

THE ENCOUNTER AND THE LAND:
ALICE OLIPHANT AND THE SHEIKH'S DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

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A woman and two children pose before the camera. The woman, dressed in layers of dark clothing, a white scarf covering her head, is the centre of the composition, seated upon what appears to be a sheepskin or animal pelt draped over a low bench. She cradles an infant close to her breast, nestled in a swaddle of cloth, while an older child stands barefoot by her side, wrapped in a patterned dress, leaning gently toward the figure we can reasonably assume is his mother. The photograph depicts a location out of focus and non-specific, yet unmistakably outdoors, marked by the presence of a tree trunk directly behind the bench, the faint outline of a rural or village landscape in the distance, and the bare soil at their feet.

At first glance, the photographic image (figure 1) conforms to the conventions of nineteenth-century Orientalist photography, reflecting the tropes through which Western photographers depicted those they referred to as 'Orientals'. The seated woman, dressed in religious attire characteristic of Middle Eastern communities, is framed as a maternal archetype as she is accompanied by her children, one of whom is wearing what appears to be a locally handwoven or printed garment.¹ And indeed, this photograph of a Druze woman and her children was taken by an Englishwoman, Alice Oliphant, sometime between 1884 and 1885, in Daliat el-Carmel, Ottoman Palestine.

Yet, when I first encountered this photograph, it elicited an unexpected sense of intimacy. While fully aware of the camera's presence, the portrayed woman does not appear to be 'performing' for the camera, but rather engaging in an exchange with the photographer. And then there is the hazy whiteness that veils the left side of the printed surface, obscuring it completely and destabilising the composition, before drifting across the woman's face and dissolving toward the right, where a clearer sense of place begins to flicker into view.



Figure 1 Alice Oliphant, Sheikh Yousef's daughter in law & children from him came the land on which the house at Dalieh was built, c.1884–5, albumen print [TR12]. © National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

Scanning the photograph from top to bottom, the bare soil and rural landscape emerge as central to the composition, situating the encounter within a specific terrain. The caption on the back of the print makes this connection explicit, gesturing toward the circumstances that made this moment possible by identifying the photographic subjects as 'Sheikh Yousef's daughter in law & children from him came the land on wh [sic] the house at Dalieh was built.' The soil beneath the figures therefore does more than locate the scene geographically; it hints at the conditions through which this meeting came into being, grounding the image in a set of relations that extend beyond the frame. In this sense, the printed image lingers as a fragment of something only partially accessible to us, while photography becomes a way of thinking with land, mediating the relations through which this encounter became possible.

This impression stands in contrast to the 'transparent', ostensibly objective gaze attempted – though never fully achieved – in most nineteenth-century



Figure 2 Alice Oliphant, *Druze Women*, c.1884–5, albumen print [TR20]. © National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

Orientalist portrayals.² This does not mean that Oliphant, a Westerner in the Middle East subject to the cultural frameworks and ideological constructions of her time, did not produce photographs of women imbued with Orientalist tropes. Such conventions are visible, for instance, in her group portrait of Druze women (figure 2). With its emphasis on local cultural artefacts and its generic title, the image seems to capture and preserve an idealised vision of communal identity through costume and setting, echoing Orientalist narratives, constructed mostly by and for Western travellers against the backdrop of imperial and colonial power dynamics. Yet unlike the transient gaze of the colonial traveller, long-term residents in Ottoman Palestine, such as Oliphant, who settled in the region, had the opportunity to embed themselves in the area's daily life. The photographic practices of some such residents were shaped

not only by the conventions of the medium but also by their immersion within the social, cultural, and political fabric of the region. In conjunction with women's access to female-only spaces and situations, women residents found themselves entangled in local networks, where, at times, encounters unfolded in ways that defy simple interpretation.³ The public sphere revealed some of these interactions, such as Western women's involvement in local education, for instance, but photographs provide us with a way to witness exchanges that are less public or straightforward, appearing as 'sparks of contingency', to quote Walter Benjamin, in a photographic moment.⁴

Understanding the photographic event as a site of potential interaction broadens the scope of what we would consider an 'exchange'; it includes nuanced moments of recognition that might extend beyond the frame of the camera and resist assimilation into the dominant historical narrative and thus are not easily articulated elsewhere. In this context, the strangeness of the scene and the sympathetic facial expression of the woman and children in the photograph invite a reading that acknowledges the photograph as simultaneously recording an asymmetrical, colonial encounter and manifesting something that exceeds this framework, expressing the fragile, unstable intimacies formed within the shared, fraught terrains of colonial life. This might be what Homi Bhabha has termed the 'Third Space': a site of hybridity where new, relational, and often ambivalent meanings emerge, unsettling the rigid categorisations of coloniser and colonised as well as other East/West binaries.⁵ Such interpretation suggests that while some photographs by Westerners reiterate reductive or conventionalised representations of local subjects, others, at times even by the same author, may manifest traces of negotiation or proximity that occasionally emerge within colonial settings, indicating that these divergent visual registers can coexist within a single body of work, and implying that such relations can coexist within one reality.⁶

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While this essay centres on selected Alice Oliphant photographs, these represent only a fraction of her wide-ranging pursuits. Born in Paris in 1847 into the distinguished Le Strange family of Norfolk, Oliphant was raised in an educated English household, receiving comprehensive education in the arts and sciences, languages, and music. Yet beyond these details, relatively little is known about Oliphant's life before her marriage, an absence that has



Figure 3 Alice Oliphant, *House at Daliéh*, c.1884–5, albumen print [TR69]. © National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

contributed to biographical accounts positioning her primarily in relation to her husband, Laurence Oliphant, a prominent British author, traveller, diplomat, and mystic, whom she married in 1872.⁷ In 1882, the Oliphants set up residence in the German Colony in Haifa, Palestine, then a small coastal town of roughly 4,500 inhabitants under Ottoman rule. Two years later, they acquired land in the Druze village of Daliat el-Carmel, building a summer residence on the slopes of Mount Carmel (figure 3). The couple hosted notable figures from across the region's diverse religious and ethnic groups, making their home a hub for social and cultural exchange. In a memoir of the lives of her cousin Laurence and his wife Alice, Margaret Oliphant notes that in the Haifa house,

The American visitor from Brocton, shrewd yet visionary, filled up the curious tale of company, along with the Roumanian [sic] Hebrew, and the quick-witted Syrian of the plain, and the Druses [sic] from Carmel, and the travellers from Belgravia. The two central figures in this curious jumble of nationalities and conditions were equally at home with every one of them, and delightful and friendly to all.⁸

The primary reason for the Oliphants' move to Palestine was Laurence's preoccupation with the settlement of Jews in the region. No document affirms his motivations for this endeavour, but in a letter from 1878 he recognised the political and economic benefits a Jewish settlement might offer to the British.⁹ His scheme, though framed in strategic terms, was entirely unofficial: Oliphant had no backing from the British government and was not sent on any formal mission. A Christian Westerner operating independently on Ottoman grounds, his endeavours point to the various positionings and entanglements with the colonial apparatus that existed in the region at the time.

While Laurence was engaged in his political and ideological pursuits, Alice spent most of her time alone, attending to the daily affairs of their household and its guests, painting, writing, and, on occasion, engaging in what she casually referred to as 'photo'ing' the people and landscape around her.¹⁰ Alice's writings do not mention the Jewish population in Palestine or elsewhere, nor does she refer to her husband's mission to their resettlement. Her visual production in drawing and photography excludes them as well. While there is no evidence to suggest that this absence stemmed from ideological disagreement, it does indicate that the couple led largely separate lives.

According to the latest scholarship, which has only recently expanded to include the work of women, Alice Oliphant is among the first female residents of Palestine to document it through photographs.¹¹ During her time in Haifa and Daliat el-Carmel, Oliphant took at least 31 photos, now preserved in the archives of the National Maritime Museum in Haifa. The collection includes documentation of the family's summer house in Dalieh, landscapes around Mount Carmel, the Galilee, and the streets of Haifa, European guests, and local Druze individuals. As a whole, the collection offers a fragmentary yet intimate glimpse into Oliphant's life in Palestine. The photographs were compiled in a private family album, not intended for public circulation, and Oliphant was not a professional photographer, but an amateur working within the domestic and social circles of her everyday life. As such, her practice was not directly bound to market forces or institutions of power. This does not mean that her use of the medium was detached from the dominant political and social forces of Ottoman Palestine, but that these appear in her photographs in ways that are not necessarily the explicit

reason for her use of the medium.¹² In her writings, Oliphant describes her engagement with the ‘little photo apparatus’, noting that her control of the device was limited and ‘clumsy’.¹³ It seems, then, that Oliphant employed photography as a means to structure and examine her life, relationships, and surroundings.

Viewing her photographs today, additional layers of meaning inevitably emerge, constantly rearticulating our reading of the images. Shaped by ongoing relations and situated in a specific territorial context, I read photography as a web of interactions that are not frozen in the moment of exposure; they stretch across time, shaped by both the conditions of production and the many acts of looking, circulating, and exchange that follow.¹⁴ Photography is interpreted as ‘the product of an encounter’, to use Ariella Azoulay’s phrasing, between the photographer, the photographed subject, and the camera, unfolding as an event that extends to the spectator and defies the exclusive authorship of any one party as well as the fixing of meaning.¹⁵ These intricate dynamics – imperial, gendered, racialised, religious, but also intimate, local, and affective – seem at times to contradict one another and destabilise binaries and categorisations. We are then prompted not to read into the photograph what we have already learned elsewhere and wish to demonstrate through visual evidence.¹⁶ Instead, we are invited to open new avenues for inquiry that complicate both our understanding of history and its visual documentations, to look past indexicality and univocal interpretations and treat the photograph as a complex and layered object, holding multiple temporal and spatial standpoints.¹⁷

This is an important emphasis, as it highlights that the inability to completely decode Oliphant’s photograph of the Druze woman and children may illustrate that photography cannot, in fact, be used as an illustrative tool. By this I mean that historically informed, yet open-ended interpretations embrace photography’s incoherence, messiness, and historical opacity as some of its strengths in complicating and nuancing our understanding of the past. With regard to the photograph that opened this essay, its haziness becomes more than a technical quality, functioning as a metaphor for the fog of history. The photograph itself does the work of veiling; its deterioration over time points to its multiple lives since the photograph was taken, its continuous exposure to light and possible mishandling, registering the photograph’s resistance to a clear reading of history in its materiality. The photograph’s



Figure 4 Alice Oliphant, *Terrace in front of Dalieh house. The village butcher & our best orchard & vineyard work man in the white turban*. Both Druses, c.1884–5, albumen print [TR18].

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power lies precisely in this refusal: in showing history's opacity and blurriness, our shifting understanding of it from our contemporary vantage point, and the entangled relations, half-seen gestures, and unresolved tensions at its core. In other words, the printed image registers a condition of ambivalence, a persistent instability of meaning, shaped by margins, discrepancies, and forms of uncertainty that have been widely noted in photographic theory.¹⁸

This ambivalence may be exemplified through a brief comparison between this photograph and a photograph of Druze men taken by Oliphant. It shows two men seated beside one another on the veranda of the Oliphants' house in Dalieh, their posture relaxed and informal (figure 4). One man faces the camera directly, while the other smiles in Oliphant's direction as his body turns toward his companion, suggesting a conversation briefly interrupted by the photographer. Their expressions convey a sense of ease and familiarity, implying a convivial relationship between photographer and subjects.

At first glance, it is similar to the relational quality present in Oliphant's portrait of the Druze woman and children. Yet the distance from which the photograph was captured evokes ethnographic documentation more than an intimate encounter. Furthermore, the men's posture suggests that, engaged in private dialogue, they are interrupted by the photographer, who, although acknowledged, remains external to their exchange. It is a moment of friendly recognition captured in the act of interruption. As a result, the traditional dynamic between photographer and photographed remains intact: the photographer is 'merely a documenter' rather than a participant in the scene. The scene, then, retains a degree of legibility: the photograph's framing and the men's expressions and positioning imply a social dynamic that the viewer can parse.

Conversely, the image of the Druze woman and children refuses such ease of interpretation. It resists resolution through a surplus of suggestive elements that do not cohere: the proximity between the three figures, and that between them and the photographer; the traditional posture; the indoor furniture placed in an outdoor setting. This incoherence is intensified by the porousness of the photograph's spatial logic, and particularly the visible space on the bench beside the seated woman. This unclaimed space destabilises the otherwise fixed and neat classificatory logic of colonial representation, dividing observer from observed, Western from native, subject from background. The bench-space urges the viewer to ask: Who is this space for? Why is it there? The space appears available, extended outward in a gesture of invitation. Could Alice Oliphant have been sitting there before moving to the other side of the lens? Is someone else invited into the photographic space to join the mother and children on the bench? The actual presence or absence from the scene is irrelevant to this examination, but their potential materialises the openness this photograph offers. This spatial element's emphasis on the speculative presence of a past or future figure in dialogue creates a photographic encounter that emerges as a form of negotiation that is not fixed in time, transforming the image into a site of layered meanings. The photograph transmits the sense that it is, to some degree, co-authored; the exchange is not between two subjects of photography interrupted by an outsider, but across the lens, between the photographed woman and the photographing woman. The camera, it seems, does not break the scene but becomes folded into it.

Oliphant's decision to photograph Druze individuals complements written accounts of her life in Palestine. In Margaret Oliphant's biographical account of Laurence and Alice's time in Palestine, Alice's everyday activities are portrayed as deeply enmeshed within the local Druze community.¹⁹ Her affection for the people of Daliat el-Carmel, with whom she spent a significant part of her time, is expressed in a letter she wrote to her sister, Jamesina Waller, in January 1885, where she notes the Druze have a 'special character for honesty' and describes them as good neighbours. In the same letter, she also details her ongoing study of Arabic.²⁰ Other correspondences by Laurence, Jamesina, and Margaret repeatedly emphasised Alice's relationship with the Druze community, particularly in the context of mourning her death. Laurence writes of the 'void' left by her loss, 'which the whole community, Moslem [sic], Druze [sic], and Christian alike, feel'.²¹ In a letter to Jamesina following his wife's passing, he quotes the Druze as saying Alice 'was a Druze all the time, and is one now'.²² Although the recurrence of affectionate depictions of Alice's relationship with the Druze across multiple family-authored sources cannot be uncritically accepted as reflecting how the Druze community perceived her, it nonetheless suggests that these relationships formed a meaningful part of her life and emphasises the significance her relatives attributed to these interactions.

The photograph's caption identifies the woman in the image as the daughter-in-law of the village sheikh, a designation that suggests a degree of prominence among her people and situates her within specific familial and social structures that intersected with the Oliphants' presence in the village. The negotiations around the purchase of land for the Dalieh house are recounted at length in Laurence Oliphant's writings.²³ After unsuccessful attempts to acquire land in Isfiya, where he claims to have encountered dishonest dealings with members of the local Christian community, Oliphant was approached by the sheikh of Daliat el-Carmel, who sought his assistance in releasing his son from Ottoman military service. In exchange, the sheikh offered the land on which the house was eventually built. The unfolding of these events highlights the social status of the Oliphants, and of Westerners more broadly, in Ottoman Palestine, which at times even surpassed that of the most prominent local families, such as the sheikh's, who relied on Western intermediaries to navigate relations with Ottoman authorities. Laurence's account mentions the son's wife – presumably the subject of Alice's

photograph – and refers to her deep sorrow at her husband's conscription. This context provides reasonable grounds to assume that the two women were personally acquainted, and that this woman was among Alice Oliphant's first acquaintances in the village, with whom she was in direct contact while their family patriarchs were sorting the purchase of the land.

The specificities of this encounter also introduce another set of negotiations into the relationship between the two women around the land, its ownership, and function. The presumably incidental inclusion of the bare soil in this image becomes charged with meaning when we consider that this very ground was the subject of the transaction that brought these women into contact. The Druze woman sits, quite literally, upon land that her family had sold to the photographer's family, transforming the earth beneath her into a complex site of exchange and negotiation. Once the earth's presence is noticed, it cannot be overlooked; the land asserts itself as a third element in the triangular composition – photographer, subject, land – a material foundation that grounds the encounter in its territorial reality.

As we further attempt to decode the photograph according to these triangular dynamics, additional layers of instability emerge. While the photograph must have been taken sometime between 1884 and 1885, after the Oliphants arrived in Dalieh, we cannot determine whether it documents a scene from before the purchase of the land was finalised, when sheikh Yousef's family may have retained some form of occupancy or ownership, or from a later period after the construction of the house was completed and the Oliphants had established themselves as the new proprietors. The resulting ambiguity is therefore both temporal and spatial, destabilising any reading of the power dynamics at play: we do not know whether the woman sits upon land that still belongs, to some degree, to her family, or whether she occupies it as an employee, neighbour, or guest of the new English owners.

Most prominently, this territorial dimension marks the photograph as a document of entangled, strategic relationships. It emerges from a convergence of interests: sheikh Yousef's family gained access to Western influence, while the Oliphants secured land for their residence. In this way, the photograph also serves as a material trace of the uneven and often non-linear processes of dispossession, which encompassed not only overt land seizure but also calculated choices made by local populations who, facing shifting imperial conditions or economic uncertainty, opted to sell land or align with foreign

actors as a means of survival and social positioning. Such decisions, made under precarious conditions, drew local communities into the gradual process of their own marginalisation.

The question of dispossession here underscores the layered entanglements that characterised land transfers in Ottoman Palestine. In an interview with Dalieh's elders, some of whom are now over ninety years of age, the sheikh in the caption was identified as Sheikh Yousef Nasereldeen Nasereldeen (يوسف نصرالدين نصرالدين), a member of the Nasereldeen family, one of the first families of Dalieh.²⁴ As such, the family held extensive landholdings across the region and mobilised it as capital in exchange for Oliphant's protection and political leverage. Thus, the sale of land to Oliphant did not entail full dispossession but constituted a form of strategic negotiation. Within this arrangement, land functioned not as a sign of loss alone but as a leveraged asset, deployed in response to evolving power dynamics and local needs.

These contested relationships to land are transmitted in the photograph's broader refusal of interpretive clarity, revealing instead the irreducible complexity of territorial relationships in Ottoman Palestine. Observing this photograph anew, one notices how its visual opacity dissolves toward the bottom edge, shifting our focus: the woman's facial expression becomes peripheral to the bare soil, which, perhaps unintentionally, becomes the focal point of the image. As we examine this lower register in more detail, other visual cues offer interpretive depth: while the woman wears traditional leather shoes, her older child stands barefoot on the earth. This physical contact between his feet and the soil suggests a direct, enduring bond with the land on which he stands. The two pairs of feet positioned side by side accentuate a certain contrast between them: the woman's shoes symbolise negotiations over ownership as well as raise questions about belonging and cultural transformations, while the child's bare feet suggest an unmediated, embodied relationship to the ground beneath him. In other words, the act of selling may alter political and material realities, but the image invites the possibility that belonging to a place – its memory carried through bodies – outlasts and is not reducible to the mechanisms of its ownership.

The portrayal of land in this photograph contrasts Oliphant's depictions of land in her drawings. These focus almost exclusively on views and sites around Mount Carmel and the Galilee, and rarely include human figures (figure 5). Oliphant's apparent use of three planes and panoramic perspectives



Figure 5 Alice Oliphant, *The Colony, Haifa*, 1884, ink on paper [NMM 3532]. © National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

in these drawings, alongside her focus on ancient ruins and rural landscapes, point to her formal artistic training, revealing her familiarity with European picturesque conventions of landscape painting and travel drawing in both technique and thematic subjects.²⁵ Crucially, these drawings demonstrate how ‘land’ is configured as ‘landscape’: a coherent visual field organised and manipulated according to specific Western assumptions. This landscape then maintains a certain alienation between viewer and viewed; it is a ‘way of seeing’ that is removed from the flux of life on the land.²⁶

Oliphant’s reluctance to draw people is especially striking when set against her photographic work. It is only occasionally interrupted when human figures appear as indistinct components of the terrain or as ‘staffage’, indicating scale rather than appearing as subjects in their own right. This aestheticisation of the scenery speaks directly to Western desires to demystify foreign lands and subject them to preconceived visual frameworks. The drawings portray a vast, empty land in a seemingly neutral manner that in fact participates in a visual logic that conforms to colonial aesthetics and reveals an integral connection to imperialism.²⁷ Conversely, the photograph examined here

operates differently. It reveals Oliphant's limited technical proficiency, which may have allowed less preconfigured depictions to emerge. Unintentionally, Oliphant's amateurism draws attention to the raw texture of the earth, exposing its uneven surface and presenting it as always in contact with its inhabitants. The soil thus becomes an active surface of encounter, binding the subjects and photographer alike to the terrain they occupy. Through its literal margins, the photograph thus reveals a central tension at the heart of colonial encounters, and the dirty, messy reality of any engagement with and in relation to the territory.

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From today's vantage point, the fact that written documentation of Daliat el-Carmel from the period was produced only by and about Western experiences amplifies Oliphant's visibility while obscuring that of the Druze woman. It is in such instances that other forms of knowledge become crucial. And indeed, oral testimonies by Daliat el-Carmel's elders have helped identify the Druze sitter as Fooda Hassoun (فُضَّة حَسُون), wife of Kasem Yousef Nasereldeen Nasereldeen (قاسم يوسف نصرالدين نصرالدين).²⁸ This identification is significant: it transforms the subject from an anonymous 'type' within a colonial archive into a named individual with a place in her community's lineage. In Hassoun's case, this also situates her within a distinguished family in her own right, as the Hassouns shared the Nasereldeens' high social status and frequently intermarried. However, beyond the act of naming, village elders were unable to provide information about Hassoun or other women of the period, including Oliphant. Their testimonies centred instead on Laurence's endeavours in the village and the male villagers' interactions with him. In this sense, these narratives ultimately perpetuate male domination in historical accounts.

Examining Druze women's fight for visibility beyond the act of naming, recent studies on Druze womanhood suggest that in Druze culture, women's resistance does not take the form of direct opposition to power but is expressed in nuanced forms of independence that operate within existing social structures. One way in which Druze women navigate the patriarchal conditions under which they live is through bargaining, accepting certain societal norms in order to gain independence or self-expression in other domains they deem more vital.²⁹ Applied to the context of this image, we

might read the photograph as documenting a moment in which Hassoun navigates the constraints of both patriarchal and colonial framings. The image captures her role as a mother in a composition that may even recall the Christian iconography of the Madonna and Child with John the Baptist, while simultaneously suggesting that her engagement with the camera exceeds this containment.³⁰ Hassoun's facial expression and ease, her proximity to her children, and the natural-looking pose she shares with her older child suggest that they were aware and in agreement with their photograph being taken.³¹ The photograph thus holds both the violence inherent in any photographic encounter as well as signs of exchange that cannot be reduced to that violence alone.³² What emerges is not a clear narrative of resistance or compliance, but a photographic trace of negotiation whose full dimensions remain partially inaccessible to us. Given her personal acquaintance with Oliphant, Hassoun may have seen this as a chance to be photographed by someone she knew, and perhaps even trusted, to make herself visible while still maintaining her accepted role. The lineage of negotiation surrounding this encounter and its resulting photograph thus extends from the men and their land deals to the women and their sense of agency. It is the land that connected these women, and it is within this triangular relationship – Alice, Fooda, Daliat el-Carmel – that this photograph should be read. This relational space would not have been possible had Oliphant not lived in Dalieh and developed an intimate familiarity with the Druze community, nor had Hassoun occupied a social position that allowed her to interact with outsiders. Hassoun's smile and apparent confidence suggest conviviality while also conveying a visual sense of dignity and control over her representation. It positions her as an active participant in shaping the encounter, even under the asymmetrical conditions in which it took place.

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The question, then, appears to hinge on the elusive notion of 'belonging'. Considering the emphasis placed by both Alice and her family members on her close ties with the Druze, the photograph she took of Fooda and her children may be read as reflecting Oliphant's own desire to belong, to be 'a Druze all the time', as her husband stresses after her passing. The act of photographing may register Oliphant's own ambivalence, her attempt to position herself within a world to which she remained proximate yet

external. While accounts by nineteenth-century Druze commentators, and by Hassoun in particular, are absent, contemporary oral testimonies suggest that the Druze, too, regarded the Oliphants' proximity to their community not only as a strategic alliance against the Ottomans but also as a source of communal pride. Interviewees repeatedly stressed that Laurence had become 'part of the village' and that he frequently attended local events and religious rituals. His landholdings were specifically cited as evidence of deep ties: 'he [Oliphant] began building his future here. Those who buy land do not intend to sell it tomorrow'.³³ Although Alice and Fooda are not mentioned in these testimonies, they suggest that a sense of belonging and high social standing were aspirations shared by both the British and the Druze, with each party seeing their association as socially beneficial. Being photographed by Oliphant could have been considered a mobilising tool for Hassoun, just as it might have been for Oliphant herself.

The resulting photograph of the encounter between these two women situates Oliphant and Hassoun within a fraught historical moment and introduces the intricate web of relations between interlocutors that frames our reading of history. Photography, in this context, becomes a means of navigating the complexities of women's positionality. It does not necessarily resolve these tensions so much as document the photographer's and subject's entanglement within them. The photographic moment becomes a 'Third Space', revealing itself as a site where colonial binaries become insufficient as analytical frameworks. Rather than confirming or subverting the unidirectional model of imperial encounters, the photograph suggests that such encounters were always more complex than these models allow. Bhabha's 'Third Space' emerges here as a fraught, uneven, yet vital ground where subjectivities clash, rearticulate, and hybridise.

What is at stake in this analysis is the recognition that photographs elude the clarity we often demand from historical evidence. Accordingly, photography's refusal of interpretive certainty becomes a resource for understanding the irreducible complexity of colonial encounters. The lives it records are present, and yet partially obscured; the encounter it documents is charged, but unreadable in full. If the photograph gestures to an alternate vision of the land and its inhabitants, it does so through a kind of historical excess – an accumulation of small, relational traces that refuse to resolve into clarity and operate in the register of the optical unconscious.³⁴ The photograph of

Fooda Hassoun by Alice Oliphant is an opaque fragment caught between private intimacy and colonial asymmetry, between personal acquaintance and structural domination. Attending to this allows us to glimpse the messy social fabric in Ottoman Palestine.

Notes

- 1 A foundational text on nineteenth-century photographic representations of Middle Eastern women is Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- 2 Many scholars have challenged photography's assumed transparency and its claims to provide unmediated access to reality. Focusing on nineteenth-century photography specifically, John Tagg's analysis of the use of photography in the service of institutional power is worth mentioning, as is Allan Sekula's insistence that photographic 'truths' are shaped by the social and institutional conditions under which images are produced and circulated. I have also found useful Elizabeth Edwards' analysis of British amateur photography and its embeddedness in imperial imaginaries and historical narratives. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,' *Artforum* 13, no. 5 (January 1975): 36–45; Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive,' *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64; Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 3 Prominent research in the debate on Western women's position in the Levant includes Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991); Nancy Micklewright, *A Victorian Traveler in the Middle East: the photography and travel writing of Annie Lady Brassey* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003); Nancy Stockdale, *Colonial Encounters among English and Palestinian Women, 1800–1948* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).
- 4 Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography,' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), 243.
- 5 The dominant Saidian interpretation of Orientalism has been critiqued for its purported homogeneous narrative of Orientalist phenomena as well as its alleged reliance on binary oppositions which fail to acknowledge the nuances of Western-Eastern relationships. Concepts like Bhabha's 'Third Space' have provided more ambivalent, relational approaches to colonial encounters, though these have also been challenged. Critics have noted that discourses of hybridity and cultural mixing can dehistoricise or depoliticise colonialism, and emphasise the need for a more nuanced understanding of race, class, and gender intersections in postcolonial theory. Some have noted that the

- very use of the term 'hybridity' is problematic, pointing to its biological and botanical origins and the pure antecedents it presumes, and questioning whether the concept can ever fully break from its racialised history. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). For critiques of Said and Bhabha, see for instance Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997); Katharyne Mitchell, 'Different Diasporas and the Hype of Hybridity,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15, no. 5 (1997): 533–553; Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 6 Mary Louise Pratt has written extensively on spaces of negotiation in the imperial context. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 8–9.
 - 7 A relatively extensive biography of Alice Oliphant appears in the catalogue of one of the only exhibitions dedicated to her visual work. See Yossi Ben-Artzi, 'Alice Oliphant – A Personality in Her Own Right,' in *In Lady Oliphant's Drawing-Room*, curated by Lida Sharef-Massad (Haifa: Haifa Museums, National Maritime Museum, 2000), 58–42.
 - 8 Margaret Oliphant, *Memoir of the Life of Laurence Oliphant and of Alice Oliphant, His Wife*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1891), 154.
 - 9 Herbert W. Schneider and George Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim: Being the Incredible History of Thomas Lake Harris and Laurence Oliphant; Their Sexual Mysticism and Utopian Communities Amply Documented to Confound the Skeptic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 331.
 - 10 Oliphant, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 302.
 - 11 Curator Guy Raz has contributed significantly to identifying and tracing the work of women photographers in Palestine, most visibly through the exhibition 'Her Own Portrait' at PHOTO IS:RAEL in 2019.
 - 12 Gil Pasternak, 'Photographic Histories, Actualities, Potentialities: Amateur Photography as Photographic Historiography,' in *Reconsidering Amateur Photography*, ed. Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie (Bradford, UK: National Media Museum, 2012), accessed May 28, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170218094345/http://eitherand.org/reconsidering-amateur-photography/photographic-histories-actualities-potentialities-/#fn12>.
 - 13 Oliphant, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 197.
 - 14 One particularly relevant exploration of photographs as material objects that function across time and space in the colonialist context is Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).
 - 15 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Relä Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008): 11, 13. My argument is indebted to Ariella Azoulay's conception of the photographic encounter. Azoulay further articulates how these relations are bound by civic and ethical obligations that exceed the moment of exposure. At the same time, I remain attentive to the critiques of her work, which highlight issues of clarity and question the universalising reach of claims grounded in specific political contexts. See for instance Justin Carville, 'Intolerable Gaze: The Social

- Contract of Photography,' *Photography and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2010): 353–58. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, in particular, challenges Azoulay's treatment of gender, arguing that her account of women's vulnerability risks collapsing distinct forms of violence into an undifferentiated category. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Azoulay Accords,' *Art in America* (September 2009): 45–48.
- 16 Christopher Pinney, 'How the Other Half...', in *Photography's Other Histories*, eds. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3–4. Pinney also draws on what Carlo Ginzburg termed 'physiognomic' readings – interpretive approaches that reflect a scholarly inclination to support pre-existing Saidian or Foucauldian political hypotheses.
 - 17 Ibid, 4–5. Pinney extends Michael Aird's use of the term 'look past', as introduced in his essay in the volume.
 - 18 For instance, see Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley have pushed the notion of ambivalence following Freud, articulating it as 'the simultaneous holding of different (even binary) positions that are perhaps irreconcilable... They not only exist but also coexist in ways that cannot necessarily be disentangled.' Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley, eds., *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019), 3. For an account of how photography's 'uncertainty' destabilises its assumed evidential function, see Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographic Uncertainties: Between Evidence and Reassurance,' *History and Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2014): 171–88. Similar notions are also explored by Kaja Silverman in her discussion of analogy in Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy: Or The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
 - 19 Oliphant, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 159. For more about Druze culture and history, particularly on Mount Carmel, see Kais M. Firro, *A History of the Druzes* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1992); Salman H. Falah, 'A History of the Druze Settlements in Palestine During the Ottoman Period,' in *Studies on Palestine During the Ottoman Period*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz, 31–48 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1975); Aehab As'ad and Rabei G. Khamisy, 'The Druze Settlement on Mount Carmel: Daliyat al-Karmil as a Case Study – Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Evidence,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 57, no. 5 (2021).
 - 20 Oliphant, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 169.
 - 21 Ibid, 211.
 - 22 Ibid, 236.
 - 23 Laurence Oliphant, *Haifa; or, Life in Modern Palestine*, ed. Charles A. Dana (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1887), 162–3.
 - 24 An interview with Abu Fuad Hassan Salah Nasereldeem, Fuad Nasereldeem, and Riad Hassoun, conducted by the author, Daliat al-Carmel, September 12, 2025.
 - 25 For more on drawing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
 - 26 Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984; repr., Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). Cosgrove situates this 'way of seeing' within the emergence of capitalist relations to land in early modern Europe.

- 27 About landscape's function in the service of imperialism see W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape,' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5–34. Mitchell has also written specifically about the holy landscape of Israel/Palestine in W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Holy Landscape: Israel, Palestine, and the American Wilderness,' *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (Winter, 2000): 193–223.
- 28 Interview with Abu Fuad Hassan Salah Nasereldeen, Fuad Nasereldeen, and Riad Hassoun, September 12, 2025.
- 29 Ebtesam Barakat, 'Gender Struggle Within Complex Religious Realities: Druze Women in Israel as a Case Study,' *Gender Issues* 39, no. 1 (2022), 39–63. Barakat draws upon earlier scholarship that critically interrogates gender, agency, and authority in Middle Eastern societies, notably the work of Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood. Her use of 'bargaining' draws on the work of Deniz Kandiyoti, particularly in Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy,' *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274–290.
- 30 While Oliphant never explicitly used religious motifs in her visual production, her immersion in a culture saturated with biblical imagery suggests that such references may have shaped her composition, even if only subconsciously.
- 31 In her analysis of images titled 'Zulu Mothers' circulating in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, Christraud Geary identifies visual cues that may suggest a measure of voluntary participation on the part of the sitters, even within the asymmetrical dynamics that structured their encounters with (likely Western) photographers. She particularly points to the ways in which children's cooperation may signal parental consent. Christraud Geary, 'Zulu Mothers' and Their Children Traveling Around the World: From Photograph to Picture Postcard,' in *African Photography from the Walther Collection: Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, ed. Tamar Garb (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl/The Walther Collection, 2013), 70–80.
- 32 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 99.
- 33 Interview with Abu Fuad Hassan Salah Nasereldeen, Fuad Nasereldeen, and Riad Hassoun, September 12, 2025.
- 34 Walter Benjamin's concept of the optical unconscious foregrounds photography's capacity to register involuntary and contingent details that escape conscious intention and exceed the limits of human perception. Rosalind Krauss later reworked the term to critique modernist claims of pure visual autonomy, foregrounding the repressed psychological and bodily dimensions of vision. More recent scholarship has returned to Benjamin's idea specifically in relation to photography, developing the optical unconscious as a historical and political concept. Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography'; Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski, eds., *Photography and the Optical Unconscious* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).