

Two Letters from Jerusalem: Haunted by Our Breathing

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It is silenced screaming and pain that turned the streets of Jerusalem into storytellers. As Old City shop owner Abu Ayman explained: “They [the Israeli government] did not leave any breathing space, be it their economic strangulation, their police, the soldiers and their rifles, their secret police, their checkpoints, their settlers, their youth that turned the Old City into their playground, and we are their targets ... My neighbor died yesterday, and I could not even go to the funeral, as they blocked off the entire area. As you see, we are silenced, our burdens are more than we can carry ... So, we stopped even daring to speak. But maybe soon they will also start punishing us for our silence, for even breathing.”

Abu Ayman was not alone in living the everyday terror that has claimed the streets of occupied Jerusalem. Such terror has also invaded the very intimate space of the body. When Tahani, a young pregnant woman in Ras al-‘Amud, began having contractions this week, about to give birth, she feared going to the hospital, worried about being abused on her way or attacked by teargas bombs. A large Israeli police presence was controlling her neighborhood, and the road to the Palestinian-run Maqasid hospital on the Mount of Olives was the scene of confrontations between protestors and the Israeli police. She was forced to seek care at an Israeli hospital in West Jerusalem. When she arrived at the emergency room at a late stage, the medical team in Sha’are Tzedek was surprised by her “ignorance” and called her a “backward” Palestinian for not reaching the hospital and delivering the baby safely and on time. As Tahani whispered on the phone as she described her exchange with the Israeli nurses: “What do they know? They know nothing about me. They know nothing about my ordeal.

I am not an irresponsible mother ... I am simply a Palestinian mother.”

It is here, in occupied Jerusalem, that sixteen-year-old Mohammed Abu Khdeir was kidnapped by a gang of Zionist settlers, tortured, forced to drink gasoline (as his mother explained to us during our visit to the family on 9 July 2014), and burned alive, his body discarded in a forest on the outskirts of the city. Earlier, Jewish lynch mobs roamed the streets chanting “mavet al-Aravim” (death to Arabs), searching for Palestinians to brutalize in further acts of “vengeance,” a call first posed by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu after the bodies of three murdered Israeli settler youth were discovered in the occupied West Bank. Even as some liberal Zionists attack settlers and the state for their violent acts and further incitement to racial violence, the agonies of bereaved Jewish parents and families during the funeral of their children draw the support of entire nations, while the family of Abu Khdeir, amidst their grieving, is further criminalized and pathologized by false (and even forged) claims that they took part in their son’s torture and killing, that it was an “honor killing.” Perhaps our pain, suffering, and brutalization at the hands of the Zionist state and settler society is unrecognizable, invisible or rendered invisible to many, but its harrowing effect, as the “exceptionality” in relation to the political economy of representation and the politics of recognition, constitutes the atrocious hegemonic necropolitical culture of denial.

Daily, Israeli pundits, politicians, and scholars debate how to start “teaching” Palestinians and “punishing” us for our inherent criminality. As Ayelet Shaked, a Knesset member from the far-right Jewish Home party, posted on her Facebook page the day before Mohammed was killed:

This is a war between two people. Who is the enemy? The Palestinian people ... They are all enemy combatants ... Now this also includes the mothers of the martyrs, who send them to hell with flowers and kisses. They should follow their sons, nothing would be more just. They should go, as should the physical homes in which they raised the snakes. Otherwise, more little snakes will be raised there.¹

In these times, the biopolitical and necropolitical project of Israeli settler colonial power is unveiled. Each Palestinian child is a potential terrorist, and women, as reproducers of Palestinians, are central to the imagined “demographic threat,” an indigenous presence which must be eliminated to ensure Israeli settler colonial claims to land and identity. As we write this, the death toll in Gaza rises, through indiscriminate attacks on “combatant” and “civilian” populations that have already killed 121 and injured over six hundred, a large portion of which are women and children. Three days ago, twenty-five-year-old Suha Hamad was killed as she tried to shelter her four children from an airstrike that targeted their family home.² It is precisely in line with this politics of fear, guided by a logic of racial and sexual terror, that Dr. Mordechai Kedar, a scholar at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, proclaimed in an interview on Israel’s Reshet Bet radio the day that Mohammed was killed: “the only deterrent for ... those who kidnapped the [Israeli] children and killed them, the only way to deter them is their knowledge that

either their sister or their mother will be raped if they are caught ... this is the culture of the Middle East.”³

Security in the Jewish state has always been a theology. But in such grave times, we witness the security theology reproduced day and night in occupied Jerusalem, both by the state and by settler society, to establish the Palestinian body, space, and time as unworthy Other, reproducing colonial power. It was the second day after Mohammed’s tortured body was discovered and we both needed to regain our power to resist such oppression. We took a walk from the Armenian quarter to the Jewish quarter, listening to the voices in the streets. One young man, an American Jew, told his friend, “We should just shower them all ... shower them all with bullets.” At Shabbat dinner in a dining hall just across from the Wailing Wall, Palestinian youth served Taglit-Birthright youth food and drink – work taken on, however reluctantly, to avoid the economic strangulation that Abu Ayman discussed with us, and support families fighting poverty. As one of the Palestinian workers, accompanied by his Jewish boss, left the dining hall to bring more drinks for the thirsty youth, one of the Birthright teens who was standing around with his girlfriend proclaimed, amidst the crowd’s laughter, “Look at them ... they’re animals ... maybe we should ask them what kind of animals they are.” The words of the young man, the laughter of the couples, the manner in which they portrayed Palestinians, resonate with the words of a public defender in Florida – the state where Tariq Abu Khdeir, Mohammed’s cousin, who was badly beaten by Israeli police and is currently under house arrest, resides. He wrote this week, “They [referring to Palestinian Muslims] are the filthy swine they don’t eat.” His colleague, another lawyer, responded, “That’s why the Palestinian people are considered the cockroaches of the world. Reprehensible and despicable with utter disregard for civility and humanity. Burn them to the ground.”⁴ Jerusalem today is that Manichean world Frantz Fanon described so precisely, where “the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms.”⁵

A “culture of terror” has infiltrated the spaces of everyday life in occupied Jerusalem. Our streets are filled with soldiers and police, in numbers unusually large even for this highly militarized zone under Israeli occupation. Military police on horseback cruise the tight, small paths of the Old City. Flying checkpoints are set up on every street corner. Each morning they invade homes, waking parents from sleep, arresting children without explanation. Yesterday, a young man from Silwan called, describing how four of his neighbors, all teenage boys, were taken by soldiers at 4:30 in the morning. Their parents had not been allowed to accompany them, he says, their lawyer is still uncertain where they are being held and under what charges, if any. “It was like they had just disappeared,” he says, a term that brings to mind the chilling stories of the thousands of *desaparecidos* during the dirty wars in Latin America, those taken in the middle of the night by military forces, many never to be seen again. It is thus that our families live in fear of leaving their homes, but also in fear inside their own homes, which any Palestinian knows very well might be occupied by settlers, invaded or destroyed by the military at any moment. For what reason, one might ask? Being Palestinian is enough.

Young people in Shu‘fat, Silwan, the Old City, Ras al-‘Amud, the Mount of Olives, and other areas of occupied Jerusalem rise up to confront such dehumanizing conditions,

to oppose military incursions into their neighborhoods, and in solidarity with our people in Gaza. Every evening the city is flooded with soldiers, the sounds of helicopters circling above, police cars and ambulance sirens, then silence ... a trapping silence, as if death is approaching. Yet amidst the death zones, one can clearly notice Palestinian women challenging security personnel, men and women working hand in hand to safeguard children from abuses and arrests, and elderly people sitting on street corners, helping, informing, and discussing the “situation” (*al-wadʿ*) with shop owners: another mode of ventilating, supporting each other, and resisting the daily oppression.

But, somehow, the nightmare of colonial control does not evaporate. The daily investigations and humiliations – such as stopping us while entering Jaffa Gate on our way home, requesting a driving license, an identity card, the car’s registration, the reason we are driving at a specific time of day, where we are coming from, where we are planning to park the car; those sudden modes of stopping us and unanticipated checks that are always ready to strip us of our power, posing us as naked entities living under constant investigations – suggest a new penology that transgresses power to validate furthering the colonial power. The new penology that is developed by the colonialists is either hypervisible, as the attacks on Gaza illustrate, and justified by Israel’s security theology and militarized concerns, or invisible to political power holders and their media. This penology not only transformed our spaces into a Panopticon arrayed with mundane and public forms of surveillance and terror that punctuate our everyday lives, demarcating who has a right to the city and who should be expelled; it is also turning our bodies into *ajsad mahdura*, bodies that can be maimed, oppressed, abused, and killed. This may take the form of actual physical killing, or a slow, day-to-day, mundane, intimate, legalized social, cultural, and economic homicide.

We sense the effect of such a penology when hearing Sabri’s words. Sabri, who runs a small fruit and vegetable shop, was walking in Suq al-Husur with his ten-year-old son yesterday when they faced a group of Orthodox Jews, wearing black suits and hats, screaming, “Yimah Shemkha ... Amalek ... Amalek,” biblical terms connoting a curse and death upon an individual or community, including children belonging to Amalek, the *goyim*. Sabri and his son walked fast, then began to run, fearing for their lives, as the group screaming at them grew, along with their fear of being lynched in the streets. Israeli security and border police gathered on the corner of the street, watching them run. As Sabri said: “They enjoyed seeing us running away, they knew we might be attacked ... but, as you know, they only interfere when Jews are attacked.” That same afternoon, an orthodox Jewish child from the fast-expanding settlement of the nearby Jewish quarter hit and bit Ohan, our other neighbor’s son. A group of young Jewish children began attacking Palestinian children, who were playing in the street outside their family home. The settler parents, who came outside to see what the commotion was about, began to hit the Palestinian children with their belts. Those attackers, who constantly terrify our children and people in Silwan, the Old City, al-‘Isawiyya, Ras al-‘Amud, and elsewhere, terrified us for such a long time – but never managed to prevent us from walking our streets, speaking Arabic, being there for each other when needed, and claiming Palestine as our home space. Voices in the suq here in the Old City and among our Palestinian families

in Jerusalem ask how, why, and until when they can bully us and call us Amalek, until when can they block our streets, attack our bodies, lives, and spaces, and stay safe and unidentified or undefined as attackers. The impunity with which such daily attacks and dispossessions occur binds the state and settler society together in colonial criminality.

Amidst the continuous injustices, Israeli media, security, social, and psychological analysts, including some academic colleagues, overwhelmingly seek to explain the torture and burning of a Palestinian child's body and the outbreaks of racial panics and hysteria among civil/settler society as a "new level of escalation," a shocking aberration by a few Jewish extremists in an otherwise democratic society. As if racial terror against Palestinian natives is not formative of the settler-colonial "Jewish state" and the cultural imaginaries of settler identity. The arrests, beatings, torture, and killings of Palestinian bodies are ongoing, laboring in the effort to terrify Palestinian natives away from their homes and land, a sociocide that profoundly resonates with historical and continuous criminalities and colonial violence since the Nakba. The nature of Israeli settler colonial power requires the everyday exercise of terror against the native Palestinian Other, whose very presence haunts the colonial imagination. Indeed, it is haunted by our breathing.

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Endnotes

- 1 Ali Abunimah, "Israeli Lawmaker's Call for Genocide of Palestinians Gets Thousands of Facebook Likes," *Electronic Intifada*, 7 July 2014, accessed 10 July 2014, electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israeli-lawmakers-call-genocide-palestinians-gets-thousands-facebook-likes. Also see Mira Hillel, "Why I'm on the Brink of Burning My Israeli Passport," *Independent*, 11 July 2014.
- 2 "Gaza Mother Dies Shielding Children from Israeli Attack," Ma'an News Agency, 13 July 2014, accessed 13 July 2014, www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=711730.
- 3 Mordechai Kedar, interview by Yossi Hadar, *Hakol Diburim*, Reshet Bet, 2 July 2014, accessed 15 July 2014, www.iba.org.ila/bet/player.aspx#!/style/popAudio/ar/1567635/audio/yes.
- 4 Zachary Fagenson, "Florida Lawyers Fired for Calling Palestinians 'Swine', 'Cockroaches'," Reuters, 8 July 2014, accessed 9 July 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/08/us-usa-florida-facebook-palestinians-idUSKBN0FD2JV20140708
- 5 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 42.