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What It Means To Be Palestinian

Reflections on Anti-colonial Identities in Times of Excessive Production and Destruction

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that during moments of extreme flux and danger, such as the ongoing Israeli war against Gaza, it becomes relevant to consider how Palestinian identity is constructed and performed by a variety of actors, by Palestinians and by their supporters, as the most compelling contemporary form of a transnational anti-colonial identity emerging within and in opposition to persisting colonial structures, oppression and subjugation. It is also in these moments, I propose, that it becomes necessary to resituate, reconfigure and re-center Palestine in the imagination, not as a pre-determined bounded entity, but as an entity that is always in conversation with its imagined spatiality and temporality and with national and transnational communal anti-colonial struggles.

Keywords

anti-colonial – oppression – Palestinian identity – spatiality – temporality – transnational

1 Introduction

... To be sure, no single Palestinian can be said to feel what most other Palestinians feel. Ours has been too various and scattered a fate for that

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sort of correspondence. But there is no doubt that we do, in fact, form a community, if at heart a community built on suffering and exile ... 'Palestinians,' an older relative has been saying to me for at least twenty-five years, 'are a sickness.' I don't share his view, although the fact that we fall between a number of classifications undoubtedly causes our friends, our enemies, [and] ourselves a lot of difficulties, certainly, it contributes to the problem of writing about and representing the Palestinians generally.

SAID 1986: 6

I penned this essay amidst the most violent, horrendous and tragic period for Palestinians wherever they are, but mostly for Palestinians subjected to Israeli genocidal warfare and the destruction of lives in Gaza since 7 October 2023. Much like many other Palestinians since that fateful day, I found myself witnessing intensified, horrific, and relentless violence that is both material and immaterial, violence intended to kill, and violence intended to erase, silence, and even criminalize Palestinian voices, and erase Palestinian identity, essentially what it means to be Palestinian.

As I switched news channels, turned to social media platforms I rarely used before and talked with family and friends desperate to learn more news, I was reminded again of the problems of writing about Palestine and what it means to be Palestinian, problems that Edward Said alludes to in the excerpt above. I was reminded that it is during highly networked, mediated, affective and emotive accounts of what is now a second more virulent Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe) unfolding before our eyes that the question of Palestinian identity, or what it means to be Palestinian, re-asserts itself not only as an academic abstract or theory but as a necessary existential reality to counter Israel's plan to destroy it.

Similarly to other Palestinians, particularly those in the diaspora, I was shocked by the ways Palestinians and Palestinian-ness were represented and addressed in the mainstream Western media and by public officials following the unfortunate events of 7 October 2023 and the violent Israeli response against Gaza and its people. However, I was unsurprised given the century-long history of dispossession, misrepresentation and even silencing of Palestinians in Western public and mainstream media where the (self)-representation and the production of what it means to be Palestinian had been and remain contestable, as so much is about Palestine.

Putting the problematic issues around representation and voice aside, this essay suggests that Israel's ongoing genocidal war against Gaza is an exceptional liminal time that demands rethinking Palestinian identity as the most

compelling contemporary form of a transnational anti-colonial identity emerging within, and in opposition to, persisting colonial structures, oppression and subjugation. It is in such moments of extreme destruction and production that it becomes necessary to resituate, reconfigure and re-center Palestine in the imagination, not as a pre-determined bounded entity, but as an entity that is always in conversation with its imagined spatiality and temporality and with national and transnational communal anti-colonial struggles.

2 Identities in Times of Destruction

The question of Palestinian identity has been debated for long as has efforts, by Israel and its supporters, to suppress it. Like others, I have researched and written about what it means to be Palestinian in the diaspora and among Palestinians in historic Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. My monograph *What it Means to be Palestinian: Stories of Palestinian Peoplehood* (2010) reflected on how Palestinian identity is neither fixed nor essentialist—it is neither personal nor collective, it is neither secular nor religious—rather, it is mobile and fluid, moving along several axes of identifications in accordance with diverse socio-historical contexts, remembered and lived experiences.

In that monograph on the oral history of Palestinian peoplehood and lives, I argued that Palestinians' speaking about themselves 'does not stem from a need to restore an original identity; rather, it is a continuous process of remembering or putting together moment by moment and of provisional and partial reconstruction of the past in the present' (Matar 2011: 4). What it means to be Palestinian, I suggested, was inextricably linked to narrating, and being permitted to narrate, lived experiences and memories of social lives, homes and homeland that remain relevant because of and despite their forced interruption.

Today, within the context of the lengthy and ferocious Israeli violence against Gaza and its mediation aimed at destroying Palestinian-ness and Palestinians' ongoing struggles against this violence, I found myself revisiting that argument and also re-thinking what it means to be Palestinian not only as a discourse or narrative of the past and present but also as continuous meaningful mobilizations around the idea of Palestinian identity—primarily an anti-colonial identity produced and performed through multilayered activities, mobilized by various actors taking myriad routes (not all tangible), relying on both 'old' and 'new' technologies.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, meaningful mobilizations around what it means to be Palestinian not only contend with how to access or preserve

the disappearing through memory-making and remembering but also about how to survive and make meaning out of and despite continuous political impasses and repeated incursions. Meaningful mobilizations around the idea of Palestinian identity, by virtue of the socio-political contexts within which they emerge, are persistent anti-colonial acts of resistance against the wilful and intended Israeli practice to destroy Palestinian-ness, including practices of denying their existence or their right to exist, a voice, to communicate and memory and remembering.

3 Debates about Palestinian Identity

I am old enough to remember the tail-end of the Palestinian revolutionary period when questions of Palestinian identity revolved around the idea as an essentially anti-colonial revolutionary consciousness, which began to emerge, enabled largely, but not solely, by the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) political and cultural program, seeking to mobilize Palestinians and their global supporters behind the liberation struggle.

As I have argued elsewhere, the PLO's political and cultural activism during that period helped mobilize a Palestinian-centric revolutionary aesthetic in language and image, mediate new visibility for the Palestinian people and transform the organization into the most potent contemporary social and political movement in the Arab world, particularly in the early revolutionary period between 1968–1974 (Matar 2018). These practices not only helped attract recruits to the revolution but also helped redefine Palestinians' imagination of themselves while locating this imagination in lived experiences and conditions of displacement (whether as refugee conditions, exile or diaspora) as well as within global struggles against imperialism and injustice.

In the first five months of the latest Israeli aggression against Gaza, I found myself again glued to news channels, switching between broadcasts, searching social media platforms and sifting through mountains of eyewitness accounts and personal narratives. I returned again and again to Edward Said's writings to help make sense of the past and the present and the meaning of Palestinian-ness amid utter destruction and loss of hope. I found solace in thinking that the meaningful mobilization around what it means to be Palestinian, or the Palestinian identity if you wish, must contend with the idea that this identity remains and should be discussed as an anti-colonial one.

I emphasize that this framing does not preclude or deny other articulations of what it means to be Palestinian, nor does it prevent us from understanding how identity emerges, what work it does, and when it might matter to

political and other processes. Furthermore, such a framing does not restrict us from thinking about when and how identity is instrumentalized, essentialized, adapted, disrupted and negotiated, particularly when confronted with socially constructed binaries and political uncertainties. Although this framing allows us to understand the settler-colonial project, namely through Israel, as encompassing all social relations imposed and dominating, and to address the anti-colonial as a necessary strategic framework that engages the intersections of class, disability, ethnicity, gender, linguistic, race, religion and sexuality-based oppressions through historical moments across time and space.

This framing allows us to offer a radical critique of the dominant discourses of the colonial oppressor whose antics and oppressive practices continue to affect the lives of the subordinate and colonized even as the colonized resists such dominance. The anti-colonial, as Simmons and Sefa Dei (2012) potently suggest, gives us a position that is not only revolutionary and emancipatory in terms of its epistemic potential but also in terms of the possibilities of offers for colonized and marginalized subjects to imagine their futures. Importantly, it allows a politicized reading of the present as involving temporalities of practice that have implications for how identity can speak back to the colonizer while insisting on engaging the contemporary moment through memories and histories of colonial violence. It is about the continued struggle to resist the neo-colonial governing procedures that reside within the everyday lived experience.

Using the anti-colonial frame challenges the tendency to discuss identity as simply fluid, in flux or social constructions to be complicated and contested. Rather, it situates Palestinian identity, or what it means to be Palestinian, in what we might call continuous 'anti-colonial moments', when the production and performance of Palestinian-ness intervene in the making of and engagement with global and transnational subversive politics for change and in the emergence of alliances between global anti-colonial struggles sharing histories of oppression and resistance alike.

The contemporary Palestinian anti-colonial moment recalls other older examples, most prominently the anti-colonial moment of the Palestinian revolutionary period during the 1960s–1970s. It attracted global solidarities and mobilization around what it means to be Palestinian and Palestinian-ness while linking to other global anti-colonial movements. What differentiates the contemporary moment from the older ones is that Israel can no longer hide its settler-colonial intentions, nor can it completely silence Palestinians as it had done before. This, of course, is a produce of the increasing visibility of Palestine and Palestinians' lived experiences enabled through the expansion of digital platforms and social media spaces, providing Palestinians the spaces through

which to be seen and heard and through support by diverse solidarity groups in cities of the Western metropole.

What is also different now is that Palestinians everywhere can no longer be silenced, even if they wished to, complicating the relationship with those in the diaspora, like me, who have had and have with those we co-inhabit the same spaces with and with the homeland—a relationship that remains defined by the need to justify your existence as a Palestinian and by the inaccessibility of Palestine as a physical space that continues to grip our imagination.

4 Radical Imaginations of the Anti-colonial

The production and performance of Palestinian-ness (what it means to be Palestinian) involve and evoke radical imaginations as an organized field of social practices, a form of work (labor), or negotiations between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility (see Appadurai 1996). In different ways, we see examples of these imaginations in the production and performance of Palestinian-ness during global protests in the Global North urban centers in support of and solidarity with the Palestinians.

Until the devastating October events and the genocidal and ethnic cleansing by Israelis against Palestinians in Gaza and the Occupied Territories, the historical reality of the settler-colonization of Palestine has often been couched in a specific anti-Palestinian narrative on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a discourse that obscures or denies the double process of imperialism and settler colonialism (British and Zionist) that Palestine was subjected to between the First World War and 1948. Nevertheless, Israel's ferocious response, which continues its permanent war against the Palestinians, has unleashed unprecedented protests and popular mobilizations by global solidarity movements, feminist and anti-race groups in the Global North capitals that together actively re-imagine, re-invent and mobilize Palestinian-ness as an anti-colonial identity.

The chant 'we are all Palestinian' has reverberated in the streets, universities and other spaces, suggesting that global solidarities with Palestine are also social practices and products of particular temporalities, such as the contemporary moment. In this temporality, Palestine is also imagined and mobilized as more than just a Palestinian, or 'local', problem, but a global concern impacting and impacted by other global concerns—black lives, indigenous movements, gender issues, as well as global crises. In an Uber car on my way home recently, the driver from Mauritius almost fell out of his seat when I told him I was

a Palestinian. 'Sister', he told me, 'you make us proud; you are changing the world, you are standing for all of us colonial subjects in our anti-colonial struggle.'

These emotive practices of solidarity confirm Palestine remains an existential concern in the sense that Israeli colonial and discriminatory practices, including overt physical and symbolic violence against Palestinians, have accentuated the liminal nature of Palestinian existence within and beyond borders. Therefore, what it means to be Palestinian, I suggest, has become part of a global vocabulary and language to help us see that Gaza, the metaphor for Palestine, will not disappear and will continue along with other parts of historic Palestine to define the Palestinian relationship with Israel. Edward Said knew as much in 1986 when he sought to wrestle with and convey the ineluctable fact that it is the Palestinians' very existence and presence which matters in this equation. As he wrote:

to the Israelis, whose incomparable military and political power dominates us, we are at the periphery, *the image that will not go away*. Every assertion of our nonexistence, every attempt to spirit us away, every new effort to prove that we were never really there, simply raises the question of why so much denial of, and such energy expended on, what was not there? Could it be that even as alien outsiders, we dog their military might with our obdurate moral claim, our insistence (like that of Bartleby the Scrivener) that 'we would prefer not to,' not to leave, not to abandon Palestine forever?

SAID 1986: 41–42

5 Conclusion

Israel's genocidal war against Gaza which began in October 2023 has underlined the need to address what it means to be Palestinian, or Palestinian identity as the most relevant contemporary example of anti-colonial identity that is revolutionary and emancipatory in terms of its epistemic potential and in terms of the possibilities of offers for colonized and marginalized subjects to imagine their futures. Furthermore, as this essay has proposed, the war, as the most virulent disruptive and destructive temporality has resituated, reconfigured and re-centered Palestine in the imagination, not as a pre-determined bounded entity, but as an entity that is always in conversation with its imagined spatiality and temporality and with national and transnational communal anti-colonial struggles.

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