



## Liquifying Categories in a Palestinian Refugee Camp

Review by Elizabeth Berk

Gustavo Barbosa, 2022, *The Best of Hard Times: Palestinian Refugee Masculinities in Lebanon*, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 329 pp., ISBN 978-0-8156-5524-4.

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Both Gustavo Barbosa and I, as non-native speakers of Arabic educated in the Western liberal tradition, have dedicated portions of our scholarly inquiries to gender and agency, as concepts, lived experiences, words, and metonyms that link all of these. During my fieldwork in Lebanon I, as Barbosa, found myself searching for an Arabic word for agency and curious as to why conversations otherwise held in Arabic often employed the English for both gender and agency. Barbosa delves further into these questions in his *The Best of Hard Times: Palestinian Refugee Masculinities in Lebanon*, echoing Visweswaran's (1997: 616) invocation to not mistake the category, the heuristic device, of gender for its reality or realities.

Taking on "crisis of masculinity" and "youth bulge" discourses that he locates in scholarly, organizational, and media work, Barbosa's main project is to problematize the "categories through which we see," in this case including, *inter alia*, ethnography itself, gender, "antistate effects," and youth and generation. In order to answer the question "how do the Shatila shabāb come of age today and display their sex belonging" (36), Barbosa welcomes his readers into the worlds of the Shatila shabāb, the young men or lads, most of whom are Palestinian (though this is one of the "imagined populations" (88) Barbosa interrogates), who live in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon. He follows Ghannam (2013) in looking at the masculine life trajectories of the fidā'iyyīn, the generation of Palestinian men who fought in the revolution for Palestine around the years 1967-82, and their sons, today's shabāb.

Barbosa spent the years 2007-2009 in the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon, living in the camp for one year during that time. He employed participant observation (and what he refers to as non-participant observation), questionnaires, focus groups, life history interviews, and open-ended interviews. These last he conducted with sets of parents and their children both together and separately, local leaders, UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the UN body that works with Palestinians) and NGO staff, and scholars researching Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. He also conducted a household survey with 39 families, and held workshops that used rap music and older, nationalistic songs to encourage discussion. Finally, Barbosa includes pictures he took with one of the shabāb, Hisham, images which today they can no longer discern which are Hisham's and which Barbosa's. In a project "advocating for patterns that connect," it is fitting for Barbosa to show pictures that in a "very deep sense are ours," a tight link between form and function that Barbosa sustains throughout the book (42). The lads, the shabāb, gave Barbosa what they called, in English, a "hard time," as they were all too familiar with researchers coming into their camps with nothing in their daily lives ever changing (66). This "hard time" prompts Barbosa to interrogate the ethnographic enterprise itself, so that one of his focuses in the field was the "limits of representation" in ethnography (12). He accomplishes this interrogation through self-referential writing, such as alerting the readers to when he tells white lies (118), and by letting us into some of his interviews with statements such as "Me: [Pushing, insensitively]" (163). He ultimately concludes that part of what we must do as ethnographers, methodologically and theoretically, is "let go of those grand narratives," such as gender and youth/generation (253).

In destabilizing gender and youth/generation in the context of the Shatila shabāb, Barbosa compares the "revolutionary masculinities" of the fidā'iyyīn, the generation of the revolution, to the "quotidian masculinities" of today's lads, the shabāb (37-8). He builds on the work of scholars such as Marcia Inhorn and her notion of "emergent masculinities" to argue that, rather than understanding the shabāb and men in similar situations as in a crisis of masculinity, as emasculated because they cannot embody or perform masculinity in the ways their fathers did, scholars should rather problematize the notions of hegemonic masculinity and gender themselves, admitting the "full historicity and pliability of masculinity over time" (2012:125).

He demonstrates, through the shabāb's rap music and their now-defunct practice of raising pigeons, that these lads do not "fit comfortably into either category: 'youth' or 'generation' (197). Here Barbosa's analysis calls to the fore that of Abu Lughod's in her *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), in which the shabāb express through rap attitudes they might not otherwise be able to, an exercise that is always already political.

Barbosa understands the liquifying of gender and youth/generation through an antistate lens, taking care throughout the book to note the ways in which, in the absence of the state, order still prevails in Shatila and the lives of the shabāb. He also dedicates a chapter to demonstrating the ways in which numbers and statistics can at best tell only a partial picture of the shabāb's lives, and how they can reify certain categories such as refugee or Palestinian. He also addresses language, both his own non-native English and the Arabic he used in his fieldwork. The chapters are organized via the theme of water, and Barbosa draws on Bateson's notion of the "meta-for", deftly mixing theory and ethnography throughout, one of the major strengths of this book (19).

He dedicates his book to the shabāb (110), and it is apparent throughout that he not only paid strict ethnographic attention to these men, but that their eventual acceptance and befriending of him means a lot to him as an ethnographer and a human. Further, the book is incredibly rich ethnographically, with Barbosa managing to protect his interlocutors' identities while also offering deep and nuanced journeys into their lives. If there is a shortcoming to the book, it is perhaps that Barbosa sets himself too many projects. While he convincingly demonstrates the interconnectedness of the ethnographic project, gender, youth, and the antistate, keeping track of these threads can at times feel overwhelming for the reader. It would further enhance his analysis to be in closer conversation with scholars such as Maya Mikdashi on citizenship in Lebanon, and scholars of trans and other queer experiences who are also liquifying some of the categories Barbosa explores.

This book is recommended for scholars interested in gender, youth, political anthropology, the Middle East, and ethnographic method. Public policy students and those outside the academy, such as those working for relevant NGOs, might also be interested. It is suitable for any level of student, including in courses on anthropological or ethnographic methods. Its larger theoretical

interventions are certainly applicable to contexts outside the Middle East, in any case where crisis of masculinity discourses might prevail. Finally, this book might interest students of Arabic language, as Barbosa parses some of its finer points in his analysis.

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