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New Faculty

A sense of place

Associate Professor Irus Braverman explores the nexus of law, geography and anthropology

These days, Irus Braverman is learning her way around Buffalo, having moved here in early June. But knowing east from west is proving to be somewhat difficult. It is, she says, mostly a question of acquired geography: “I grew up in Jerusalem and am used to having mountains around to keep me oriented. Here I mostly get lost.”

Indeed, it is that sense of inner-connectedness between the natural and the social worlds that informs Braverman’s work, which travels between the disciplines of law, geography, and anthropology. She joins the UB Law faculty from Harvard University, where she was an associate at the Humanities Center and previously a visiting fellow at Harvard Law’s Human Rights Program. She has also just defended her thesis for a doctorate in juridical science at the University of Toronto.

Braverman (her first name is pronounced Ee-rous) wrote her M.A. thesis in criminology on housing regulations in East Jerusalem, and about the governmental practice of house demolitions in particular. In her doctoral thesis, Braverman’s focus of attention has shifted from the space of the house to that of trees.

“In a way, one is no less of a human construction than the other,” she explains, “only that with trees people seem to believe that they are natural and therefore are not social or political constructs, which is precisely why trees provide such a fascinating research project.”

Her doctoral thesis, titled “Tree Wars: A Study of Natural Governance in Israel/Palestine and in Four American Cities,” deals with what she calls “the politics of nature.” Her awareness of the political power of natural things dates back to her practice as an environmental lawyer in Tel Aviv some ten years ago. Accordingly, the first part of her thesis focuses on the politics of pine and olive landscapes in Israel/Palestine.

“Trees there play a very important national role,” she explains. The pine was the main tree planted by the Jewish National Fund for decades and has come to be identified with the Jewish people, while the olive tree has become a symbol of Palestinian clinging to the land and resistance to the Israeli occupation. Tensions between the two groups have manifested themselves also in the burning of forests and the uprooting of olive groves.

At the same time, Braverman also clarifies that there is more to the picture than this binary tree affiliation. She explains that the dual identities can also be bypassed and confused by a set of sometimes surprising connections. For example, “the olive tree is used in various instances as a symbol of the Israeli state and Jewish settlers have increasingly been planting olive trees,” she says.

The second part of her thesis discusses the role of trees in certain American urban settings, and in four North American cities in particular, including Toronto and Boston, Mass. She explores the way human traffic is controlled through the placement of trees on city sidewalks, as well as the dynamic between tree management on city sidewalks and urban crime control.

Now that she is in Buffalo, Braverman is considering studying the October 2006 storm and its social and spatial effects. “Having trees play such an important role in Buffalo since the storm is a very interesting coincidence with my own research interests,” she states. She has already started interviewing various tree officials in town.

Buffalo’s location near an international border is another topic that triggers her interests, and there she finds further evidence that geography and politics go hand in hand. Her border experience dates back to

her years in Israel, where she was active in a women’s group that routinely monitors Israeli soldiers’ behavior at various checkpoints in the West Bank.

Braverman has worked as a community organizer in low-income communities in Washington, D.C.; Boston; and San Diego, as well as in Israel. Now, at UB Law, she is excited at the prospects of legal scholarship that cuts across disciplines, and she admires the unique and eclectic scholarship of her new colleagues at the law school. She mentions the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy as an excellent place for scholars from different disciplines to come together. She wants to develop ties with other departments at UB, especially with the departments of geography, anthropology, and sociology.

She is also excited about teaching. This will be her first time teaching law to American students, and she is looking forward to the challenge. “When someone practices law, it is important that they are reflective about their work,” she says. “Teaching in general—and teaching in a law school in particular—is about providing law students with tools for critical thought and reflexivity, making law a living thing rather than something passive or stagnant that students feel they have no influence over.”

As she begins teaching, her courses will include topics such as Law and Nature and Law and Geography. Those courses will begin in the spring because of a personal blessing: Braverman and her partner, Gregor Harvey, a classical and folk guitarist and Irish mandolin player, had their first child at the end of August.

A close-up portrait of Associate Professor Irus Braverman. She has dark, curly hair and is wearing a black turtleneck under a brown and grey plaid jacket. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

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—Associate Professor Irus Braverman