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## INTERVIEW WITH SANDRA BARRILARO. “PHOTOGRAPHY IS A FUNDAMENTAL TOOL FOR ACTIVISM”

Helena Ferreira

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Figure 1: Palestinian woman, Sandra Barrilaro, 2015

I met Sandra Barrilaro in Santiago de Compostela, in a session where she spoke about her experience as a member of the activist group *Women's Boat to Gaza*, which defy Israel's blockade of Gaza to show its solidarity with the resistance of Palestinian women. She fascinated the audience with her gripping account of the symbolic voyage of one of the sailboats that sailed to Gaza in September last year, with women of various nationalities. The interview reproduced here dates from August 2017.

Sandra Barrilaro is a Spanish photographer who has worked with imagery for more than thirty years, teaching photography courses and writing articles for specialty magazines. She has also published a children's book: *Bajo las estrellas* (2001). She made several trips to Palestine that served to expand the ample photographic archive that collects photos about this territory and to carry out photographic reports. As a result of these several trips, came the series of black and white photos entitled *Palestine, a look at injustice*, which has been shown in different cities across Spain.

She is co-author of the book *Contra el olvido – Una memoria fotográfica de Palestina antes de la Nakba, 1889-1948* (2015), a fundamental work to preserve the historical memory of the Palestinian population against the denial propaganda that exists into the Zionist movement. She was also editor in this book, paying special attention to the role of Palestinian women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, analyzing their presence in a multitude of photographs of the time. This project coordinated by Sandra Barrilaro, together with Teresa Aranguren, Johnny Mansour and Bichara Khader, with a prologue

written by Pedro Martínez Montávez, evidences the existence of a Palestine with society, culture and territory that was occupied and usurped by the colonizers.

In fact, the Palestinian people have been subjected to a process of progressive colonization. In the midst of all this oppression, in which an entire society loses its identity, the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children, are placed in high-risk contexts. Palestinian women live in degrading conditions and fight for survival in their fragile communities, but at the same time they use their knowledge and all their remaining strength at the service of liberation inside and outside the territory occupied by Israel.

**Helena Ferreira** – When did you start taking pictures?

**Sandra Barrilaro** – At the age of 13 I was offered a Kodak Instamatic since I was already passionate about photography. It was only after I was 20 years old that I really learned photography and a friend offered me a Reflex, and it was after that point that I started to photograph and never stopped afterwards.

**H. F.** – What does your eye seek? I mean, what makes you do this or that picture?

**S. B.** – I believe that my eyes almost always try to tell something, I love storytelling, whether in film, photography or literature ... For years I did mountain hiking and my best memories are of the nights in camp, telling stories around the campfire; an atavistic image (speaking of photography), assembled human beings, telling stories... I love literature and I feel envy for the people who are capable of express themselves by words and people who are storytellers. My best-known work is with Palestine, which has more to do with photojournalism, which I really love. But, I have an intimate vein that I developed quite photographically. And I do it in a very intuitive way. I spent more than a year photographing in a grove, always in black and white. I took pictures of the nature in which there were tracks, traces of human beings and "picked up" some elements there without reason. One day a writer friend, Aintzane García, saw the photos, stayed with them one night and the next morning had written a beautiful story. I asked her how and where she had taken it from her, and she said, "It's all in the pictures." And she was right, but I did not have that perception until she was able to put it into words. I believe that what all my photos have in common is the search for the human being in his intimacy, his dreams and desires, which can bring us together and which can make us more beautiful inwardly.

**H. F.** – Do you consider that there is a feminine specificity in the approach to photography?

**S. B.** – In the years that I taught photography, I realized that men were more interested in the equipment. Completely fascinated by it, it was for many almost an end in itself. Contrary to women, who in general viewed the equipment only as a mean to reach a goal... Over the years I have realized that women and men sometimes have different ways of being in the world and of seeing it. I will not say that it is possible to speak of a female and a male photograph, because I would need to study the subject in depth, but perhaps men are more interested in movement, action, affection and women are

interested in getting closer to people in general, in capturing its interior, its essence, the reasons of its history. Looks like those of the Cuban photographer Ana Mendieta and those of the German photographer Dieter Appelt are radically different, although both use their own body as an expression. Clearly Appelt's expression is more aggressive, harder, seeking the visual impact, the annoyance of the person who observes the image, are more technological pictures. Mendieta's photographs merges with nature, returns to the maternal womb, is more organic. These are images that, we might say, depict a male and a feminine gaze. However, in Sebastião Salgado, Gervasio Sánchez, Susan Meiselas, and Cristina García Rodero I did not find that difference.

**H. F.** – Tell us about your first visit to Palestine and all the others that followed.

**S. B.** – My first trip to Palestine was in 2009 and, like the great majority of my travels, I did it alone. I stayed at a cooperative's house in Ramallah and from there I traveled every morning by bus (public transportation) to various places in Palestine: Jerusalem, Jenin, Hebron, Qalquilia, Bethlehem ... And, I was horrified by everything I saw and lived and I kept repeating: "I can not believe this." Even though I followed Palestine news since I was a teenager, I could not imagine the crude reality and the huge injustice that this people are subjected to. On the other hand, I became marveled with the Palestinian people, with their warmth and humanity. They welcomed me everywhere, without knowing me and although I traveled alone, I felt perfectly safe in an occupied land. I will never forget this Arabic hospitality. I especially fell in love with the ability that these people have to thank foreigners for visiting their land, for being interested in them. I made very good friends, I returned a few months later and since then I have traveled several times to Palestine, some to the West Bank, others to what is now the territory of the State of Israel: Haifa, Nazareth, Acre ... And in the middle of the Egyptian revolution, in 2011, I was able to enter Gaza by Rafah on the second attempt.

**H. F.** – You were also one of the women in the *Women's Boat to Gaza* ... How did this opportunity come about?

**S. B.** – Yes, I was one of the lucky ones who traveled on the Zaytouna-Oliva on the final crossing, nine days of continuous navigation from Messina to 35 miles off the coast of Gaza. At this point, our boat was approached by the Israeli army, and we were kidnapped, forced to change course and to go to a Israeli Port. Later we were arrested and finally deported to our countries of origin. I was invited because of the photographic work that I carried out in Palestine, which gave rise to an exhibition that was shown in different cities and some countries, especially by the publication of the book *Contra el olvido. Una memoria fotográfica de Palestina antes de la Nakba, 1889-1948* who had a tremendous success. By the way, absolutely unexpected, both for authors and publishers. In fact, Teresa Aranguren and I spent more than a year traveling to present the book and we were always surprised by its success.

**H. F.** – Can you tell us something about the women who traveled with you?

**S. B.** – I traveled with thirteen women from five continents. What can I say about my traveling companions? They are very solidary, committed, and with a great sense of humor. Only in this spirit can you embark on a small sailboat on a Mediterranean coast knowing that “on the other side” you have the Israeli army waiting for you, to attack you ... Beginning with our leader, Ann Wright, former Colonel of the United States Army and Mairead Maguire, Irish and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Both incredibly energetic, being more than 70 years old. They had previously participated in similar actions and felt perfectly at ease in that small boat that was moving devilishly during the storm. Martha Davidson, a Maori woman and New Zealand MP; Samira Douaifia an Algerian MP; Leigh-Ann Naidoo South African schoolteacher and athlete; Fauziah Hasan advocate for student rights; a Malaysian physician who took care of all of us, particularly in sickness. Two tireless professionals from Aljazeera, Mina Harballou, a Moroccan living in London; Hoda Rakhme, a Lebanese woman living in Moscow and Jeannette Escanilla, Chilean refugee in Sweden, politics. And, of course, the crew, with the Australian captain Madeleine Habib, the Swedish sailor Emma Ringqvist and Synne Sofie Reksten from Norway. A wonderful team of women who embarked, leaving a lot on the ground, to carry a message of solidarity, peace and hope from women from all over the world to the women of Gaza and, by extension, men and women from all over the world to the whole village of Gaza.

**H. F.** – Is it right to say that you documented this trip with your camera, as you travel around as well?

**S. B.** – Yes. The photographs I captured on board of the Zaytouna-Oliva I took them with a small compact camera. In other boats of the Freedom Fleet, when they were approached by the Israeli navy, in addition to killing, injuring or using violence against passengers and crew, they also confiscated the boats and personal belongings of all, so I did not want to take my gear. These are pictures that describe our day to day traveling, writing chronicles, answering calls, giving interviews, watching e-mail, cooking, laughing ... Pictures of the boat that has become our home, the sea, the sky, my companions ... Both Dr. Fauziah Hasan and I hid the photo cards at the time of the robbery and managed to keep them despite all the exhaustive controls we were subjected to.

**H. F.** – According to Cartier-Bresson, photography is the only means of expression that forever fixes the precise and transient moment. For him, the photographers deal with things that continually disappear and that after they gone, nothing can make them return, except by photographs. The book *Contra el olvido. Una memoria fotográfica de Palestina antes de la Nakba, 1889-1948* deals with this issue? An attempt to fix a free Palestine?

**S. B.** – Yes, he was very right. The photograph captures moments that disappear or that become other things, things in transformation. The chapter I wrote in this book begins with a quotation from Roland Barthes: “All photography is a certificate of presence,” and this book is both, on one hand is proof that Palestine and its people existed before

the year of 1948 and it is the portrait of a society, of a world that overnight was devastated and disappeared. The photographs in this book show a world that has not come back, and will probably never be the same, or anything that looks like it.

**H. F.** – What can you tell us about the Palestinian women of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries?

**S. B.** – Meanwhile I searched and selected the pictures for this book, I was fascinated by the women and the photographs of the women I met. Some of them very modern, socially and politically active, hardworking and very sophisticated. It was particularly surprising their role in the Palestinian revolts of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**H. F.** – And what do you have to say about the colonized / refugees that you photograph in the present time?

**S. B.** – The Palestinian women I have met today are like the previous ones, strong women with a special relationship with the land, like all Palestinians in general. I found women of great depth, with wisdom and love for the land and the people. I believe these women are aware of the fundamental role they play as they keep the mental health of a harassed, colonized, blocked society. Even though the Palestinian refugee women I know are apparently in a better position, they are also aware that there is still a great struggle ahead which they must continue and that they can not afford to disappear and be one among so many mistreated and forgotten civilizations. What I admire most about Palestinian women as well as men, especially those living in the West Bank and Gaza, is their dignity.

**H. F.** – Palestinian women and children are the most vulnerable group. Do your pictures capture the violence and the atmosphere of terror to which these groups are particularly subjected to?

**S. B.** – I believe that in many of the portraits I have taken of women and children, this shadow of violence appears, although it is simply a portrait of their daily life, because I have never been in the most tragic moments like intifada or bombing. However, their daily life is immersed in the violence of occupation or blockade, with all that implies. In one of these portraits, for example, a woman appears on the terrace of her house in Hebron, with a child on each side. It's not a violent situation, they simply posed for the picture. The woman appears with a half smile, because she knows that she has to conserve and transmit hope and tranquility to their lives, but the faces of the boys clearly reflects fear and tension. In the background, on another terrace, there is a guardhouse with Israeli soldiers watching and threatening day and night.

**H. F.** – I see your photographs as a report, an instrument of struggle. What is for you the connection between photography and activism?

**S. B.** – It's certainly a report. After my first trip to Palestine with a small borrowed camera, I thought I would have to go back and photograph everything I had seen so I could show it, tell it. That's how it was, in a few months I went back to Palestine again



and again, photographing everything I found there: the checkpoints, the wall, the settlers ... Purely the occupation and the blockade. Photography is a fundamental tool for activism, for denunciation, for knowledge: "a picture is worth a thousand words," I continue to believe it. Film and video are part of this too, many people associate the occupation of Palestine with the image of two Israeli soldiers breaking the arms of a Palestinian boy ... And the Palestine people know this very well, and in many villages, people organized themselves and acquired cameras to denounce their own situation.

**H. F.** – Do you consider that photography is always political?

**S. B.** – The word "politics" is very distorted and discredited by the amount of "politicians" who live at the expense of it. We are accustomed to relate politics to everything that is bad. If what we mean by politics is the relationship between citizenship and states, parties, police forces, power, etc... then, definitely, photography does not have to be always political at all. As an art, photography is also a spiritual expression, it is totally legitimate to make photography that only reflects beauty and moves us inwardly. This does not mean that political photography in its broadest meaning is not beautiful. I repeat the example of Sebastião Salgado, but here we speak of the most significant meaning in the human being, of politics with elevation and with social concerns.

**H. F.** – Barthes argued that a picture can infinitely repeat what happened only once in its material existence. To believe this is to imagine who sees your photos to visualize and to understand the unique events that take place in Palestine...

**S. B.** – Absolutely! Many people who look at the Palestine situation as something far away and a complicated dispute when they see a picture of the Bethlehem wall with its 12 meters, they ask what that is. They inquire themselves when they have to see the sad face of a boy at the Qalandia checkpoint, with its corridors between bars resembling a place where animals are enclosed; seeing young, unprotected Palestinians throwing stones at Israeli soldiers near the Ni'lin wall under tear gas, soldiers armed to the teeth; to see the beautiful houses of the old town of Hebrón destroyed and empty; seeing the face of a girl in a school uniform in Gaza, interrogating the chamber directly; to see the ditch surrounding a luxury hotel in Gaza built with bags covered with cement; they inquire themselves when they see what I call the aesthetics of war... After seeing these pictures, many people were more deeply interested in what is happening in Palestine, they questioned and internalized what is happening there, something that is not exactly what the media tells us.

**H. F.** – And you, how do you live with this reality? In what way the experiences you had affect you?

**S. B.** – Let's not forget that photography is only a medium, you can use it honestly or not, it can be honestly contemplated or not. You can live these experiences or after seeing a few images that touched you, messed with you, you can just discard them, to live more comfortably. I felt responsible for telling others everything we've seen and

lived. A human rights activist Berenice Ceyta said one day that "knowledge compromise oneself". So, after getting to know the reality of Palestine I couldn't get back to my normal life as if nothing happened there. Palestine and its people play a fundamental role in my life since that.

**H. F.** – The image has acquired a constant presence in contemporary life today. What do you think is the place of photography nowadays?

**S. B.** – There is an excess and trivialization of the images, a clear example of this are the selfies, a gesture which by itself is not bad, but it has been used with excess and with a narcissistic use. In fact, I'm a little tired of so many images. I love photography and cinema, but with this saturation I almost do not shoot photographs. Although, when I get close to good pictures or I pick my camera... something very strong moves inside me.

**H. F.** – Finally, can you tell us about your future projects?

**S. B.** – Soon I will be directing a magazine about Morocco, in which the good pictures will play a fundamental part. I am also preparing a photo book of Palestinian women, because I have very good photographs and because I want to honor them in some way. But this will take some time, because I have spent the last year and a half traveling to present my last book and to talk about the women's boat to Gaza and I need inner tranquility and a lot of concentration for this new project. I work better when I isolate myself and totally engage with what I am doing. And, of course, I want to travel again to Palestine and Nepal, where I lived a long time ago many years ago. And shoot the landscapes of Iceland and Greenland, meet Africa and its smiling people and re-enter in Gaza... ✍

Translated by Sara Santos

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Helena Ferreira is a PhD student of the doctoral program in Cultural Studies in partnership between the University of Aveiro and the University of Minho. He is a team member of the Languages, Literatures and Cultures Research Centre of the University of Aveiro. Her main areas of scientific interest include: Gender and Sexuality, Media Studies and Human Rights. Recent publications are related to the following topics: semiotics, media studies, queer theory, gender issues and human rights.

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