

Songs for Harlem and Laments for the Children in Birmingham and Beyond: A Review of the documentary *No Other Land* (2024)¹

Anthony Purvis

Across the cages of the keyless aviaries,
The lines and wires, the gallows of the broken kites,
Crucify, against the fearful light,
The ragged dresses of the little children.
Soon, in the sterile jungles of the waterpipes and ladders,
The bleeding sun, a bird of prey, will terrify the poor,
These will forget the unbelievable moon.²

The years have passed since Merton wrote these opening lines of 'Aubade — Harlem'. The emotion, however, speaks well beyond the immediacy of place and time. The poem goes on to describe how 'Daylight has driven iron spikes, / Into the flesh of Jesus' hands and feet: / Four flowers of blood have nailed Him to the walls of Harlem'.³ This is commanding imagery. It disrupts traditional modes of seeing and perceiving Harlem, pointing to the deeper truths the district might signify. Inspired initially by his walk home, Merton hears a mother's injunction, cautioning her child not to fly a kite on the Harlem rooftops.

'Aubade — Harlem' alludes to other voices and cries, ones which we continue to remember and which resound with anguished pathos across our world. Poetry functions in relation to memory, in the way that monuments and museums do, but also in the way that photograph albums can, or home-made films and diaries. Images, in this case Merton's words, invite us to hear in the voices of New York's dispossessed the cries of the universal poor, the ones spoken of by Jesus in the equally striking and disruptive imagery recorded in Matthew's Gospel.⁴

A memorial, or *memoria*, speak of and beyond their immediacy.⁵ In the case of such recollections, we hear voices whose dispossession is not confined to Harlem's doorways of the 1930s or, with Matthew, first-century Palestine. Rather, they reverberate across the edifices and

monuments erected in the name of each epoch's repeated claims to modernity, monuments so easily and unceremoniously demolished in the silencing din of violation. But for Merton, material artefacts are made visible and audible in and around human culture: Prades, Oakham, Cuba, Columbia, Gethsemani, place names associated with Merton's past, speak to us now, for ever alive, rich in memory and desire, and not only Merton's.

Harlem signifies people, community and home as much as it points to land, exclusion and dispossession. Merton, still living in New York and studying at Columbia at this time, is walking home from duties at Friendship House. His attention, first drawn by sounds of voices, beholds in the poem the bigger context, probing something yet still deeper. Merton the contemplative listens to and beyond the injunction not to fly a kite and hears people who, in Matthew's words, 'are always with us'. Who are these people who are ever present?

I was strikingly reminded of Merton's poetry, and of those people who are always with us, when I watched the documentary *No Other Land*. A Palestinian-Israeli collective documents West Bank violence and displacement. The film is significant because it's not the product of bystanders but peacemakers and activists. This is an unadorned insider's record of conflict. I've watched it a few times now, and spoken of it at length with friends – journalists, trade unionists, activists, refugees and others – in and beyond my own region and country. Reviews of the film testify to its impact and significance. It's a 'must-see' for today's Merton readers, resonating as it does ideas raised not only in his poetry, but also *Seeds of Destruction*⁶ and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.⁷

On one level, the film functions as a memoria, but the use of the term here comes with a deeply poignant inflection: this is a commemoration that is alive and on-going, signifying past trauma and its repetition. Sadly, this is a documentary whose existence was aggressively undermined throughout filming, and where the crew's equipment and livelihood were permanently at risk.

We don't hear the same voices or cries recorded by Merton, but we do see and hear Merton's insights in the film's depiction of recurring acts of violence, materially embodied in the tears and suffering of people whose entitlement to a homeland is denied. In the poetry and prose written during the 1960s, Merton disrupts how we might understand what is happening in his own country. He doesn't seek for tidy, explanatory metaphors so much as he searches for new ways of understanding and using language. Indeed, with the 'Children of Birmingham'⁸, so, too, the

children of Masafer Yatta in the West Bank give 'their town a name to be remembered', a place where kites may fly freely from the region's rooftops.

During the 1960s, Merton's prose and poetry functions to bridge the profound gaps, the deathly silences in the culture, where few in public office speak of peace and reconciliation.

Your dark eyes will never need to understand
Our sadness who see you
Hold that plastic glass-eyed
Merchandise as if our empty-headed race
Worthless full of fury
Twanging and drooling in the southern night
With guns and phantoms
Needed to know love⁹

In the way that he is deeply troubled by the attack on innocent children in 1963, so we too are shocked by an equally unnecessary tragedy. Hear the voices of 2024:

They're taking our home. / What will we do? / Put that in the corner. / Organize our things. / Put your clothes in the cave. / Do you have a place for this? / Put our beds deep inside the cave. / Kids don't go far, help us! / Bring the laundry machine inside. / Are we going to live in a cave now? / Oh my, nothing is left. / They destroyed even the sheep pen. / - You're Basel? / - Yes. / I'm Yuval, how are you? / Yuval, please be sensitive with the people. / They asked if I'm an Israeli journalist?¹⁰

These words, spoken not long into the documentary, disclose the film's production values and its collective dimensions. The film is not complicated. A fairly classical documentary format, which is collaborative rather than auteur-based, holds together the lives and events of people from Masafer Yatta and who might otherwise have been forgotten. The film spans about twenty or so years (thanks in part to Basel Adra's homemade video footage), though the time frame is more centrally focused around the last five years and especially the last two.

Significant allusions to a longer history speak powerfully through the bulldozed remains of homes. It's a film that is able to reach beyond the superficial, heavily censored news feeds and media reports that dart across handsets and screens. In many respects, the film is born of a

prolonged moment of listening and watching, an on-going engagement that has been happening outside the gaze of Western media.

Thanks to Basel Adra, the film started life earlier than its moment of production (he begins filming when he's 15), and whilst he is one of four directors, he remains an important site for the documentary's focalisation. The film, however, is impossible to imagine without a crew that listens to each other and to those who live in Masafer Yatta. If ever there was a case for immediate cessation of destruction and violence, and not just in the West Bank, then it lies in this film's dialogic, expansive qualities.

A few minutes into the documentary, we meet Yuval Abraham, an Israeli investigative journalist. He's at Adra's home, initially greeted with suspicion. Two other journalists who began to visit the village as it opposed occupation are Hamdan Ballal, a Palestinian farmer, photographer, and human rights researcher; and Rachel Szor, an Israeli visual journalist. Week by week, the four become acquainted. It's at this point that Ballal suggests the four collaborate on a longform documentary. From conversation and collaboration came listening; and from the listening, so the bonds of trust were firmly established. Perhaps this is the film's testimony to the meaning of how we might understand *memoria*: as the moment where place, time and event represent the way of life of a people whose voices must be heard and recalled.

Adra was born in the Palestinian community of Masafer Yatta in 1996. This is – was – an area of about twenty small villages in the mountains of the West Bank. Watching the film, the abiding sense of its topography are the limitless, stunning horizons, unadorned by high-rise buildings or tenements. But this is not mediated in poetic or obviously self-reflexive ways. It is very direct. The shots are jumpy. The industry-based standards for evaluating non-fiction documentary film do not really apply to a piece whose production crew are still being attacked. Crew members are subject to bodily harm as they film bulldozers clearing ground for 'settlers'. Longshots look to the sky and horizon, momentarily, perhaps desperately, fleeing the present moment in images that beckon with an imaginary potential. 'Is it possible to imagine something more universal and abiding?', I ask myself. The film's personal topographies speak of limitation, suffering and dislocation. But the film disrupts one's conditioned expectations.

It is these two horizons – of land and people – that come together in a powerful story. It's not an 'easy watch'; and – sadly – it's not an unfamiliar story. But for the local people, this watch is a vigil, a prophetic

resistance, a seemingly endless wait. Towards the end of the film, the crew imagine that their efforts won't dampen hope. I'm reminded that Merton's civil rights poems, whilst hugely troubling (and they should be) also don't dampen hope. *No Other Land* resonates very much the sadness and brutality reported in Merton's civil rights poetry and in his later prose reflections on ideas which take shape around the terms 'white liberal' and 'the guilty bystander'.¹¹ But the form – Merton's poetry, and in this case documentary film – is disruptive. It won't let one rest or simply walk on by.

I am not sure we witness any bystanders in *No Other Land*, though in the film's 'flashbacks' (Adra's home-film clips) there is every sense of where responsibility rests for the violence. Three minutes into the film and footage from Adra's younger years records children playing on work vans, collecting straw with family members, gleefully fooling around water wells with the exuberance that erupts with innocence and childhood. No one is guilty here. These are happy times, presented without any naïveté or sentimentality. This feels like a home-movie. It is twenty or so years ago. 'No one is by-standing, are they?', I ask myself again and again.

I ask these questions because the film, rightly, makes for uncomfortable moments, though there's no sense that this is born of conceit or gratuity. One senses that, despite their courage and determination, the crew are unassuming, modest. There are no aggrandising, liberal gestures in the film's performative qualities. 'Who will watch the film? Why is it being withdrawn in some cinemas? Why have the crew been subject to repeated attacks? What can I do?' These questions remain, not least in light of Merton's own reflections written during the 1960s. Some questions persist, and still do. 'Are we all guilty bystanders [...] implicated in systemic evil [...] living far from the epicenters of human suffering'?'¹²

Thirteen minutes into the film and something now feels very uneasy. We are following the film's own 'linear' sequence. But now, mixed with footage from an earlier period, we learn about the beginnings of settlers' encroachments. The horizon abides. But it's abiding by way of exclusion and expulsion. Still the children play. Washing hangs drying in the warm air; battered rooftops mark the place of homes, separated from the historic caves and meeting places. Now, and again now, more threats are followed by bulldozers, army vehicles and ...

Watching the film, I can't not confront the fact that the bystander might in fact be me. It's not for a review such as this to imagine a 'we'

who by-stands. I can't say with any ease, as others have suggested, that '*we are all guilty bystanders*'. More importantly, I really don't think the film intends to generate this effect either. *No Other Land* isn't pointing fingers at a plural, unidentified 'we' or 'you'. Far from it. This is a film to augment hope, not diminish it. What is clear in my own understanding is that the people of the West Bank are surely not bystanders. With the children of Birmingham in 1963, and many before and since, the people of Masafer Yatta are not guilty.

Review after review of this film is hugely positive; awards continue; and that means mainstream media isn't left to tell the whole story. This film ensures these people will not be forgotten. Deploying expository modes associated with the earliest traditions of classical documentary, and attentive to modes associated with documentarists John Pilger and Yasmine Perni¹³ *No Other Land* does not offer a poetic metaphor or simile by which to tie up loose ends. But in the midst of despair, the film continues in its own hope, with others and perhaps, sadly, also regardless, such is the determination to continue hoping. The film alludes to an end point, but it does so, crucially, in the very collaborative dimensions of film-making itself.

They deprive us of our rights. They have great military and technological power. But they shouldn't forget how once, they too were weak. They suffered like this. And they won't succeed, with all their strength they will fail. They will never make Palestinians leave this land. What do you think?" // "I think we need ... I think people need to figure out how to make change. That's the question. Somebody watches something, they're touched, and then? Exactly. What can we do? I hope we'll change this bad reality. I hope.¹⁴

I wonder if this is what will be remembered as the film passes into wider circulation? The very construction of the film itself will be recalled as a hope-filled, dialogic space where cultural and historical meanings come together. It is in this production process that the people become the signifiers of the future. In figuring out 'how to make change', so the films' values serve as point of identity and of continuity, an encounter in time, and where place and people are called into communion. This is where the possibility of peace is heard.

Thanks to Merton, we hear with him the cries of Harlem and Birmingham. Thanks to *No Other Land*, we hear voices of the West Bank. Poetry and film – despite populist claims to the contrary – can never resolve human contradictions. But they can expose them, raise questions

about them and imagine a new space in which to talk. The film has – rightly in my view – won several prizes, not least from peers in the documentary field. However, no number of prizes will fully accord the film’s importance as a collaborative event rooted in listening and – despite the noise of war – in brief moments of almost contemplative silence. Documentaries can’t do the same things as poetry. Nor should they. But they do bring to us, as did Merton’s poetry, an image, a face, a voice and a renewed desire to hope. And as Israeli journalist Abraham Yuval listens to people who don’t trust him on both sides, so audiences realise that it is in the mistrust, the perplexity and refusals that a new future is hoped for. This is a documentary born of listening at these deep levels.

‘Merton recognized early on that in an increasingly violent and cacophonous world, the ability to listen is constrained, and even threatened.’¹⁵ Merton knew that poetry, in words and images, materialises for us geographies and landscapes peopled by folk whose suffering requires a response. Poetry is one way of evoking an emotion that invites us to respond. That’s why Merton’s words continue to speak so powerfully today. So, too film and documentary. Merton is not a bystander, at least not when it comes to a listening which is also a response.

And perhaps a similar claim can be made of *No Other Land*. In March 2025, not long after the film was awarded the Oscar’s Documentary Prize, one of the co-directors was again physically attacked for his involvement in the film. ‘We sincerely apologise to Mr Ballal and all artists who felt unsupported by our previous statement’, read a statement from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, ‘and want to make it clear that the Academy condemns violence of this kind anywhere in the world’¹⁶ A fresh statement read: ‘We abhor the suppression of free speech under any circumstances. It is indefensible for an organisation to recognise a film with an award in the first week of March, and then fail to defend its film-makers just a few weeks later.’¹⁷ All the more reason to champion moments when, with Merton and others, we continue to listen to each other in ‘violent and cacophonous world’. *No Other World* demonstrates that, despite all odds, it’s still possible to listen.

Notes

1. *No Other Land* (2024). Dir. Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor; Yabayay Media, Antipode Films; running time 92 minutes.

Available to download via usual media platforms. Images used *with permission*, Antipode Films (31 March 2025).

2. I selected material from *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ed. & with an Introduction by Lynn R Szabo, New York: New Directions, 2005. This collection – and there are a number to choose from – usefully brings together material pertinent to this current review.
3. Ibid.
4. Matthew 26: 9-11
5. *Memoria* (Latin) renders singular and plural meanings in one noun.
6. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, London: Macmillan, 1967
7. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1966
8. Szabo, op. cit.
9. Ibid, 'Picture of a Black child with a white doll; dedicated to 'Carole Denise McNair, killed Birmingham, Sept., 1963
10. Full film script for *No Other Land* is available here <https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewtopic.php?t=164109>:
11. See in particular Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*; *Seeds of Destruction*.
12. These questions are originally posed as claims in Bonnie Thurston, "Thomas Merton on the Gifts of a Guilty Bystander" (Full text: <https://thomasmertonsociety.org/Guard/Thurston.pdf>) My decision to re-phrase the claims as interrogatives is with the aim of confronting the unresolved challenges in understanding the wider dimensions and implications of Merton's notion of the bystander. See also James Cronin for an excellent examination of related issues in Cronin, James G. R. 'The Bystander Motif in the Social Writings of Thomas Merton', *Merton Journal*, Vol. 22:1, 2014.
13. See Perni's important *The Stones Cry Out* (2014), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2965266/>
14. Op cit, *No Other Land* transcript.
15. Kathleen Norris, 'Preface', in *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*. op. cit.
16. See *The Guardian* (UK), 29 March, 2025.
17. Ibid.

Anthony Purvis is Treasurer and Membership Secretary of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland.