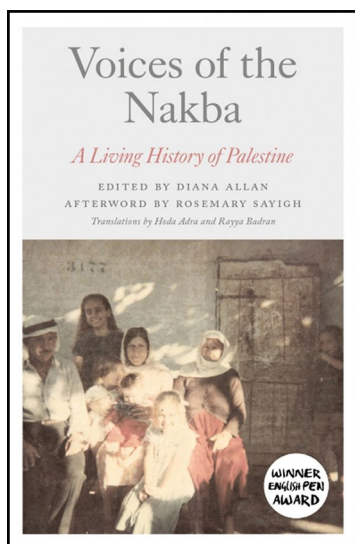


## RECENT BOOKS

***Voices of the Nakba: A Living History of Palestine***, edited by Diana Allan. London: Pluto Press, 2021. 368 pages. \$23.00 paper, \$12.00 e-book.

Reviewed by Yara Hawari



Diana Allan's edited volume *Voices of the Nakba: A Living History of Palestine* is an emotive collection of chapters that demonstrate how Palestinians continue to be living conduits of their own history. Each chapter is followed by raw transcripts of interviews conducted by Allan and Mahmoud Zeidan in the early 2000s. For the last decade, a huge project involving the digitization of these interviews and many others has taken place at the American University of Beirut. The database is called the Palestinian Oral History Archive (<https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/>). It is now possible to trawl through over one thousand hours of audio-visual recordings in the database. This book offers an analysis and contextualization of a selection of these interviews from various scholars working on Palestinian history. Beautifully woven together, these chapters highlight the enduring importance of oral history in the Palestinian struggle against erasure.

Indeed, oral history has long played a key role in the Palestinian historical narrative, but it took a more prominent role following the 1948 Nakba. Palestinian historian Nur Masalha's well-known description of oral history as an "emergency science" explains how it has been used to substitute much of the material forms of knowledge that have been consecutively destroyed or looted by the Zionist settler-colonial project.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, this emergency science developed as a bottom-up body of knowledge to challenge the hegemonic Zionist narrative. As Salman Abu Sitta explains in chapter 8, this is a narrative that claims Palestine prior to 1948 was *terra nullius*: a land without a people. Yet Palestinians themselves are evidence of the fallacy of that statement. Thousands of their recorded testimonies tell us of a vibrant Palestinian society that existed before the Zionist occupation and a people in the throes of national awakening, thus showing the importance of oral history to the Palestinian narrative and how it cannot be understated.

While oral history is the oldest form of historical record, written documentation is still favored as more authoritative and legitimate. Contemporary oral history scholarship has challenged this notion, asserting that oral sources must not be marginalized given that they have the potential to produce a more social history or "a history built around people."<sup>2</sup> For a long time, the written record was only concerned with political narratives and histories divided chronologically according to reigns and dynasties. Documentation of ordinary people prior to the latter half of the twentieth century was limited to registers of births, deaths, and marriages, in other words, empirical and legal statistics. Other documents based on oral accounts, such as diaries and letters, were few and far between during this period.<sup>3</sup> The latter half of the twentieth century saw the popularization of oral history, particularly following the invention of the portable tape recorder. In a seminal article

published in 1977, feminist oral historian Sherna Berger Gluck claimed that “women are creating a new history [and] affirming that our everyday lives are history.”<sup>4</sup>

As Gluck argues one of the many strengths of oral history is its ability to capture a history that is textured and emotive. The first section of the volume highlights this texture with its intricate details of Palestinian life prior to British rule. As anthropologist Rochelle Davis notes, one woman, Hasna, is particularly careful to detail items and practices in her interview that she thinks would be unfamiliar to her interviewer—who was presumably from a younger generation (29). Hasna’s detailed recollection speaks to the urgency felt by those of the Nakba generation to preserve all aspects of life before 1948. The richness of oral history is also emphasized in chapter 2 by historian Sherene Seikaly, who explains that these testimonies “teach us the value of embracing a multiplicity of historical forms, both formal and informal ... [they] give us powerful windows onto Palestinian history, as well as the rich and shifting relationships people forge with memory and the past” (46). Indeed, this volume shares many histories and reminds us that oral history relies on people’s perceptions of the past and the ways in which they choose to remember past events. Scholar Lena Jayyusi’s analysis of diverging testimonies in chapter 11 also illuminates this. Comparing the testimonies of two Palestinians from Lydda and Ramla, Jayyusi explains that divergence “speaks to class location and the different choices, opportunities and affinities it affords” (239). In this way, oral history presents us with multiple perspectives that may have otherwise been lost in written documentation.

Yet while different recollections and perspectives are an invaluable contribution to the body of Palestinian oral history, so too are the reiterations and repetitions that cut across multiple intersections of Palestinian society. For example, the depiction of life before the Zionist occupation as an idyllic, often rural, existence is a common theme of memories and testimonies. In chapter 1, Davis explains that “those who lived it often contribute to its romanticisation, usually because they faced impossibly difficult circumstances after the Nakba, when they were made refugees” (28). This romanticized and often nostalgic sentiment has a substantial presence in both the individual and collective memories of Palestine before the Nakba. Many will describe Palestine pre-Nakba as a country of rolling hills, bountiful fields, and harmonious villages. While certain aspects might be an accurate depiction, nostalgia often omits the less attractive aspects of the past, such as food shortages and village rivalries. Far from being redundant, these nostalgic recollections can tell us much about what people are missing from the present. Having been dispossessed of their lands, describing them in such idyllic ways speaks to the desire for them to be returned. Nostalgia is thus not only retrospective in its romanticization of the past, but it can also be seen as prospective or an articulation for a better future.

Indeed, oral history does not adhere to temporal and chronological orders in the same way as written historical records. Memories are not stagnant stores of information but rather ever changing according to the present. French historian Pierre Nora describes memories as a “perpetually actual phenomenon.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, while memories are always changing, they speak to the moment in which they are articulated. We see this clearly in many of the testimonies, for example, where interviewees add justifications to their memories, as if knowing they would be perceived differently in the present. In historian Alex Winder’s chapter on the British Mandate Palestinian police force, one of the interviewees, ‘Umar Shihada, states that “it was better to be employed and gain a salary than to remain in the fields throughout the year ... we were surviving. That’s how it was then” (103). The interviewee predicts the hostility that might be directed toward him for

working with the British Mandate administration. Laila Parsons explains this in the context of interviewer-interviewee dynamic: “Their words are also elicited in response to the interviewer’s questions ... partly because many of the interviewers’ questions emerge from a much later understanding of the Nakba. All three men struggle to redirect the questions away from current portrayals of the Nakba and insist on their lived experience of the catastrophe” (213). These dynamics between interviewer and interviewee are an important facet to oral history methodologies. Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli’s work on the practice of using interviews and the role of the researcher and the research participant illuminates this well. Portelli explains that oral history is a collaboration between the researcher and the person providing the account.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is a process that can be fraught with varying power imbalances including age, race, class, and gender, as noted by Palestinian oral history veteran Rosemary Sayigh in the afterword (299). We thus have to understand the articulation of memories not only as a description of the past but is constantly being shaped by contemporary dynamics.

This is demonstrated rather poignantly when some interviewees speak with hindsight, placing their memories in a specific temporal mode. For example, Fifi’s testimony in Seikaly’s chapter: “Had we sensed any problems, it would have surely been better for us. But we didn’t ...” (51). This particularly common sentiment of “if only” is indicative of blurred temporal boundaries and of an unfinished past. Increasingly, the Nakba is no longer understood as a historical event, but rather an ongoing process of erasure where the past seeps into the present. In this reality of continuous and cyclical trauma, boundaries between different temporalities are blurred. This blurring is often reflected in memories and recollections, leaving room for traditional historians to dismiss oral history for its lack of accuracy and subjectivities. This positionality not only fails to acknowledge the many subjectivities in written documentation, but it also fails to see the ultimate strength of oral history—that it can tell us about the past, present, and future all at once.

Through oral history, Palestinians have come to understand who they were before Zionist settler colonialism and who they might become after it. Indeed, oral history is one of the mightiest tools against erasure. Beyond Palestine, Indigenous people across the world have preserved their stories against colonial erasure through transmission and inherited memories. Describing storytelling as an act of living resistance, scholars Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes state: “Stories become mediums for Indigenous people to both analogize colonial violence and resist it in real ways. A kind of embodied reciprocity exists between a people and their stories ... contrary to liberal notions of stories as depoliticized acts of sharing, we must recognize stories as acts of creative rebellion. Decolonizing the very act of storytelling ...”<sup>7</sup>

This book demonstrates that Palestinian oral history is as relevant today as it ever was. In the book’s afterword, Sayigh details the many oral history projects that have been conducted over the years that have helped us understand the countless facets of the Palestinian struggle and of Palestine itself. Echoing Sium and Ritskes, Sayigh explains that these oral histories “not only restore a vital human perspective to our understanding of the region, but also subvert imperialist hegemony over knowledge and teaching of Middle Eastern history” (300).

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## Endnotes

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2. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.
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4. Sherna Gluck, "What's So Special about Women? Women's Oral History," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346006>.
5. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.
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7. Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes, "Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): v, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/19626/16256>.

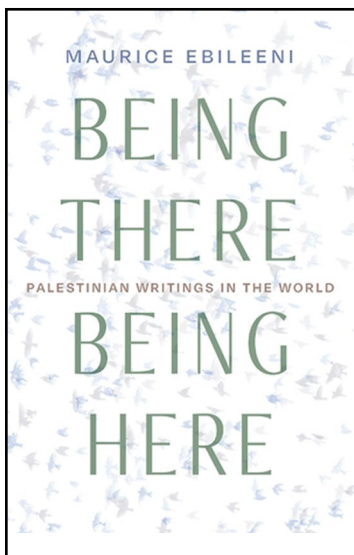
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2022.2156758>



***Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World***, Maurice Ebileeni. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2022. 240 pages. \$75.00 hardcover, \$29.95 paper, \$29.95 e-book.

***Palestinian Citizens in Israel: A History Through Fiction, 1948-2010***, Manar H. Makhoul. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 248 pages. \$125.00 hardcover, \$24.95 paper, \$27.95 e-book.

Reviewed by Liron Mor



What is Palestinian literature? And how does one define "Palestinian," exactly? These are the fundamental questions that implicitly guide two new and exciting studies on Palestinian literature—Manar H. Makhoul's *Palestinian Citizens in Israel: A History Through Fiction, 1948-2010* and Maurice Ebileeni's *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World*. Both authors intentionally seek out an internal prism on Palestinian literature and identity, while also aiming to express local particularities overlooked by previous scholarship. They thus join current efforts in Palestine studies to recenter Palestinian cultures and histories instead of exploring them only in relation to Zionism.

To seek answers to these monumental questions, Makhoul and Ebileeni largely turn to different archives. Makhoul focuses on literature by Palestinian citizens in Israel (his preferred term, with the usual caveats), clustering them into subgroups according to historical stages and