

# H-Net Reviews

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**Dana Hercbergs.** *Overlooking the Border: Narratives of Divided Jerusalem.* Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018. Illustrations, maps. xlii + 292 pp. \$31.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8143-4492-7; \$79.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-4108-7.

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It has been several months since US president Donald Trump announced his intention to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and the hotly contested question of Jerusalem's status once again exploded onto world debate. It seems apt, then, that only a few months later, a book would emerge that reorients our focus onto the lives and experiences of the people(s) living in the Holy City. Yet Dana Hercbergs's ethnographic study of Jerusalem's modern residents, *Overlooking the Border: Narratives of Divided Jerusalem*, has been several years in the making. It just so happens that the topic of the contested Jerusalem is one of perennial interest, sure to enjoy continued relevance for both academic and lay readers.

Hercbergs is a qualified guide for this exploration of Jerusalem's varied communities and cultures. Her academic training is in folklore and folklife, with expertise in Middle East cultures and identities, as well as in divided cities, particularly Jerusalem, and this training has prepared her well to probe areas of Jerusalem's history and character that have been underrepresented in academic and cultural studies. In six chapters, she explores some of the disparate perceptions, Jewish and Palestinian, of the city's modern history (since 1948), as well as its current situation.

Hercbergs notes early on that her emphasis is on narrative, acknowledging that part of the narrative being told is also her own. Whether the intended meaning is that, as an ethnography, the study inevitably incorporates her own learning experience of talking personally with dozens of individuals and participating in various

tours and cultural experiences or that, as a native-born Jewish Israeli (though raised for many years in the US), her own religio-political identity has a stake in the current and future status of Jerusalem is unclear. This seems to me, however, much less important than the fact that she readily (and on multiple occasions) recognizes her own potential biases and the way that her background may influence her access to certain conversations and events.

That Hercbergs's interests lean toward storytelling is evident from the first pages and throughout. She explains that "stories represent local identity in a world historical moment of conflict" (p. xix). Likewise, stories of the past and present frame questions of who has the right to narrate Jerusalem's landscape. "The very idea of who constitutes an authoritative voice and what is worth telling," she explains, "is of profound import for a city whose stories bear on issues of international legitimacy, domestic policy, tourism, and economic investment" (p. xxvii). Indeed, we find these issues present, explicitly or implicitly, in almost every story told. Yet, whereas Palestinian narration efforts seem to be more public-facing, directed more toward shaping international opinion, Jewish storytelling takes place on a much more local and introspective level. And whereas the book's participants often seek to communicate a particular truth relating to their own identity and that of their version of Jerusalem, the author notes the futility of seeking "truth" in this kind of study, opting instead to look for ways that the present shapes narratives of the past (p. xxix).

The first two chapters offer some of the most original contributions of the book. Hercbergs begins by introducing us to Jerusalem of today through the memories of its residents. In exploring the one-time West Jerusalem neighborhoods of Qatamon and Talbiyeh, both of which were created by the Arab middle class in the 1920s and 1930s, we meet Palestinians for whom 1948 has meant refugee life and lost homes that have never been returned to them, even after the border dividing them from their homes dissolved after 1967. Through various conversations, we also become acquainted with a few of the Jewish Israelis who took up residence in those “abandoned” homes after arriving in Israel from Arab countries in the early 1950s and finding housing to be scarce. We see Israeli state efforts to erase the historically Arab presence in the city through place-names and street signs, as well as commemorative plaques, and the ways the term “abandoned homes” helps these residents, ambivalent about claiming Arab homes as their own, to find some justification for living in them. But the story Hercbergs tells of Palestinian displacement is much more complex than Israeli settlement of “abandoned” turf. The author taps into research that describes the loss of pre-1948 Palestinian society in Jerusalem, since subsequent Palestinian historiography has emphasized peasant authenticity and connection to the land and sidelined Palestinian urban intelligentsia, which not only has lost its social status due to the reorientation toward peasant Palestinian identity but has also dispersed into an international diaspora much more regularly than has the less economically advantaged peasantry of the local villages.

The resentment felt by Palestinians in Jerusalem goes beyond their lost homes and way of life, however. In various conversations, Hercbergs noted the theme of the social role reversal that was occasioned by 1948 and then furthered in 1967. Where Arab society had previously dominated Jerusalem political and cultural life, now it must be subservient to Jewish (Zionist) hegemony. This disruption and reversal encompassed more than just the loss of power and the humiliation of being ruled by those who they once ruled. What Hercbergs found time after time was a deep sense of betrayal. When Jews had been under threat during the riots of 1929 and other similar events, many Palestinians protected them. In 1948, they point out, Palestinians found no reciprocation. No Jews protected any Arabs when they were, as they saw it, the weaker party under threat. They imply, in other words, that Palestinian social and political dominance had been much more benevolent than that of the Jewish population.

The book’s third chapter offers a unique look into the shared plight of Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. It was mainly the Mizrahim who took up residence in the empty homes of the Palestinians in the border neighborhood of Musrara, yet despite their being situated in the heart of Jerusalem, these immigrant Jews felt closed off and neglected by the Zionist state. This shared sense of exclusion from and resentment toward the Zionist hegemony is eclipsed, however, by the larger political reality in Jerusalem. Whereas her Palestinian discussants chuckle sardonically at the absurdity of having to pay thirty shekels to enter a home (now a museum) they had once owned—an ownership they had never relinquished—the Mizrahim she talks to evoke a certain ambivalence toward the shared Arab heritage and frustration with the state. Much of this ambivalence arises out of a desire to avoid the stigma of being known as “Arab lovers” (p. 121). Musrara, then, represents a point of both connection and separation—“a border that invites and repels” (p. 148).

In the following two chapters, Hercbergs narrows her focus a bit more, analyzing Palestinian Jerusalemite identity as it has developed in the decades since 1967 (chapter 4) and that of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jewish residents of the city (chapter 5). She notes that often otherwise distinct group and social identities become enmeshed because of the need for a unified religio-national Palestinian identity, as well as the need to be partners in the national-religious struggle against a shared sense of hurt and injustice. For their part, Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews, Hercberg claims, are influenced by the need in Jerusalem to assert authentic roots and native identity. As both marginalized groups draw a distinction from the cultural and political dominance of the Ashkenazi hegemony, another tension emerges as Sephardi Jerusalemite Jews seek to separate their identity from the broader Mizrahi identity, emphasizing their “privileged status as long-term natives” (pp. 222-23).

The final chapter widens the lens again to look more broadly at the visual space and manufactured landscape of Jerusalem since 1967. Transformations in the landscape, the author posits, have clear political and economic goals. They are meant to create a modern Israeli metropolis with a robust commerce and to promote tourism in the city. Yet much of this transformation seeks also to create and assert a public narrative for the residents and visitors to the city. Ir David (City of David) archaeological park, for example, not only reflects Jewish heritage in the land but also creates and defines it in a modern context. Another form of creating public

narrative comes through artistic acts of Palestinian resistance, such as musical representation of frustration through rapping, as well as visual graffiti art on the separation wall. Both Ir David and public graffiti typify the effort to influence Jerusalem's perception for both locals and visitors, attempting to define the meaning of today's Holy City and its relationship with the past—ancient or more recent.

Hercbergs has written an important contribution to scholarship on Jerusalem. Yet the thing I was left desiring was a clearer and more substantive thesis. The author states early that the “aim of this book [is] to demonstrate that ethnographic inquiry can generate a space for the meeting of narratives” (p. xxxix). Hercbergs certainly accomplishes this goal, with ample illustrations of narratives that can embrace a “both/and also” approach to Jerusalem's divided landscape. And the book is aptly named, returning to the concept of “borders” again and again. As Hercbergs points out in the postscript, whereas the various borders within Jerusalem, both concrete and abstract, have been a means of separation, they have also provided a place of meeting and connection. Still, I wonder if she could not have presented all these with a bit clearer direction as to the *meaning* of the “meeting of narratives,” or even how her interviewees might have viewed this “both/and also” approach.

Another issue is the occasional inconsistency of context and description in the stories Hercbergs tells. At times, the extent of historical detail feels intended for an expert on Jerusalem's history and population; at others, it is so basic as to seem novice-level. Likewise, although her descriptions of encounters and special events are generally vivid, at times her exploration of the nuances of social and intergroup dynamics lacks specificity and depth. For example, although Hercbergs briefly mentions other religious groups besides Jews and Muslims, she ignores the Christian populations in Jerusalem almost entirely.

Certainly, they are a small fraction of the city's population, but the Christian community in Jerusalem is of great importance to a majority of those who visit and take interest in the city.[1]

On the whole, however, Hercbergs's book adds rich description to scholarship already extant on Jerusalem's social and visual landscape and provides some new insights and perspectives. The book also offers the reader a strong bibliography, useful footnotes, and excellent illustrations, including color photos and maps. It deftly blends ethnography with historical perspective and presents delightful behind-the-scenes looks at Jerusalem's neighborhoods and residents. It is generally well written and remarkably readable, a feat not easily accomplished in the field of anthropology, and I recommend it for anyone interested in narrative and folklore of divided and religiously charged communities, as well as those who seek greater understanding of Jerusalem, its recent history, and its people(s) today.

#### Note

[1]. Statistics from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism has Christian visitors as 55 percent of all incoming tourism to Israel in 2017. “Incoming Tourism Survey 2018,” Israeli Ministry of Tourism, 2018, <a href="https://info.goisrael.com/en/incoming-tourism-survey-2016-pdf-3" >https://info.goisrael.com/en/incoming-tourism-survey-2016-pdf-3</a> .

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