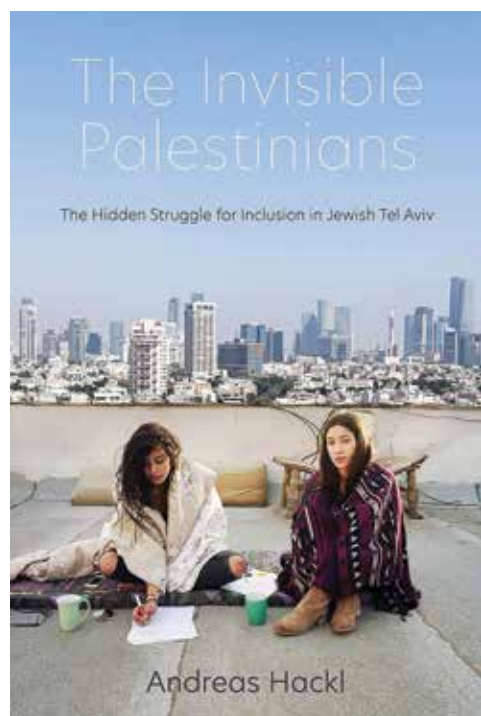


REVIEW

Beyond Memory Activism: Palestinian Life in the Colonial City

Review by Yara Sa'di-Ibraheem

Andreas Hackl, *The Invisible Palestinians: The Hidden Struggle for Inclusion in Jewish Tel Aviv* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022). 230 pages. \$70.00 cloth; \$28.00 paperback; \$27.99 ebook.



Abstract

Andreas Hackl explores in his book, *The Invisible Palestinians: The Hidden Struggle for Inclusion in Jewish Tel Aviv*, the reality of Palestinians who, for a variety of reasons, live in Tel Aviv. Hackl argues that the apparent access granted to Palestinians to partake in the universal dimensions of urban life is contingent upon their continuous political and collective invisibility, which he labels “immersive invisibility.” The author explores the manifestations of this bargain in seven chapters, displaying different groups of Palestinians and aspects of their lives. These include students, workers, and other groups of residents who often live in the city temporarily, some to benefit from the educational and occupational opportunities it offers, while others in search of personal freedom and anonymity. However, as some interviewees’ narratives reveal, access to these benefits is conditioned on their invisibility, an issue that has not been previously explored.

Keywords:

Tel Aviv; Jaffa; Palestinians; conditional inclusion; immersive invisibility; Indigenous space; settler-colonial cities.

Pre-1948 Tel Aviv is frequently portrayed in scholarly literature as the emblematic city of Jewish settlers that embodies the aspirations of a new, urbanized Jewish society and serves as a symbol of the Zionist project’s success and a model of capitalist modernity. It is often labeled the “White City” in contrast to Jaffa, the “Black City”,

reflecting a spatial polarity between settler and native. This duality has only increased since the Nakba in 1948, when Tel Aviv expanded considerably through confiscating the lands of depopulated Palestinian villages surrounding the city. These villages were erased and replaced with Jewish residential neighborhoods, including Tel Aviv University campus and several parks.

In contrast to this prevalent binary representation, Andreas Hackl explores in his book, *The Invisible Palestinians: The Hidden Struggle for Inclusion in Jewish Tel Aviv*, the reality of Palestinians who, for a variety of reasons, live in Tel Aviv. By focusing on this group, he challenges colonial attempts of *urbes nullius*, a term used by Glen Coulthard to refer to urban spaces devoid of Indigenous people's presence. Instead, he views the city as a contested space within which Palestinians struggle to achieve urban citizenship, arguing "that the Palestinians' invisible struggles for inclusion and access in Tel Aviv provide an important complementary perspective on how indigenous peoples use and navigate settler-colonial spaces" (15). Epistemologically, he explores the city through the lived experiences and personal narratives of Palestinian residents – the marginalized "indigenous" others. Rightfully, this approach addresses Palestinians in Tel Aviv as a collective that is systematically denied political expression and is often disregarded in scholarly literature.

Drawing on over two years of ethnographic research conducted between 2012 and 2014, and a follow-up visit in 2017, Hackl critically examines the paradoxical nature of Palestinians' "conditional inclusion" in Tel Aviv, a city that, outwardly, projects a liberal ethos while simultaneously disregards Palestinians' presence. Hackl argues that Palestinian citizenship in Israel represents a form of settler-colonial control, where inclusion functions as a governance tool, and citizenship is used to manage and contain Indigenous people's claims to sovereignty and self-determination. In Tel Aviv, this dynamic is mirrored at the urban level; the apparent access granted to Palestinians to partake in the universal dimensions of urban life is contingent upon their "immersive invisibility," namely, continuous political and collective invisibility in work, education, and leisure among other aspects of life, the same components that Hackl underscores as key factors for urban minority citizenship. Hence, central to his analysis is the notion of the "invisibility bargain," according to which Palestinians' presence in Tel Aviv is premised on their contribution to the city's economy. Thus, they are granted "economic citizenship" as long as they remain "Good Arabs" by maintaining their political and social invisibility as Palestinians.

The author explores the manifestations of this bargain throughout seven chapters, presenting different groups of Palestinians and aspects of their lives. These include students, workers, and other groups of residents who often live in the city temporarily, some to benefit from the educational and occupational opportunities it offers, while others in search of personal freedom and anonymity. However, as some of Hackl's interviewees' narratives reveal, access to these benefits is conditioned on their invisibility.

Many of the Palestinians who come to Tel Aviv do so for work. Palestinian workers in various fields are simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, encountering the city as temporary residents who experience a profound sense of dislocation. For instance,

Palestinian citizens who work as drivers for Israeli bus companies are pulled into Tel Aviv for work while their mobility is confined to their towns. As Omar, a Palestinian bus driver states: “I can’t take part in anything in Tel Aviv. The time is dead, I don’t have any time. And getting a room is too expensive” (26). Likewise, Raed, a Palestinian software engineer, commutes daily from Nablus in the occupied West Bank to Tel Aviv through checkpoints and settlements, as his permit does not allow him to stay overnight. This dual perspective of citizens and non-citizens underscores how Israel’s political economy differentially distributes mobility, by creating a complex web of limited pathways into the city. These pathways, in turn, reinforce the invisibility, disconnection, and dispersion of Palestinians within the urban space.

The other major draw of Palestinians into the city is education. This is addressed through the experiences of Palestinian students at Tel Aviv University, an institution built on the land of the destroyed Palestinian village of al-Shaykh Muwannis. Despite the university’s material and discursive erasure of Palestinian history, many Palestinian students conceive the university as a site of political awakening and collective activism. However, they also encounter, often for the first time, the realities of this conditional inclusion. Hackl explores how, after being politically active on campus, these students employ strategies of invisibility and mimicry to navigate through their exclusions upon their graduation to find employment. This balancing act intertwines with additional tensions that they experience between the city and the anonymity and freedom it offers in contrast to their hometowns’ sociability.

While Tel Aviv University might tolerate some degree of Palestinian political or cultural expression, the broader city imposes a stark contradiction between accepting individual professional success and disallowing public expression of Palestinian social life. This dissonance leads to a collective sense of anonymity, described by one middle-class Palestinian professional as: “We are anonymous together” (73). This collective anonymity also facilitates the journey of Palestinians through the city’s nightlife and social scene, particularly the hidden spaces where Palestinian identity is both expressed and concealed, from underground bars hosting Arabic DJ nights to private apartment gatherings. Hackl explores the additional layers of invisibility faced by single Palestinian women and members of the LGBTQ community. For example, he depicts the experience of a Palestinian woman who initially tries to integrate into the LGBTQ scene but soon discovers the painful process of co-optation and erasure of Palestinian identity that often accompanies such attempts; eventually she had to choose to be either a Palestinian or a member of the Israeli LGBTQ community. Her rejection of these pressures reflects the broader struggle of the Palestinians to maintain their cultural and political identity in a city that demands their invisibility. Other experiences reveal that participating in Tel Aviv’s social life often requires Palestinians to quietly accept the heavily politicized hegemonic Israeli entertainment culture.

Hackl also provides access to the experiences of Palestinian workers in the cultural sector by focusing on three Palestinian artists living and working in Tel Aviv: contemporary artist Anisa Ashkar, writer Raji Bathish, and actor and musician Mira

‘Awad. Although Indigeneity is not a central theme in all their work, their status as Palestinians shapes their artistic and personal lives in countless ways. While art has the potential to foster Indigenous resistance in some colonial contexts, the interviewees indicate that the liberal Israeli art scene often suppresses radical alternatives. In this context, art becomes a form of expression that, although not overtly political, navigates and reveals invisible aspects of identity, as it is used by Palestinian artists as a personal and alternative means of resistance. Hackl unveils how these artists navigate the tension between creative expression and the realities of living in Tel Aviv. In the case of Bathish, the situation of experiencing “exile at home,” facing both linguistic and political alienation, and continuously rejecting the role of a “token Arab” led him to leave the city. As he asserts: “It’s very hard to live in a place that is afraid of the language you think in” (129).

Hackl also gives attention to more explicit political dimensions, addressing various phenomena, such as protests, public events, and guided tours on the hidden Palestinian history of Jaffa and Tel Aviv. These activities disrupt the invisibility of Palestinians, but they are often met with strong public reactions. Yet, despite their focus on national issues and historical narratives, these efforts do not fully address the current realities of Palestinians in Tel Aviv. In addition, he explores the complexities in the relationships between local Palestinian Jaffawis and Palestinian residents in Tel Aviv from other regions. Jaffawi political activists expressed concern that middle-class Palestinian residents of Tel Aviv often view Jaffa romantically and are detached from its deep-rooted problems, such as violence and a housing crisis. They use the city merely as a gentrified leisure space, ignoring the systemic neglect by the authorities and the conditions the residents of Jaffa endure. Hackl builds on these themes and offers a critical ethnography of the idea that Palestinians’ pragmatic immersion in Tel Aviv can lead to civil coexistence. He shows how the city’s liberal façade often crumbles during Israel’s wars with the Palestinians such as the 2014 war on Gaza, as well as on Israeli national commemoration days. On such occasions, latent tensions and hostilities are exposed, shattering the illusion of depoliticized urban relations. Hackl concludes that the forced invisibility of Palestinians in Tel Aviv is unsustainable and represents a flawed approach to coexistence.

Narrating Tel Aviv through Palestinians’ personal stories can be a powerful method for decolonizing research on settler-colonial urban spaces. By centering Indigenous experiences of living within the colonial city, this book decolonizes the binary approach of “white” versus “black” cities. Moreover, while memory activism challenges dominant narratives intent on Palestinian erasure, it is often limited to the commemoration of Palestinian depopulated villages and does not address contemporary realities of Palestinians or offer a future vision beyond the demand for the return of the Palestinian refugees. Hackl’s approach goes beyond memory activism in studying contemporary Palestinian life in the colonial city. With much of the existing literature focused on historical processes of elimination, *The Invisible Palestinians*’s focus on contemporary structural power relations in settler-colonial cities fills an important gap.

The book's focus on current realities could have been enhanced by further situating them in their social, economic, and historical context. This could have provided a deeper understanding of particular issues raised in the book, such as Palestinian students in Israeli universities, middle-class living in Tel Aviv, and the transformations in Jaffa society over the past few decades. Such a social-historical contextualization could have facilitated an understanding of the scale and root of some events and phenomena mentioned. Nevertheless, the book offers worthwhile theoretical advances in the geography of settler-colonial cities and a profound critique of the intersection between urban life and settler colonialism. By providing valuable insights into the lived experiences of Palestinians in Tel Aviv, Hackl points to the broader implications of these experiences for examining urban citizenship in settler-colonial settings.

Yara Sa'di-Ibraheem holds a PhD in human geography and is currently a Polonsky postdoctoral fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. She is interested in Indigenous geographies and time, settler colonialism, neoliberal urbanism, and the social-political aspects of infrastructure in colonial settings.