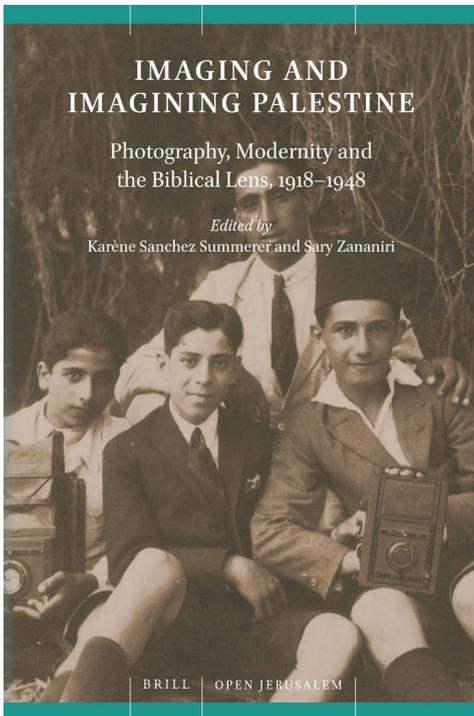


BOOK REVIEW

Archival Imagination and the Photographic History of Palestine

Review by
Nayrouz Abu Hatoum



Karène Sanchez Summerer and Sary Zananiri, eds., *Imaging and Imagining Palestine: Photography, Modernity and the Biblical Lens, 1918–1948*, Foreword by Salim Tamari. Brill, 2021. 432 pp. \$191 (hardback).

Abstract

Imaging and Imagining Palestine takes us to the archive of early Palestinian photography. The book offers a selection of essays on the photographic collection during the British Mandate period in Palestine. The contributors reveal a world known to Palestinians outside the photographic frame. Through unearthing the Palestinian photographic archive, the book curates and visualizes Palestinian life and resistance during the British Mandate and before Israeli colonization. *Imaging and Imagining Palestine* demands the viewers of the photographic archive to read these visuals through an Indigenous framework that insists on seeing the agency of Palestinians in these photographic encounters. Indigenizing photography allows us to take risks in adopting a radical imagination that invites us to think about the liberatory aspect of documenting, archiving, and worldmaking for Palestinians that could have been realized had history taken another turn.

Keywords

Photography; archives; Palestine; British Mandate; Indigenizing photography; visual politics; visual sovereignty.

Imaging and Imagining Palestine offers a unique selection of essays about the potential of the archival imagination in Palestine. The book examines photography in Palestine during the British Mandate period (1918–48),

which was remarkably rich in events that altered the Palestinian political and social landscape, from the end of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of British rule to burgeoning Zionist colonization and the Arab revolt of 1936–39. The contributions thus unearth a world known in the Palestinian collective memory through oral history and texts, yet one whose visual representation might not be as thoroughly familiar.

One main task of the book, edited by Karène Sanchez Summerer and Sary Zananiri, is to expose Western colonial and Orientalist attachments to Palestine as a biblical landscape. Emerging colonial powers projected a biblical image and imagination of Palestine to render it not only legible but also governable and colonizable. As the collection of essays brilliantly shows, in Western colonial imaginations Palestinians carried the burden of representing biblical ways of living while being objectified and deemed outside progress and modernity. Beyond this, *Imaging and Imagining Palestine* proposes a decolonial understanding of the lives of Palestinians captured in varied photographic settings and kept in multiple archives, offering a thriving Palestinian presence juxtaposed against dominant narratives that erase them from history. Overall, the book teaches us that although European or American photographers dominated the visual scene in Mandate Palestine, the presence of Palestinian social, political, and cultural life forms should dominate our reading and viewing of such photographic archives. Palestinians were not passive objects or scenery in these photographic encounters.

Summerer and Zananiri have divided the book into three sections. Section one's essays focus on different photographic archives and their relationship to missionary, political, and religious institutions. Abigail Jacobson discusses the American Colony's photographic archive of the Jerusalem Orphanage; Inger Marie Okkenhaug writes on the Swedish Jerusalem Society's archives of the Swedish School in Jerusalem; Norig Neveu and Karène Sanchez Summerer focus on the Dominicans' Photographic Collection; and Issam Nasser addresses Palestinian family albums and vernacular photographic collections. These photographic projects illustrate the diverse religious and political missionary interests in Palestine, while tracing socio-cultural and political transformation in Palestinian society. As evident in this section, photographs of Palestinians circulated widely outside these institutions to the United States or Europe as a form of proof that Palestinians, children specifically, were undergoing "modernization" through Western education and discipline.

The second section focuses on photographers' life stories and journeys, emphasizing positionality and intention in the production of photographs. Rona Sela examines the life and work of the Lebanese-born Arab Jerusalemite Khalil Ra'd; Rachel Lev takes on the album diary of the American Colony's John D. Whiting; and Sary Zananiri turns his attention to the work of the Dutch photographer Frank Scholten. The third section proposes to reconsider and reconceptualize the importance of Indigenous perspectives in the production of photographs in Palestine. Stephen Sheehi offers a decolonizing methodology and epistemology of archival photography in Palestine. Yazan Koptiy examines the *National Geographic* archives of Mandatory Palestine to insert his own family memory into the images and locate lost Palestinians' lived knowledge;

and Nadi Abusaada addresses the role of German and British aerial photography in understanding Palestinian urban spaces and the colonial attempts at governing them.

Reading the essays in *Imaging and Imagining Palestine* and looking at the curated photographic selection, one can feel how the inheritance of past uncertainty and loss made its way into Palestine's future after Zionist colonization. At the same time, building on Gil Hochberg's recent book *Becoming Palestine*, one realizes how the photographic archives might orient us toward an imagination for a future liberated Palestine.¹ The potential of such imagination is exemplified particularly in the essays of Nassar, Kopty, Sheehi, and Abusaada, and Zananiri's introduction. They call on viewers to do the work of rereading the photographic archive through an Indigenous framework that insists on the agency of Palestinians depicted in the photographs and of Arab and Armenian Palestinian photographers. Indigenizing photography allows us to take risks in adopting a radical imagination that invites us to think about the liberatory aspect of documenting, archiving, and world making for Palestinians that could have been realized had history taken another turn. Yet I found it somewhat perplexing, given *Imaging and Imagining Palestine*'s efforts to center the Palestinian narrative, as clearly articulated by Zananiri's introduction, that the discussion on Indigenizing photography is pushed to the last section. Starting with these texts could inaugurate the framework and the tone for the rest of the book.

Further, if Indigenizing photography and Indigenizing visual politics are significant frameworks for understanding the history of Palestine during the period of British colonization, then it is crucial to engage with Indigenous methodologies and literature in other but related settler-colonial and colonial contexts. There is ample scholarship in the U.S settler colonial context that resituates and makes dynamic Indigenous use of and engagement with various visual representations through cinematic and photographic archives. Indigenous Tuscarora scholar Jolene Rickard's concept of "visual sovereignty," for example, offers a way to look back at these archival materials and observe how Palestinians, as photographed subjects or as photographers, used photography to assert their political and cultural attachment to their community or the land.² In other words, visual sovereignty offers Indigenous scholars a methodology to revisit Indigenous visual archives and producers' legacy in order to establish a framework that centers Indigenous agency in the making of the visual landscape. Specifically, producers or actors have made Indigenous lives visible on celluloid, pushing against settler-colonial representations of Indigenous peoples. Further, colonial photographers and photographic archival projects in Palestine were also involved with other colonial projects. The book describes the journeys of some prominent figures in producing the photographic archive, such as Chicago residents Horatio Gates Spafford and Anna T. Spafford, who migrated from the United States to Palestine to help establish the American Colony in Jerusalem and may well have transferred settler-colonial sensibilities from one colonial space to another.

While *Imaging and Imagining Palestine* clearly identifies the role of Orientalism and the framework of bibliofication, to use Nassar's term, in understanding the photographic projects in Palestine, there is a missed opportunity in making linkages

between transnational colonial and settler-colonial projects that enable seamless transgressions and mobility of American or European settlers from one colony to another. Still, in laying the groundwork for such connections and in speaking to interdisciplinary scholars and a wider readership, *Image and Imagining Palestine* makes relevant and urgent contributions to such disciplines as Palestine studies, history, photography, visual studies, anthropology, urban studies, and gender studies.

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Endnotes

- 1 Gil Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
- 2 Jolene Rickard, "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (April 2017): 81–84.