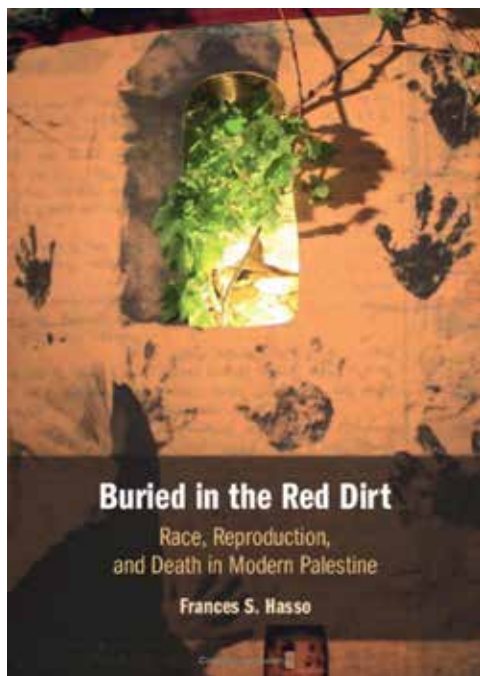


## BOOK REVIEW

# Life, Death, and Reproductive Desire in Mandate and Present-Day Palestine

Review by Nadim Bawalsa

Frances Hasso, *Buried in the Red Dirt: Race, Reproduction, and Death in Modern Palestine*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. 288 pages. Open access: online at [doi.org/10.1017/9781009072854](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009072854) (accessed 17 August 2023).



## Abstract

In this review of Frances Hasso's new book, *Buried in the Red Dirt: Race, Reproduction, and Death in Modern Palestine*, Nadim Bawalsa highlights the book's contributions to multidisciplinary areas of study of Palestine and Palestinians. At once a historical investigation of British and Zionist health, life, and death records during the Mandate, Hasso also offers analysis of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish legal positions on reproductive practices, including abortion practices, as well as unprecedented access to Palestinian women's intimate sexual, reproductive, and non-reproductive desires through her ethnographic fieldwork in Palestine and neighboring countries. Bawalsa stresses how Hasso's methodological and analytical ingenuity brings to light hitherto unchallenged assumptions about Palestinian women's past and present reproductive choices, refuting in the process the idea that Palestinians have been engaged in demographic competition with the Jews – an anxiety, Hasso argues, that was in fact manifested in British and Zionist racist eugenicist obsessions during the Mandate period and throughout the Israeli Zionist settler colonization of Palestine. Drawing on a multitude of sources, including archival records, interviews, literary and artistic analysis, as well as on African diasporic, Black feminist, and queer scholarship, Hasso's book offers altogether new approaches to studying Palestine and Palestinians, both past and present.

## Keywords

Mandate Palestine; reproduction; death; desire; demographic anxiety; abortion; midwifery; eugenics; race; settler colonialism.

One doesn't often come by a book about modern Palestinian history that is not primarily concerned with 1948, Zionism, or nationalism. It is equally uncommon to come by a book on modern Palestinian history that doesn't rely primarily on British and Israeli archives or the Palestinian press. And it is perhaps most unusual of all to come by a book on modern Palestinian history – or any history, for that matter – that is also a contemporary ethnography. Frances Hasso's *Buried in the Red Dirt* is a rare book of this kind, an impressive achievement that speaks to Hasso's unconventional approach and multidisciplinary background.

*Buried in the Red Dirt* is unique not only in the breadth of source material and methodologies Hasso employs “to deepen [our] understanding of Palestinian daily life” (3) from the British Mandate to the present day, but in the themes and ideas she invites readers to ponder: life, death, and power; settler colonialism, race, and eugenics; and reproduction, breastfeeding, and abortion, among others. Hasso moves beyond narratives rooted in Palestinian political history, centered on seminal events like 1948 and 1967, to examine “nonevents such as the structural maldistribution of illness, disease, injury, hunger, and early death because of colonial, racial, and class status, as well as the sexual inequalities that allocate power, resources, pain, and pleasure unevenly.” Reading sources about “nonevents” and “ordinary” Palestinians, for both what is recorded and what is omitted, and divulging private aspects of her interlocutors' lives that most would likely never broach, Hasso offers an altogether new account of the Palestinian lived experience, past and present. The result, as she puts it in the coda, is to remind the reader that “extraction of labor and life are the very grounds of imperialism and colonialism and are always legitimated by racializing the abjected group” (244).

That British Mandate and Zionist Israeli health and reproductive policies toward Palestinians were and are fundamentally racialized may not be new or surprising information, but Hasso takes it a step further: controlling Palestinian life and death over a century indicates British and Zionist demographic anxieties and obsessions. In fact, as Hasso shows, the stereotype that Palestinians procreate to demographically defeat the Jews is nothing but a projection of Zionist fears. For Palestinians, Hasso states matter-of-factly, “commitment to sustaining kin ties” following decades of exile, dispersal, and massacres, “differs from having babies for the purpose of demographically competing with Jews” (214). Hasso uses interviews with Palestinian women, as well as Palestinian literature and film over the last few decades, to show that “Palestinian creative work has been more likely to express pessimistic futurities, dwelling on the grounds of social and biological death rather than reproduction” (242).

Following an extensive and weighty introduction that reflects the author's diverse scholarly interests and priorities, Hasso's first two chapters dive into British health records during the Mandate to expose “British developmental colonialism and welfare austerity” in their policies toward sick and healthy Palestinian infants. This she contrasts with Zionist organizations' investment in Jewish health during the same period, showing not only the clear imbalance in quality of healthcare offered to Jews compared to Palestinians, but how it was profoundly attached to civilizational rhetoric that both British authorities and Zionists used to deprioritize Palestinian lives and bodies. Rather

than stop there, though, Hasso offers a fascinating account of irreverent and “unlicensed” Palestinian nurse-midwives and healers who “worked and collected fees independently of government sponsored clinics” (111), in contravention of British colonial policies.

Hasso’s next chapter compares Palestinian (Muslim and Christian) and Jewish birth and death records during the Mandate. She finds that “British authorities frequently expressed concern with higher Palestinian birthrates” (115) and that they regularly complained that records for Palestinians were inconsistent and incomplete, often leaving out “villages and pastoral communities whose members moved seasonally” (123). By contrast, she shows that statistics for Jews were meticulously recorded thanks to the plethora of Zionist health institutions “and the high use of them by Jewish people in Palestine” (124). Hasso contends that this discrepancy evinces British and Zionist authorities’ demographic anxieties and obsessions in Palestine, constantly seeking to overcome Palestinians’ demographic dominance.

Focusing on Western eugenicist discourse and locating its manifestation among Zionist health authorities in Palestine, Hasso shows how this demographic anxiety informed the transnational breastfeeding and mothercraft campaigns that came to Palestine, and sought to “improve the health of only some children” (144). British and Zionist obsessions over infant mortality were invariably racialized and gendered, a point clearly demonstrated in Hasso’s discussion of breastfeeding; after all, the mother and her breastmilk – and not bottled milk – were seen as essential to ensuring a “strong and sturdy population” (149). Thus, Hasso tells us: “Debates regarding ‘natural’ versus ‘artificial’ feeding, timed feeding, and the weaning of babies in Palestine were most relevant to Zionist health practitioners in their work with Jewish women, infants, and children, which was guided by the logic of improving the racial fitness of the Jewish ‘nation’” (146).

At the book’s midpoint, Hasso shifts gears, moving from British and Zionist colonial records to an examination of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim legal and religious conceptions of sex, contraception, and abortion, as they relate to Palestine. Through this rich discussion, Hasso shows not only that Muslim and Jewish traditions are “far more flexible and plural” than Christian ones on these issues (181), but that Ottoman, British, Jordanian, and Israeli restrictions on birth control say infinitely more about state interests than culture or tradition. This legal examination and the conclusions reached offer helpful background information for the final two chapters’ foray into the lives and reproductive choices of Palestinian women.

For these, Hasso puts on her ethnographer hat, offering unprecedented access to the most intimate and private aspects of her interlocutors’ lives: their sexual, reproductive, and non-reproductive practices and desires. Provocatively titled “I Did Not Want Children” and “The Art of Death in Life,” chapters 5 and 6 emphasize Palestinian women’s agency, so often unacknowledged within the suffocating walls of imperial and colonial archives. In chapter 5, Hasso uses stories from the Hebrew press during the British Mandate, as well as information she gleaned from interviews with more than two dozen elderly Palestinian women, “to foreground Palestinian anti-reproductive desires and birth control practices from the 1940s to the present” (46). Through her interviews, Hasso discovers that Palestinian women have sought and found various ways to actualize

their desires to *not* have children, often resorting to “informal” termination practices with the absence of contraception. These included “sitting on hot tiles in Turkish baths while massaging a woman’s belly button until she bled, inserting a *surra*, sage stick, or *mulukhiyya* [mallow] stick into the uterus, putting sugar cubes into the belly button, and drinking castor oil (which contracts the uterus) or boiled cinnamon” (196). Findings like these will be of particular interest not just to multidisciplinary scholars of gender and Palestine, but also to those of medicine and science.

Hasso convincingly argues in chapter 6 that Palestinian women’s reproductive decisions reflect their own desires for creating or not creating life, and that any other interpretation is a projection – often imperial, patriarchal, nationalistic, and settler-colonial in nature – imposed on them. The chapter is ambitious in scope, combining archival analysis with first-person testimonies of twenty-six individuals recollecting decades-old memories. However, Hasso’s writing style is inviting, keeping the reader more interested in what her interlocutors have to say next than methodological complexities. Exploring the nuances of Palestinian women’s choices of life and death under occupation and in exile – which Hasso does through a discussion of Palestinian artistic expression since 1948 – evinces compelling themes about Palestinian conceptions of futurity that are overlooked in the framework of demographic competition with the Jewish occupier. “Indeed,” she writes, “I found death more relevant than reproduction in my analysis of Palestinian poetry, fiction, and film” (211). If the choice to reproduce fits into the politics of dispossession and military occupation, then it is about survival, not resistance.

*Buried in the Red Dirt* succeeds in Hasso’s mission to “tell a story about life and death, and about missing bodies and experiences” (1–2) as they relate to Palestine and Palestinians. At once a historical account that exposes British and Zionist anxieties, obsessions, and schemes around Palestinian birth, death, and life, the book is also a vivid ethnography about Palestinian women’s intimate choices. The outcome is altogether new and critical: in examining the range of reproductive and non-reproductive desires of Palestinians through archival files, interviews, art, literature, and film, the book “challenges the assumption that Palestinians after 1948 absorbed the demographic competitive logic of Zionist,” and instead, “shows how demographic research on Palestinian fertility ... often reproduces Zionist ideological assumptions and projections” (242). Drawing on African diasporic, Black feminist, and queer scholarship, Hasso proposes that an alternative to this skewed perspective is in fact to emphasize anti-reproductive desire as part of the Palestinian experience of decolonization, past, present, and future. If the ethnic cleansing of Palestine is a fundamental compulsion of Zionism, Hasso concludes, then it is worth considering the multifaceted ways Palestinians continue to negotiate life, death, and regeneration in the face of ongoing efforts to erase them.

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