

# ABOUT LAND

Colonization, whether  
in Canada or Palestine,  
marks a before and  
an after where  
identity is radically  
altered by loss.

by Wanda Nanibush



IN MAY 2016, I travelled with artists Jamelie Hassan and Ron Benner to Bethlehem for a conference called Art and Resistance, organized by Rehab Nazzal of the Dar Al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture. As we clipped along from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, our driver, a Palestinian from East Jerusalem, pointed out the contradiction of the new road: it is built on illegally confiscated Palestinian land, yet Palestinians are not allowed to drive on it. Our driver had Israeli citizenship, but for Palestinians, it would take hours to do what we did in 10 minutes. The aftertaste of occupation is bitter.

From the car, I filmed my first sight of what many Palestinians refer to as the Israeli Apartheid Wall. I was shocked by its size—twice the height of the former Berlin Wall—and impressed by the beauty and resilience of the graffiti that covers it. It reminded me of Palestinian artist Laila Shawa's silkscreen *Walls of Gaza, Series I* (1992), which I had just photographed at the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Art in Amman. Her work speaks to the use of graffiti and tagging on household and community walls as a mode of communication during the First Intifada (1987–93)—a form of resistance to Israeli occupation and its ways of keeping information from circulating.

Israel has a general strategy of not allowing Palestinians to see each other, not to mention the ongoing censorship of foreign journalists. Meanwhile, Palestine is in a process of building cultural institutions and policies to serve the development of Palestinian identity. The Palestinian Museum, located just outside of Ramallah, opened this May, celebrating the work of Amman-based landscape architect Lara Zureikat, who was unable to attend because she

couldn't get a travel permit from Israel. Four other artists from Gaza were also refused permits to attend the conference. As an Indigenous visitor, I was primed for these observations, having lived under internal and internalized colonization in the country now called Canada. For nearly 60 years, starting in 1885, parts of western Canada had a pass system that required Indigenous people to obtain a paper from the Indian Agent to leave their reservation. Pass/permit systems have the insidious effect of teaching people that they do not have power. Systems of apartheid are one way of confiscating land, building wealth for the occupier and breeding poverty for the colonized.

Being Indigenous in Palestine is about land. People approached me from this viewpoint, knowing I would understand the land's cultural importance, the trauma of its loss and the desire for return. I heard many personal stories of what Palestinians call *Nakba*, or "catastrophe," where villages had been violently confiscated in 1948 by the newly declared State of Israel, forcing more than 700,000 Palestinians to flee their homes. This is the founding trauma of Palestinian identity and marks village life as pre-colonial. Colonization marks a before and after where identity is radically altered by loss.

The Apartheid Wall's construction and the many illegal Israeli settlements that dot the occupied territories are about land, not religion. Stories from displaced Palestinians remind me of our own elders' stories of sacred sites and hunting grounds lost to modern development projects. At the conference, I spoke about Anishinaabe ways of resistance as not just being against an occupying power, but as being with the land in the name of the life that depends on it. One of the conference's opening speakers, Michel Khleifi, who made the first films on *Nakba* in the 1980s, talked about how the art of resistance is listening to the stories the land tells.

I began to watch the land. We visited a confiscated village as a large

group, which made me deeply uncomfortable with what I felt was trauma porn. As cameras flashed, I resisted the impulse to photograph loss. Images travel, and I had seen photos of destroyed villages before coming here. A fellow artist pointed out the surprising survival of pomegranate trees. I noticed fig and olive trees. I only photographed these sites of resistance. It became an ethics of image-making for me in Palestine that fit an Indigenous ethic of not focusing on victimhood but instead on our survival and persistence in maintaining our culture under the pressure of genocide.

The word “human” often came up among the Palestinian artists and academics I was travelling with. It was invoked as a countermeasure to occupation as a dehumanizing force, and because of a lingering feeling of betrayal represented by the Oslo Accord of 1993. As part of those negotiations, the land was carved up into zones run by either the Palestinian Authority or Israel, or by a combination of both. Using the word “human” in this context represents disillusionment with governments that sell out people’s dreams of liberation to further their own power. The word also represents creation—the energy that sustains a people through genocide. The violence of borders and nations is ever-present. But it is the land that tells another story, one harder to hear but ultimately more profound. It is here, on the land, that a new identity is being formed, through art that forges a path critical of all nation states and the mentality of oppression in all its forms. Struggle defines the most fragile and beautiful aspects of life, which are lost when our differences and ways of being are destroyed. All structures and modes of containing humanity are challenged when thinking of the human in relation to the land.

Artists who work in performance, such as Rana Bishara, have hammered this home by directly intervening into the experiences of occupation. In 2012, Bishara performed *A Scream of Dignity*, wearing a symbolic *kefiyyah* (an ancient cloth that became a symbol of Palestinian resistance in the 1960s) made of thousands of black-and-white plastic zip ties, materials often used as handcuffs. Each handcuff was made in honour of one of the Palestinian prisoners who went on hunger strike for 28 days in 2012. Bishara wore the garment in the streets. Kids whose fathers were in prison put on the *kefiyyah*, instantly understanding its meaning. The performance makes me wonder if under the domain of art-world commerce we haven't placed art as the martyr to capital, and that by dragging it back into the streets, we might find a way out of the endless cycle of conflict and oppression that we have collectively fed. As Bishara states: "Give me a gun and I will give you flowers—I will give you my art." ■





A cactus "tag" marks the names of Palestinians who were forcibly evicted from the village of Lifta by February 1948. Cacti grow everywhere. They are tenacious, rugged and hard to destroy, and have come to represent the Palestinian people and their land.

