe*, as both *commencement* and *commandment*, at the conceptual core of the archive, Derrida alternately places emphasis

on documents and on the law. "To be guarded thus," Derrida continues, "in the jurisdiction of this *speaking the law*, they [the documents] needed at once a guardian and a localization" (Derrida 1995, 2). This conflation between law and documents is troubling and is made possible only when the internal machination of the archive is centered around the "core" of the archive, its essence that the philosopher can grasp only when the noisy presence of people is removed, what Derrida calls its "topo-nomology," "without which no archive would ever come into play or appear as such" (Derrida 1995, 3). Derrida's account of the archive is schematic and abstract. The documents that "needed" their guardian and localization are depicted as the focal points of the archive. Derrida's own intervention in the archive does not leave its impression in this schematic depiction; he remains external to the mechanism of the archive, a guest who comes after its constitution. Such external observation of how the archive works could not be obtained were Derrida not being lured, seduced by the sentries to look at their work from the outside, to track down the borders they set and the fences they erect, and by doing so to acknowledge the law they legislate. After all, part of the sentries' work is to fool the one who stands at the archive's entrance and make him or her believe that they, notwithstanding the law they guard, were there before. Yet, in turn, Derrida tries to fool the sentries, writing that "[i]n an enigmatic sense,...the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past....It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (Derrida 1995, 36).

Certainly, something is wrong with the temporality of the archive and with its announced mission to serve as a guardian of the past. Achille Mbembe locates the problem in the archive's desire to forget and liquidate the past, whereas Derrida performs this desire even as he detaches the past from the future, without providing any argument to sustain such a separation: "[T]he question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past....It is a question of the future" (Derrida 1995, 36). This claim is similar to what has become commonly identified as the revolutionary gesture par excellence: positing a new beginning that disrupts the oppressive past—rather than recognize in it the imperial gesture whose license to destroy cultures is grounded in this fantasy of a new beginning. The notion of a radically new beginning, inherited from the major 18th-century revolutions, is inseparable from the formation of a body politic whose members are differentially ruled. This means that those who were dispossessed in the process were made unqualified for reparations, restitution,

and compensations. This disruptive temporality stands at odds with people's modes of negotiating the time of the archive, which are never a matter of aspiring for a new beginning but rather always rejection of and negotiation with the archive's mission of isolating historic actions and foreclosing interactions with them—in effect, the archive's mission of stealing common time by making people's claims disappear for varied durations before they are permitted to reemerge publicly. Co-citizens' concrete actions in and interactions with the archive, their insistence on their right to continue to engage that which was removed from the course of events that shape the common, can be substituted for an abstracted past and an engineered future only in an approach to the archive, exemplified by Derrida's text, that relegates these co-citizens to a place outside the archive, labeling them external users, if it asserts their presence at all. No less than through the documents it preserves, the archive's operation is conducted through the way it rules over governed populations. Consequently, it is not only interest in documents that brings people to interact with archives, but also the way they are ruled by archives, sometimes through documents, sometimes in their absence.

By assuming the guardians' original presence in the archive, before others he conceives as contingent users whose presence is incidental and secondary to its operation, the philosopher makes himself complicit with the guardians, denying the interactions of others, including himself, with the guardians and the rules that often consists of refusing to hand over some documents, smuggling others out of the vicinity of the archive, copying them illicitly and sharing them randomly with others, even selling them for a profit. Yet if one chooses not to ignore these others and instead becomes their companion, rather than relating to the archive as an accomplished place of the law with incontestable archons, the first thing that becomes clear is that the archive is not a place but a threshold. When the archive is seen as a threshold, it is no longer possible to prioritize the *archons'* pretension to be guardians of a consummate sovereignty over the living reality of masses of deprived and dispossessed groups of co-citizens who constantly challenge the law that was made to preserve their dispossession and deprivation. At the archive's entrance, the question *what is an archive*—a place or a threshold, a depository of documents or an apparatus of rule, an accomplished law or a contested violence—is essential if one wants to avoid siding with the guardians and looking inward, thus viewing those dispossessed by the archive solely through their presence in the documents preserved inside it, that is, looking for them under categories

provided by the differential sovereignty the archive was made to serve, categories such as “infiltrators” or “refugees.” Those who continue to be dispossessed by the archive and forced to embody political categories such as “infiltrators” do not expect to find in it a remedy in the form of an apocalyptic leap into a future, such as the one Derrida depicts when he writes, “If we want to know what [the archive] will have meant, we will only know in times to come...a spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive” (Derrida 1997, 36). My Palestinian companion’s refusal to inhabit the figure of the infiltrator is not an expression of a spectral messianicity but rather a rejection of the violence enforced on their bodies and a persistent call that denies their classification in a past detached from what came after and a future made into an *a priori* law whose meaning is still to be revealed.

When this person or his peers sought to return, the category of “infiltrator”—a constitutive element of the differential sovereign regime that was created in their country, which denied their present grievances and relegated them either to a completed past that cannot be reversed or to a future beyond reach—was attached to their bodies. This category was made legible to security agents at borders and frontlines who read in it a set of instructions—interrogate, arrest, harass, expel, or execute—that also became legible to citizens. The violence these agents exercised against those who were until recently their co-citizens eventually produced masses of archival documents that scholars were interpellated to explore. The archive lures scholars to comply with the imperative to look for infiltrators *in* photographs and documents, where their images, manners, habits, and modes of infiltration can be viewed and studied carefully. In the archive, the legibility of the category of the “infiltrator” is acknowledged and confirmed as an object of knowledge belonging to citizens. Entering the archive with my Palestinian companion, the point of departure for my study of the “infiltrator” is that the infiltrator who is allegedly captured in the photos *does not exist*. As I work in his company, he ceases to be an object of knowledge, and together we inhabit a continuous present in which state agents try to force a Palestinian who resists the authority of the state to expel him from his homeland to be an infiltrator. In his company, the interpellation directed at Israeli Jewish citizens to recognize Palestinians in these documents dealing with infiltrators cannot be brought to completion, since it is not about granting him a right to return as an expression of progress, generosity, or humanitarianism, but about recognizing his refusal to be expelled to begin with, as a refusal that has never ceased.

My assumption—that the infiltrator does not exist—is an onto-political assertion that the archive cannot confirm or refute, since the archive is one of the sites where infiltrators are fabricated against their will. Similarly, the existence of “infiltrators” cannot be confirmed or refuted by the presence of photographs in the archive that are classified under this title. Rather than reading such photographs as representations or evidence of infiltrators, I use them as an opportunity to ask: what are the photographic and archival conditions for the fabrication of the infiltrator? Being a product of violence, the infiltrator should not be studied as such—that is, as an object of knowledge that can be tracked down *in* documents—but rather in relation to the citizen who, in being differentiated from the infiltrator, participates in the latter category’s fabrication. Hence, claiming that the infiltrator doesn’t exist is equivalent to the claim that citizenship is a light weapon that coerces people to embody outrageous political categories. The persistence of the figure of the infiltrator, I argue, is evidence of the ongoing violence and dispossession embedded in the institutions of citizenship, archives, and scholarship in places where such a category has been naturalized into the discourse.

Relating to the archive as a document-centered institution driven by concern for a discrete past, as we do when we consult the documents an archive holds, elides the violent military, as well as ideological and political, campaign that must take place inside and outside the archive, often even outside the country, to maintain the perception of the archive as a professional institution in charge of preserving the past. Statements that express shock at the poor maintenance of negatives and documents that have “historical value,” important as these artifacts might be, uphold the idea of the archive as a site of historical preservation rather than as one of the major ruling apparatuses of a regime-made disaster, which operates by secluding forms of life, often through looting and confiscation, and showcasing them as history.

Slightly different from groundbreaking work by scholars such as Gish Amit’s on the robbing of Palestinian libraries, Aron Shai’s work on the involvement of the Israeli Antiquities Authority in the destruction of Palestinian villages, or Rona Sela’s work on looted collections of photographs in the IDF archive, which are based on exposing classified documents stored for decades in archives, I am more interested in the looting that takes place in full sight, in floodlit arenas, even. These public spectacles, involving the private or semi-private seizure of trophies, are essential elements in training Israeli citizens not to see the violence of which they consist.⁴ Rather than acting as one who “unearths” the

looting of Palestinian archives and scientifically reconstructs these events from archival documents that were declassified after an abominable delay and in which one can find plans for looting explicitly written, and thus giving more weight to archival documents than to people's grievances, testimonies, and photographs that are not classified and hence do not have to be discovered, I prefer to explore the regime-made disaster as it manifests itself openly, on the surface, in the aftermath of brutal interventions. Learning from and with Palestinian companions, I cannot fail to perceive the different instantiations of looting as limited to the expropriation of documents, but rather see how these acts of plunder become central to the form of rule that governs us together and imposes limits on our capacity to imagine and inhabit time and space differently than along the dividing lines of differential sovereignty. This companionship becomes a way to engage one another outside the form of our respective roles in the theater of differential sovereignty.

Photographs of looting and looted photographs that no one considered classifying can—and should—teach us about archives, archival procedures and law, and archivists and their field of expertise. Looking at certain photographs from the peak of the war the state of Israel has waged against those it made into “infiltrators,”

namely, photographs taken by soldiers and shared publicly on digital platforms, we can learn about the ways photographs are handled, the body language of expropriation and appropriation, the ceremonies of taking trophy pictures, and the judgments soldiers make on the meanings and uses of photographs, as incriminating evidence of enemy aspirations, as confidential or dangerous material, or as signs of cultural hierarchies and distinctions. The looted materials are sorted according to the military needs, general and particular interests, and short- and long-term PR concerns that guided the soldiers in deciding which documents they would take with them and which they would leave behind, manifested in their lack of interest in them and their poor value. Some recurrent gestures, visible in many of the images taken at sites of looting, but seldom discussed as constitutive of the archive, deserve attention and inclusion in our understanding of what an archive is. Here is a clear gesture of ostentatious disregard for Palestinian archives, the role they play in the social fabric, the labor invested in them, the impact of time on them, their modes of caring for Palestinians' past, for their documents, records, or modes of organization. This sight is the outcome of a series of gestures that directly contradict the image of meticulous archival labor that the Zionist archive foregrounded as the expression of



FIGURE 4. Screenshot, Zionist Archive, Jerusalem, Home Page, courtesy NIA (Non-Imperial Archive).

its mission and mode of operation. [Figure 4: Cluster of four photos, Zionist archive] This dimension of disregard, vandalism, damage, desecration, and havoc, though it coincides with the act of plunder, is not its by-product but rather an operation in itself, having its own goals vis-à-vis citizens and those who are governed as non-citizens. The piles of papers are thrown on the ground in complete disorder, and those that are demonstratively trashed testify to the soldiers' authority to act as archivists, determining the value of documents and deciding on their fate. The destruction is produced according to calculated decisions whose aim is to show publicly that Palestinians are unable to protect their own assets, and thus to provide the justification for a "rescue" operation of records that will be deemed valuable for what is *in* them when brought "back home," with the soldiers. Documents are sorted during (or sometimes after) the military operation by those who are not recognized as archivists but act as such, already within the relevant institutions, as well as by the hands of recognizable archivists and librarians who handle them with the proper professional care and scientific attention. Some materials, with or without army commanders' agreement, are taken out of the national booty and put into the realm of private individuals, serving as personal souvenirs through which family members are socialized into the theater of looting.

Here Is an Archivist

[Figure 5: Photo of a soldier with a pile of documents in his hands] Though he doesn't wear gloves and doesn't look like any of the familiar archivists who welcome us in state archives, there is no reason to deny that much of the material we consult in state archives around the world was procured in a similar way. In his hand he holds a bunch of photographs. Together with several others, this photo was uploaded by former soldiers to the website of their military unit, demonstrating with evident pride that soldiers were authorized to handle photographic collections. The mission of Unit 101 was to pursue "infiltrators" before or after they crossed the border into Israel. Until 1956, this unit was responsible for what were called "retaliation operations," but as can be seen on their website, a considerable component of these operations was the looting of documents, including photographs.⁵ [Figure 6: "Arik and Davidi checking documents and pictures] In this photo, probably taken during a nighttime operation, several soldiers crowd around a number of small photographs held by one soldier. This soldier shows the photographs to his unit-mates and passes some of them over to the soldier



FIGURE 5. The Bnot Yaacov Bridge Customs House, "Customs House Sa'ir Operation," October 22, 1955, the Association for the Paratroopers' Heritage. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



FIGURE 6. "Arik and Davidi checking documents and pictures found at the outpost near the Customs House," the Association for the Paratroopers' Heritage. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



FIGURE 7. A paratrooper holding a kerchief with the picture of Nasser, Al Sab'ha Mission, Operation Volcano, November 2, 1955, the Association for the Paratroopers' Heritage. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

standing next to him. The soldiers whose attention is focused on the photos seem rather amused by what they see. We cannot know what is in these photos, or whether they are personal or official. We can tell, though, that looking together at looted photographs, photos seen without permission from and in the absence of their owners, is a bonding moment, forming the bond of accomplices who have the power to transform a crime into an acceptable act. The soldiers' way of holding their photographic booty arouses reasonable suspicion that not all photographs were deposited in archives, and that some—reaching military offices that found them neither incriminating nor valuable—were trashed instead.

[Figure 7: A paratrooper holding a kerchief with the picture of Nasser] Here is another photo, from "Operation Volcano" at the Sabha outpost in Gaza, in which a soldier poses with his booty, probably after his return from the military operation, based on his posture, the full daylight, and the skyline reminiscent of a Jewish settlement. He presents to the camera Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir's portrait printed at the center of a kerchief as incriminating evidence of the fact that Egyptians, and perhaps even Palestinian refugees in Gaza, adore their leader.⁶ The soldier is indifferent to the kerchief as an intimate possession of its owner or as a popular platform of sharing photography.⁷

The photo-kerchief was not appropriated in the imperial manner that recognizes the value of the looted item and hence enriches its national patrimony. Rather,

it was reduced to its "content," devalued as a sign of a backward culture based on a leader's personality cult and denied its particularities as a specific form of personalized photo-object. To this day, the destruction of decades of photographic activity in Palestine has not ceased to affect conditions for the possibility of creating and researching photography in the entire region. Photographs taken in other places and times by Palestinians, with the intention of documenting the destruction unleashed by Israeli soldiers as they looted archives of documents and photographs, reaffirm this assumption regarding the way photographs are handled when looted.

Obviously, the looting and dispossession of Palestinians who were made "refugees" or "infiltrators" meant economic disaster for Palestinians and benefit for Israeli Jews. As regards culture, however, the connected vessels law did not hold in the same way. The massive ruination, destruction, and appropriation of the infrastructure of culture in Palestine in the late 1940s produced dispossession not solely among Palestinians—what was lost was not exclusively Palestinian but common, as culture is often produced. Jews were also dispossessed of the cultural infrastructure of a mixed society of which they had been a part, as well as their own past in Palestine, a past that became identified solely with Arabs, since Israel imposed itself as representative of the Jews and in opposition to Palestine.⁸

[Figure 8: Jaffa Street, Jerusalem—Al Quds, 1898–1902—taken by the photographers of the photography department of the American Colony headed by Elisha Meyers] The lovely street captured in a famous photo from the collection of the American Colony was densely inhabited by numerous photographers' studios—those of Militad Savvides, Boulos Meo, Elia Studio, Khalil Raad, Garvad Krikorian who worked with David Sabunji of Jaffa, Jacob Ben Dov, and others—animated sites where diverse types of encounters and activities took place.⁹ Alongside these studios, there were photography stores such as Photo Prisma, Photo Europa, Ganan, and Abraham Yehezkeili.¹⁰ This is one of the major sites where much of the history of early photographic activity in Palestine took place: an urban open-ended space where many photographers had their studios, and persons came by to have their photos taken or to buy those of others, and distant spectators acted and interacted according to variegated protocols that they shaped and adopted. In a dense, fruitful, and challenging urban fabric, frequented by at least 1,000 people each day, male and female professionals labored together as operators of cameras, assistants, those preoccupied with lighting, those who developed the negatives and those who printed them, those who retouched photographs, and others who



FIGURE 8. Jaffa Street, Jerusalem—Al Quds, 1898–1902—taken by the photographers of the photography department of the American Colony headed by Elisha Meyers [from the glass negative], courtesy of the G. Eric and Edith Matson photo collection, Library of Congress Print and Photography Department, Washington, DC (the photo is a part of the photograph album of Jaffa–Jerusalem 1898–1900, American Colony in Jerusalem collection, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem).

designed the space with accessories to accommodate different photographed persons' taste and helped them find the right dress.¹¹ Those spaces were frequented by collectors and travelers, tourists and local clients, photographed persons of all kinds who came to buy photographs and postcards of themselves and of others, of beloved or exotic places and varied landscapes. This street and the entire neighborhood were the beating heart of the photographic field of Palestine. A ten-minute walk away from there were the studios of Rassa, Za'rur, and Hana Safieh, as well as the American Colony studio.¹²

The activity of these photographers combined studio work and a fascinating documentation project of Palestine as it was undergoing political, cultural, and social development. With time, the drawers and shelves of each of these studios contained a rich archive of photographs of life in Palestine and a unique record of a vivid local photographic culture. From our perspective today, it is tempting to say that a mixture of ethnic and national groups had been formed by means of photographic activity. However, a more accurate historical description would be that, in this area of Jerusalem, photographers, photographed persons, and spectators mingled without conceiving of themselves in total

opposition to others. The binary division of the world into Arabs and Jews was not operative and certainly not absolute, and photographers, for example, were known by their names, advertised on the street signs, and their geographical provenance: Armenian, Safadi, or Jerusalemite. The camera enabled them to be attracted by or remain oblivious to ethnic and national origins—certainly not to recognize in them a commanding law. These forms of identification did not limit or subsume their actions and interactions with others—whether with the photographed persons caught in the lens, the clients who patronized the shops, or, certainly, those with whom they shared a passion for photography.¹³

Following the July 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem by the Etzel (Irgun) Jewish underground militia, the staff of the American Colony studio feared for the thousands of photographs created in the colony and sent about 20,000 negatives to the United States, thus saving them from brutal extinction, looting, and appropriation.¹⁴ Since 1949, this possibility of a mixed photography in Palestine that is not determined by the power relations imposed by the political regime based on a differential rule has been destroyed. Palestinians who opposed the partition of Palestine were not represented in the legal agreements achieved between

Jordan and the State of Israel, where technical slips turned this area—the locus of the genesis of photographic activity in Palestine—into no-man’s-land, disputed territory. Even though neither side—Israel or Jordan—was authorized to control it or intervene there, “the line of houses in the no-man’s-land, on both sides of Jaffa Street was ruined.”¹⁵ In the photograph taken by Werner Brown in 1951, the buildings where the photographers’ studios and stores were located are already collapsed.¹⁶ No one claimed responsibility for the ruination, nor for the looting of the vast and invaluable photographic archives. Later, in David Kroyanker’s book, taking up all of half a line, one can read that “demolition crew members of the Israeli army blast abandoned houses in the city, from Jaffa Gate to the Fast Hotel.”¹⁷ In 1967, when Israel conquered the eastern part of Jerusalem, it completed the erasure of this area. The brutal transformation of Palestine into rubble was motivated by a total disregard for the world created there and a desire of the militant faction of Zionism to render Palestine Jewish. Here on Jaffa Street, intentionally ruined, the invaluable fabric of 100 years of photography in Palestine as a practice in which photographers, photographed persons, and spectators participated was extinguished.

What was destroyed in the violence of the late 1940s was much more than singular studios of talented photographers, now being discovered and rescued from concealed military basements.¹⁸ We still cannot know how large these looted accessible collections are and how much was destroyed or is still concealed. Whoever claims to know is misleading, since they can only repeat military information shaped by considerations foreign to a civil logic of archives. Additional Israeli archives might enjoy parts of these collections and are complicit not only in the crime of looting but in the crime of violently differentiating access to the materials along ethnic lines. The exclusion of Palestinians is what impedes the collapse of the hall of mirrors in which Jewish Israelis are trapped, viewing infinitely reflected the point of view violently imposed by differential sovereignty. Very little is known of these photographic collections in comparison to the number of studios and the intense activity that encouraged photographers and traders to open studios and stores next to each other in this quarter.

The ruination of the non-partitioned photographic field that was active in Palestine until 1948 is imprinted, I argue, on any photograph that is produced in what became Israel, even when no traces are visible within the borders of the photographic frame. It can be reconstructed from the limits of what could be seen, studied, or said, who can participate in the telling, and how far and how much these constraints can be pushed away.

Infiltrators cannot exist anywhere except in the archive, preferably in Israeli archives, and cannot persist there unless Israeli Jews collaborate in their fabrication. In all other places where “infiltrators” could be looked for, their presence was short-lived. They were either killed and eliminated or returned to their “proper” place—that is, refugee camps—where they stopped being infiltrators, but continue to reveal the illegitimacy of the Israeli regime. Hence, the study of the figure of the infiltrator cannot but be the study of his pair, the figure of the Israeli citizen, whose existence is predicated upon the infiltrator’s existence. With my companion, we experiment in studying the commons from outside the roles assigned to us by the same differential sovereign regime and through a plethora of other modalities of interactions than those prompted by these roles.

Notes

¹ On labor camps, see several photos in Azoulay (2011) and al-Saadi (2014).

² To this date, no research has been conducted on the reasons those women either agreed or refused, nor has any investigation been made of the connection between their decision to leave and whether one of their loved ones had been slaughtered in Tantura.

³ For more on the images taken during this expulsion, see Azoulay (2011).

⁴ See Amit (2011), Shai (2002), and Sela (2009).

⁵ See this website to which soldiers uploaded their photos from “retaliation operations” in the 1950s, from which I picked two photos to show the ubiquity of looting. Accessed December 13, 2016, <http://www.202.org.il/Pages/tagmul/albom.php>.

⁶ Numerous are the variations of this type of photograph with Arab leaders, disseminated publicly as incriminating material. See some examples in Gepner (1957). The Hebrew title reads “war” instead of “campaign.”

⁷ A similar kerchief is stored in the Imperial War Museum, where its caption reads: “A patriotic and inspirational propaganda scarf produced in Egypt in 1956. It bears Nasser’s portrait and scenes of the improvements and prosperity he planned for Egypt, including the Aswan High Dam.” Scarf, Egyptian, Imperial War Museum, catalogue number 10001, accessed March 23, 2015, www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30089765.

⁸ An expression of the perversion that such division—Israel for the Jews and Palestine for the Palestinians, that is, Arabs—has generated may be seen in the digital picture collection created lately by the University of Haifa. Although its index does not disclose any detail that might lead one to

assume that some of these materials were looted, the collection is named "Historical Images of the Land of Israel," which is another form of looting. The archive of photos from and of Palestine is cleansed of Palestine from the moment one enters it. The text greeting the visitor instructs: "The Land of Israel has always attracted professional and amateur photographers who perpetuate it in pictures. Over the years private persons as well as various archives and institutions have preserved collections of rare photographs documenting its unique geographical and human landscapes." The archive is available online at lib.haifa.ac.il/collections/isratage/index.php/he (accessed February 27, 2015).

⁹ On photographic activity in Palestine in the first half of the 20th century, see, for example btd.palestine-studies.org, Khaldi (1984), Nassar (2005), Raz (2015), and Sela (2000).

¹⁰ See Kroyanker (2005, 57).

¹¹ On the vivacity of the street and the number of passersby, see Kroyanker (2005).

¹² Since the late 19th century and up until the late 1940s, many photographers worked in the vicinity, among them Furman Baldwin, Elijah Meyers, and Lewis Larsson, to mention just a few. On the American Colony photographers, see Powers (2009). On photographers in Jerusalem, see Raz (2003).

¹³ On this mixture, see filmed interviews held by Akram Zaatar with Palestinian photographers (*Projects 100: Akram Zaatar*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 2013), as well as Raz (2003).

¹⁴ On the fate of the collection and its donation to the Library of Congress in the 1950s, see the library's website at www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/colony.html.

¹⁵ See Kroyanker (2005, 78).

¹⁶ Through a study of the famous American Colony photograph and this photograph taken by Werner Braun in 1951, Guy Raz identified the rubble of this photographers' quarter.

¹⁷ See Kroyanker (2005, 357). This destruction was not part of war but of constituent violence whose purpose was to preserve the outcome of violence as a fait accompli. For more on this type of violence, see Azoulay (2011).

¹⁸ On the looting of a house in Jerusalem, see Al-Hout (2011, 15–22). On the looting of the archives of 'Ali Za'rur, see Karpel (2008). On Khalil Raad, see Sela's catalogue of the exhibition at the Nahum Gutman Museum in Tel Aviv: Sela (2010). See also Tamari (2013), which is based on Lebanese Archives.

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