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1. HOW PALESTINE BECAME IMPORTANT TO AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES



In the nascent days of the millennium, I was a new doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma, attempting to convince potential dissertation committee members of the utility of my proposed project, a comparison of the discourses of colonization in North America and Palestine. It was a difficult sell. The person who would direct my dissertation, Alan Velie, was easygoing, telling me to work on whatever suited me, but other faculty worried that the idea would be too broad or mechanical. Those concerns would later play a critical role in my attempts to manage the focus of the project. Like nearly all doctoral students, I was deeply anxious about my ability to even compose a dissertation. I knew that I knew too little to know how to adequately respond to skeptical authority figures with much greater knowledge.

Eminent scholar Robert Warrior joined the faculty before my third year. I immediately approached him, though with considerable apprehension, not knowing much about his politics or predilections. He expressed enthusiasm about the idea, explaining to me his history with Edward Said and his experiences living and working in Palestine.¹ It quickly became evident in my conversations with Warrior that his interest in my project amounted to

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more than a corresponding interest in the Middle East. It was also methodological. Warrior existed, and continues to exist, at an intersection of variegated, intercommunal methodologies, a focus extending from his first book, *Tribal Secrets*, to the magisterial volume *The World of Indigenous North America*. This twenty-year period in American Indian studies saw increased focus on the national traditions of individual tribes but also on expansive practices of transnational communication. As I became immersed in the field, I realized that American Indian studies has performed inter/nationalism since its inception, a necessity given the heterogeneity of Indigenous nations in America. Descriptions of this transnational focus include “intertribal” and the all but obsolete “pan-Indian,” but in recent years inquiry in the field has moved beyond tribalism (in the sense of Darcy McNickle’s usage) and assessment of pannational affinities, though those subjects remain important.² Recent scholarship has exhibited interest in the histories, politics, and cultures of a wide range of non-American geography. For example, American Indian studies has recently forged connections with Palestine at an institutional level—that is, scholars in the field are now producing systematic analyses of Palestine as a geography of interest (and in some ways crucial) to our understanding of decolonization in North America. How does the presence of Palestine in the field shape and define its limits and possibilities? What are the terms and frameworks for useful comparative scholarship? Are there material politics at stake in comparing America and Palestine? This chapter analyzes those questions.

Before I sort out the comparative bases of Natives and Palestinians, let us take a look at some of the reasons comparison of Natives and Palestinians has increased in recent years. I believe there are three primary factors, each with its own set of contradictions and subtexts:

1. The proliferation of blogs and social media where people are able to argue, inform, share, and theorize, however superficially (or, in some cases, sophisticatedly). These platforms lend themselves to all sorts of comparisons, usually for the sake of rhetorical persuasion. The benefits

and detriments of social media to activism and scholarship are wide-ranging and in much contest, so it is difficult to quantify the exact level of influence of new media on the surge of comparison among Natives and Palestinians, but social media platforms document the extent to which the comparison has entered into the consciousness of a certain demographic, that of the intellectual engaged in public discourse around decolonization.

2. Palestine scholars and activists increasingly use the language of Indigeneity and geocultural relationships to describe the political, economic, and legal positions of Palestinians. For instance, in referencing Natives and Palestinians, Sa'ed Adel Atshan speaks of “our shared history as Indigenous peoples who have faced ethnic cleansing by European colonists.”³ The adoption of such language is a rhetorical act meant to situate—rightly, based on considerable evidence—Palestinian dispossession in a specific framework of colonial history rather than as an exceptional set of events brought forth by ahistorical circumstances. The language identifies a perceived sociohistorical familiarity with other dispossessed communities, in this case North American indigenes. The declaration that Palestinians are not merely native or original but *indigenous* to the land colonized by Israel, not a completely new phenomenon but one growing in frequency, alters a number of crucial factors of Palestinian strategies of decolonization, in particular the relationship of human rights organizations with international law, the comparative possibilities in fields such as ethnic and Indigenous studies, and both intellectual and physical deployment of Palestinian nationalism into transnational spaces.
3. The most important reason for the proliferation of comparative discourses is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS). Boycott of Israeli institutions or of the state itself has a long, albeit uneven, history in

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the Arab world. When I discuss BDS, I have in mind a specific call for cultural and academic boycott issued in 2005 by nearly two hundred organizations representing Palestinian civil society.⁴ Thus BDS is not a governmental or corporate initiative, but neither is it spontaneous or organic, for it arises from a long history of decolonial advocacy on an international scale. Narrowly, BDS can be identified as an initiative of Palestinian civil society to pressure the Israeli state to comply with international laws against colonialism and military occupation, using nonviolent methods of resistance as opposed to traditional diplomatic and dialogic strategies that have repeatedly failed (peace talks, for example, or multicultural programming). This movement continues to grow. What does BDS have to do with American Indian studies? A great deal, actually. I will explain the connections in more detail in chapter 2, but briefly, many Native scholars and activists have taken up the cause of BDS and in so doing have broadened the conditions of studying the decolonization of America and deepened what it means to undertake the types of intellectual and political activities one might perform in the service of Palestinian liberation.

Other reasons for the increase in comparisons of Natives and Palestinians include the ascension of Palestine as a test case of one's decolonial/leftist/scholarly credibility; the success of the Palestinian national movement in convincing greater numbers of people around the world to support or even identify with its cause (aided by increased Israeli belligerence and its dissemination in alternative media); the growth of Arab American studies, a field to which Palestine is central, in the academic spaces of ethnic studies, where it has encountered American Indian and Indigenous studies; and the increased emphasis in American Indian and Indigenous studies on transnational and comparative methodologies, which has led numerous scholars from the Pacific, North America, and South America to Palestine both intellectually and physically.

In early 2012, a small delegation of U.S.-based scholars visited Palestine, a visit arranged by the United States Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI), which campaigns for various BDS initiatives and helps set policy around ethical forms of boycott. In the past few decades, delegations to the West Bank and/or Gaza have been common, usually undertaken by peace groups or students. (Delegations arranged by Zionist organizations to Israel are likewise common; these delegations usually enjoy better funding and attendance.) The 2012 delegation, conceptualized in part as a fact-finding mission, differed from typical delegations in that it was peopled by prominent scholars with expertise in various areas of race and ethnicity. The point of view of the delegation, then, went beyond gathering information that would justify BDS. It also situated Palestinian dispossession in a framework of worldwide neoliberal practices, rather than merely as a consequence of communal strife or historical misfortune. The group was influenced by analysis of iniquity located primarily within U.S. racial paradigms. As a result, we have available an example of how Palestine can be of interest to American Indian studies, in this case through inter/national analysis performed by multiethnic and interdisciplinary academics.

Upon return, one of the delegates, Neferti X. M. Tadiar, observed:

Palestinian life is . . . not the accomplishment of one aberrant state, inasmuch as the latter is supported by a global economy and geopolitical order, which condemns certain social groups and strata to the status of absolutely redundant, surplus populations—an order of insatiable accumulation and destruction that affects all planetary life. The question of Palestine is thus an urgent question of a just and equitable future that is both specific to this context and to this people, and a general and paradigmatic global concern.⁵

Another delegate, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, reflects on a critical conversation she had about BDS in Haifa with a group of Palestinian citizens of Israel:

What emerged from the conversation was that '48 Palestinians are attempting to shift the discourse to the paradigm of settler

colonialism emerging from their concern with the general framework of discourse around the Palestinian question. This approach to boycott insists on a reframing to open up connections with all Palestinians. I could relate to this. In my work fighting the US occupation of Hawai'i, I routinely challenge the US government's legal claim to Hawai'i, expose the roots of the US as a settler colonial state, and critically engage the history of US imperialism in Native America and the Pacific Islands, insisting on the recognition of US empire as a form of violent, global domination.⁶

Both Tadiar and Kauanui emphasize Palestine as a global issue. Tadiar in particular contests what might be called the regionalization of the Israel–Palestine conflict—that is, the propensity to view (by design or ignorance) the conflict as limited to the regional circumstances of its creation. Kauanui personalizes Palestine, reflecting on her history as a scholar-activist of Hawaiian liberation to enter into better comprehension of Zionism's pervasive colonial history. Both writers make clear the need to approach Palestine as a crucial site of global struggle, in the process inherently acknowledging the importance—indeed, centrality—of American decolonization to that struggle.

The delegation visited Palestine at a salient historical moment and in turn played a critical role in developing that moment into something consequential and sustainable. It was conceived amid a growing awareness of Palestine as a nexus of inter/national possibility, a place where one can encounter the self-perpetuating incarnations of U.S. history. The professors who traveled from America to Palestine illustrated that scholarship limited to the environs of the campus usually overlooks the worldly knowledge in abundance in places whose subjugation enables the accrual of educational status and wealth—such places where so many work so hard to conceptualize status and wealth as a natural condition.

The New New Canaan

There are particular conditions in which Native scholars have taken up the issue of Palestine. The possibilities of comparison are

tremendously rich and accommodate complicated sites of material politics (by which I mean economic systems, activist communities, electoral processes, educational paradigms, and modes of resistance). Accessing those sites enables us to aspire to relationships that go beyond theoretical innovation by concomitantly emphasizing the practices and possibilities of decolonization. If early settlers conceptualized North America as a New Canaan (in perpetual evidence by the numerous towns across the United States with biblical nomenclature), then the role Israel plays in American imperial practices extends the metaphor by using the immutable legitimacy of its colonial enterprise as further justification for the permanence of a federal United States under whose ultimate jurisdiction Indigenous nations will remain. America thus becomes a New Canaan all over again, invigorated by the emergence of a nation-state atop the original Canaan.

Although North America was settled by different national groups, colonization of the so-called New World has been infused with a particular narrative of salvation, redemption, and destiny. Settlers assumed the role of Joshua crossing the river Jordan into Canaan, where God commanded them to exterminate the Indigenous populations and establish for themselves a beatific nation on a land of milk and honey underused and unappreciated by the natives.⁷ The English, Puritans most specifically, were the most avid proponents of this view, but vast geographies of North America were overwhelmed by settlers and missionaries animated by godly purpose. Even in acknowledging the variegated, often conflicting, narratives of New World settlement, multitudinous sources illustrate that from its earliest moments, the United States has been beholden to a Holy Land ethos, articulated in various ways throughout the enterprise of European settlement.⁸

The emergence of Zionism in Europe in the late nineteenth century evoked a dialectic with the project of American settlement that remains today in the close relationship between the United States and Israel, apparent in military aid, security cooperation, and foreign policy. However, it is actually in the complex discursive and psychological spaces of ideology that the two states most closely align. The relationship is built through particular articulations of

belonging that codify national identity into the mythologies of colonial domination and military conquest. Both Israel and the United States are relentlessly exceptional—and they are exceptional, ironically, only together.

Through identification and assessment of those connections, scholars in American Indian studies have made important advances in modes of analysis that inform my inter/national rubric. For instance, there has been much reflection on the relationship of Zionism with global systems of imperialism, militarization, plutocracy, and the neoliberal economies that undercut Indigenous self-determination in numerous parts of the world. U.S. support for Israel tells us much about the breadth of actors and actions involved in the continued occupation of Native lands in North America. Israel's conduct in the world, beyond its mistreatment of Palestinians, affects the health and economies of Indigenous communities worldwide, Indian country among them. Israel participates in the neoliberal corruption that dispossesses Natives of land and resources. Orly Benjamin's "Roots of the Neoliberal Takeover in Israel" illustrates the origins and consequences of Israel's neoliberalism, which partly explains the state's contribution to repression and genocide of Indigenous peoples in Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s. As a variety of scholars and journalists have shown, that contribution included logistical oversight and material support.⁹ General Efraín Ríos Montt, architect of Guatemala's 1982–83 genocide, which especially affected Ixil communities in the country's highlands, considered Israel an indispensable ally in the global fight against communism, with which he fancifully associated Guatemala's Native communities.

When we think of Israel's effect on American policy, Indigenous communities rarely figure into the conversation, yet, as with the vast majority of state-sponsored or corporate perfidy, Indigenous communities are the ones who most suffer the immanence of iniquity. Latin America is a noteworthy site of Israeli perfidy, which, in keeping with the practice of neoliberal geopolitics, has disproportionately harmed Natives (along with the poor more broadly). Many reasons exist for this disproportionate harm. In general, plutocratic conduct, as Jodi Byrd, Jasbir Puar, and Scott Morgensen

illustrate, exists in contradistinction to the practice of Indigenous self-determination.¹⁰ Plutocracy invariably dispossesses Indigenous peoples and further impoverishes them through resource appropriation, military occupation, environmental destruction, and sponsorship of neocolonial corruption.

Israel's covert activities in Latin America have also directly harmed Indigenous peoples. Those activities occur in the framework of U.S. imperialism, for which Israel often acts as interlocutor. Israel likewise offers its police and military for hire as consultants to both industrial and developing states, in some cases supplying arms or tactical support.¹¹ Israel's most recent foray into Latin America has involved Mexico, although, as Jimmy Johnson and Linda Quiquívix reveal, "Mexico began receiving Israeli weaponry in 1973 with the sale of five Arava planes from Israel Aerospace Industries. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, infrequent exports continued to the country in the form of small arms, mortars and electronic fences. Sales escalated in the early 2000s, according to research that we have undertaken."¹² Today Israel provides Mexico with training and weapons in its counterinsurgency against the (Mayan) Zapatistas in Chiapas. Zapatista leader Rafael Guillén Vicente (aka Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos) has noted Israel's role as a colonial aggressor across the Atlantic: "Not far from here, in a place called Gaza, in Palestine, in the Middle East, right here next to us, the Israeli government's heavily trained and armed military continues its march of death and destruction."¹³

If Gaza, in Marcos's formulation, is "right next" to Chiapas, then it also abuts significant parts of Central America. Israel's role in the 1982–83 genocide of Mayans in Guatemala was more than peripheral. It supplied arms, many captured from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), to the Honduran and Guatemalan governments.¹⁴ In Guatemala it offered counterinsurgency training and military logistics. Rodolfo Lobos Zamora, the chief of staff of the Guatemalan army during the 1980s, proclaimed, "The Israeli soldier is the model for our soldiers."¹⁵ In 1982, Montt, then Guatemala's president, "told ABC News that his success was due to the fact that 'our soldiers were trained by Israelis.'"¹⁶ During the 2013 genocide trial of Montt, a charge of which he was convicted,

further evidence of Israeli involvement came to light, including the Guatemalan army's use of helicopters supplied by Israel in addition to various intelligence channels, whose establishment led to the widespread torture and imprisonment of activists and civilians.¹⁷

Israel has also been implicated as a U.S. proxy in Africa, South Asia, and South America (in addition to numerous locales throughout the Arab world). Whatever role the United States plays in fomenting worldwide unrest or the codification of servitude, Israel is a ready tool or proxy, if not directly then certainly as what might be called a satellite surrogate of U.S. foreign policy. The disproportionate modes of dispossession that Indigenous peoples, American Indians particularly, experience because of U.S. and Israeli colonization show that philosophical and spiritual identifications between the United States and Israel have produced numerous material consequences for Indians in addition to the more conspicuous victims, the Palestinians. It is worth mentioning that while Israeli military and strategic assistance to Central American autocrats explicitly harms Indigenous peoples, there is much evidence to suggest that Natives in the United States also are victimized by Israel's close ties to the United States, primarily through neoliberal trade and development that pillage resources and limit economic development to the framework of profit-obsessed capitalism rather than allowing for the practice of legitimate egalitarian principles. Israel profits from neoliberalism at the expense of indigenes.

Resettling the Unsettled State

The vast majority of Jewish settlers to Palestine until 1967 were from Europe and the Arab world. The movement to settle the West Bank (and at various points the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula) gained momentum in the 1970s and has not slowed, in large part based on U.S. influence—not merely in terms of the financial and political support proffered by the U.S. government, but in terms of the nationality of many of the settlers. In 2011 WikiLeaks published diplomatic cables from the U.S. consular office in Tel Aviv. The State Department officers “found that the U.S. citizens’ reasons for moving to Jewish settlements in the area where Palestinians

hope to establish a state were three-fold: social, economic, and ideological.”¹⁸

The social factors include the opportunity to live in a largely isolated community with like-minded neighbors under heavy guard by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The economic advantages include tax breaks, subsidized loans, charity from evangelical Christians, and easy commutes to the green line on segregated roads. (The settlement of Elkana even provides schoolchildren free busing to ultraright-wing rallies.) The ideological phenomena are of primary concern, although there is no element of social and economic life in a settlement unaffected by ideology. The diplomatic cables conceptualize ideology in this instance as messianic fervor, of which many settlers are certainly possessed, but we can examine it in broader contexts of discourse, identity, and mythology.

Much of the current West Bank settler discourse emerges from U.S. history and bears hallmarks of North American racist jurisprudence. It likewise recapitulates the same myths of divine purpose endemic to U.S. self-esteem. In fact, many American settlers to the West Bank, approximately 15 percent of the total settler population, self-identify as liberal, according to the research of Sara Hirschhorn, who was profiled in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*:

“Jewish-American immigrants [to the territories] were primarily young, single, and highly identified as Jewish or traditional but not necessarily Orthodox in their religious orientation,” Hirschhorn said. “They were primarily political liberals in the United States, voted for the Democratic Party and have been active in 1960s radicalism in the United States, participating in the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle against the Vietnam War.”¹⁹

The *Ha'aretz* profile continues:

Many Americans who moved to the settlements after the Six-Day War see what they're doing in Israel as an extension of their radicalism in the United States, Hirschhorn said. “They would also say that what some of them consider what they're doing in the territories in part as an expression of their own Jewish civil rights.”

“In coming to Israel and participating in the settlement movement these American Jews continued in their radicalism,” the Massachusetts native said. “While many others from their generation went back to a more conventional lifestyle—becoming soccer mommies and moving to Scarsdale [an affluent New York suburb]—here they moved to a hilltop on the West Bank.”

Hirschhorn added that many Americans who move to the West Bank are trying to recapture the pioneering idealism of the state’s Zionist founders, while others are driven by a Biblical imperative to settle the land.²⁰

Hirschhorn, like earlier scholars, concludes that only a small portion of American West Bank settlers are overtly motivated by messianism. The majority of those settlers consider messianism secondary or unrelated to their presence in Palestine.

The term “messianism” requires consideration. Hirschhorn’s usage appears to be synonymous with “a Biblical imperative to settle the land,” which is generally accurate, although the term can also describe any sort of fervor of an intransigent variety. In both senses of the term, the self-identified liberal settlers who supposedly eschew messianism in fact practice it. In some ways they embody it. By settling a foreign land while claiming adherence to humanistic principles, they actually intensify (through the uncompromising assumptions of exclusion) the notion that Palestine is a land belonging to people who are not Palestinian.

It would be easy to theorize a discrepancy between the settlers’ stated commitment to civil rights and their messianism, but the two attitudes actually align. Let us focus on the belief that settlement of Palestine is “an expression of their own Jewish civil rights,” which is not as ridiculous as it first appears. The liberal discourses of American multiculturalism allow for expression of both colonial desire and communal racism because those discourses are devoted to the modern logic of individualism—the process by which racism is consigned to individualistic failure or ignorance rather than being located in the institutions of the colonial state. Furthermore, it has long been a contention across the Zionist political spectrum

that Israel is a national embodiment of Jewish culture. If this is the case (and here I submit that national identity is never a complete representation of organic culture), then rejection or even contestation of Zionism becomes an act of cultural insensitivity, susceptible to charges of anti-Semitism or intolerance.

This rationale not only protects Israel from criticism, it also allows the settlers to conceptualize their presence on the West Bank as cultural performance, unburdened by violence or aggression. If Israel is the material outcome of Jewishness, then there is no contradiction in professing support for U.S. minorities and simultaneously effecting Palestinian dispossession, for the Palestinians are merely unfortunate bystanders in a Judeocentric drama of very recent vintage, but one that precedes them in imagination. Being liberal (in the modern U.S. sense of the term) offers a terrific basis for a concerned citizen to evolve into an ideologue with the power to summon for personal use the vast weaponry of a militarized nation-state. Messianic narratives, even when unclaimed, demand that sort of evolution.

American Indians too are an inconvenient impediment to a project much grander than their earthly lives. It is worth noting that the West Bank settlers' support of U.S. minorities does not extend to Indigenous self-determination—in U.S. discourses, it rarely does. Everywhere in the United States we see the interplay of liberalism (informed by unacknowledged messianism) with settler-colonial values of permanent entitlement (to land, to access, to belonging, to upward mobility—in short, to all the spoils of conquest, without having to assume responsibility for its immorality). Perhaps this phenomenon is nowhere more evident than in the controversies over Devils Tower in Wyoming. Known by Natives as Mato Tipila and sacred to the Lakota and other nations, Devils Tower is a hot spot for recreational climbers, who pound metal into the rock face and interfere with religious rituals.

Unsuccessful in their bid to outlaw climbing on Devils Tower, Natives have been treated to fantastic displays of liberal colonial logic. Frank Sanders, for example, was deeply concerned with the plight of Indians. “The Native Americans need physical help,” he explained to *Climbing* writer Luke Laeser. “We have been working

with the clinic at the Porcupine Reservation bringing them very basic supplies (things that you and I take for granted).”²¹ In turn, in 2007–8 Sanders undertook Project 365, where he would climb Devils Tower every day for a year, helping to raise money for needy Indians. Asserting the sacredness of the site to himself, he later founded www.devilstowersacredtomanypeople.org.²² In climbing Devils Tower for 365 days in a row, Sanders aimed to end Indian poverty and create an interracial harmony unseen in the region since the first days of European contact.

The only thing Natives asked of him was to quit desecrating Mato Tipila.

Agency and Appropriation

Recent work in inter/national analysis has brought forth two important advances. The first is the transformation of Native peoples from complex political subjects into metaphorical objects of decolonial credibility. To put it more simply, Indians have become actors in the rhetorical battlegrounds of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Zionists say: Jews are like the Indians.²³ Palestinians say: nonsense, we are. Both Zionists and anti-Zionists recognize in Indians a sort of moral authority on the subject of dispossession with which they seek to be associated. I should pause for a moment to note that I find numerous problems with the formulation. I am identifying it as a phenomenon, common these days, rather than endorsing it.

My main problem with these appeals to Native authority as a way to accrue decolonial legitimacy is simple: neither Zionists nor anti-Zionists need to be correct for anything to change in our understanding of Palestine, not to mention our understanding of America (which gets trivialized and dehistoricized in this type of situation). Indeed, the historical dispossession of Indians has often resembled, and in some instances has more than resembled, the mistreatment of Jews, particularly in Spain on the eve of Columbus’s voyage and in Eastern Europe after the industrial revolution. But these realities do not preclude Palestinian dispossession from also resembling that of Indians. In fact, Palestinian dispossession also often

resembles historical Jewish dispossession; that the Palestinians' current oppressors self-identify as Jewish does not diminish this simple fact of history. Thus the crude comparisons made for the sake of rhetorical expediency stop short of analyzing the historical, economic, and discursive forces that inform the U.S.–Israeli alliance and bind Natives and Palestinians to the same anticolonial polity.

The second thing that comes out of these advances in international analysis is what we learn about the practice of American Indian studies as an academic enterprise that exists beyond the corridors of academe, by which I mean the element of the field, not always consistent but omnipresent, that compels its participants to practice communal engagement and pursue social justice (to use an old-fashioned term, one that might interchange with human rights, sovereignty, self-determination, liberation, and so forth). This ethic, in contradistinction to the traditional notion of scholars as practitioners of an objective vocation, is apparent in the mission statements of numerous academic departments. The Native American and Indigenous studies program at the University of Texas, for instance, is “particularly concerned with scholarship and intellectual exchange that contributes to the economic, social, and political advancement of indigenous peoples.”²⁴ Likewise, American Indian studies at the University of Arizona, which explores “issues from American Indian perspectives which place the land, its history and the people at the center,” makes clear its emphasis: “American Indian Studies promotes Indian self-determination, self-governance, and strong leadership as defined by Indian nations, tribes, and communities, all of which originated from the enduring beliefs and philosophies of our ancestors.”²⁵ Similar professions of material engagement and commitment to self-determination are common. Such is the case in Palestine studies.

Interest in Palestine among Native scholars is logical. The field, after all, has long offered critique of U.S. empire and imperialism and produced comparative analyses of Indians with other racial and religious minorities. It is not surprising, then, that at least some attention be directed toward an expansionist Israel not only funded by the United States but claiming to be a modern incarnation and

proud conserver of American manifest destiny. Israel, we must remember, is often conceptualized by American elites and rank-and-file Christians alike not merely as a worthy recipient of U.S. patronage, but as an indivisible component of American cultural identity. Barack Obama made clear this bond in his 2012 American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) speech: “The United States and Israel share interests, but we also share those human values that Shimon [Perez] spoke about: a commitment to human dignity. A belief that freedom is a right that is given to all of God’s children. An experience that shows us that democracy is the one and only form of government that can truly respond to the aspirations of citizens.”²⁶

Yet there might be more to the growing importance of Palestine to American Indian studies. I would suggest that interest in Palestine among Native and Indigenous scholars represents at least in part a realization of the field’s ideals of decolonial advocacy. I do not raise this point to romanticize American Indian studies or to totalize it. Rather, I suggest that any field with a commitment to the repatriation of the communities it studies will eventually become transnational because the powers against which the dispossessed fight are interrelated. And because of a variety of phenomena, transnationalism in American Indian studies quickly moved to incorporate Palestine.

The comparison of the United States and Israel is particularly germane around the concept of values, a term Obama emphasized in his AIPAC speech. Less than a year after that speech, when former U.S. senator Chuck Hagel faced scrutiny as Obama’s choice as secretary of defense because of his supposed hostility to Israel (an accusation with no basis in fact), Hagel responded to criticism by proclaiming, “America’s relationship with Israel is one that is fundamentally built on our nations’ shared values, common interests and democratic ideals.”²⁷ Values, of course, are unstable things—unreliable, too, because they are invested with so many explicit and implicit demands and coercions. In this case, as Hagel’s passage indicates, there is a long-standing discourse of shared values between the United States and Israel that mutually implicates Natives and Palestinians as premodern and unworthy of liberation.

What are those values? Democracy. Modernity. Industriousness. Freedom. Nobility. Humanity. Compassion. Natives and Palestinians not only lack these qualities, but actively seek to undermine them. American values arise not only from an expansionist capitalism but also from the redemptive mythologies of Israeli colonization, a fact that has led numerous people in American Indian studies to question the accuracy of Zionism's heroic narratives and to explore how the current situation of Palestinians under military occupation lends understanding to Native reinterpretations of those American values. As Kauanui notes,

The politics of indigeneity bring much to bear on critical analyses of Israeli exceptionalism, as it is bolstered and bankrolled by an American exceptionalism that denies the colonization of Native North America. Comparative examinations of Israeli settler colonialism in relation to questions of occupation, self-determination and decolonization within the framework of international law demand ethical consideration by Native American and Indigenous Studies scholars.²⁸

While the inclusion of Palestine in American Indian studies tells us much about the shifting possibilities of Palestine studies, particularly its uneasy relationship with Middle East studies, it also illuminates (or reinforces) a particular set of commitments in American Indian studies. Such is especially true of the material politics of decolonization and its role in the formation of certain liberationist ethics to which many practitioners of American Indian and Indigenous studies adhere. The analysis of Palestine in American Indian studies forces us to continue exploring the cultures and geographies of Indigeneity.

Here the issue of Palestine continues to prove instructive. In the culture wars of Israel–Palestine there is much chatter about the matter of Indigeneity. In fact, it is the central moral basis for claims of geographic and cultural ownership in the so-called Holy Land, a reality illuminated by former Canadian MP Irwin Cotler when he proclaimed, “Israel is the aboriginal homeland of the Jewish people across space and time. Its birth certificate originates in its inception as a First Nation, and not simply, however important, in

its United Nations international birth certificate.”²⁹ Cotler’s claim is remarkable for numerous reasons. By appropriating the language of Indigenous peoplehood (“aboriginal,” “First Nation”), Cotler positions Israel, against available historical evidence, as a presence dating to antiquity and a beneficiary of exceptional juridical standing based on a specific legal categorization.³⁰

Although conceptually Cotler articulates a variant of the Zionist claim of Jewish ownership of Palestine, his language bespeaks an approach outside the commonplaces of Zionist discourse, which has largely focused on historical grievance (particularly European anti-Semitism), promissory narratives (God granted the land to Jews), and the inevitability of ingathering the diaspora (we were here in the past and thus have a right to be here in the present). In Cotler’s argument, these commonplaces recede to assumptions as a new form of reasoning emerges, that of Israel as predecessor to the very existence of Palestinians, who become the conquerors, the foreigners, the aliens, the strangers. This argument rejects historical evidence of Palestinian dispossession and instead consigns them to the status of aggressor, stewards of their own suffering. Less obviously, it also disenfranchises Indigenous peoples in North America by subordinating their claims of nationhood into the logic of Western conquest. Cotler offers one example of the ability of Western multicultural practice to appropriate anything at its disposal in order to buttress an imperial power structure, for his pronouncement offers nothing to indicate that he would support a level of autonomy for Indigenous peoples in Canada similar to that enjoyed by the Israeli state.

Indeed, Zionists have consistently employed the language of Indigeneity—“*Jews* are indigenous to the land”—to explain the settlement of Palestine throughout the twentieth century or to rationalize the current settlement of the West Bank. Allen Z. Hertz, for instance, declares, “Conceptually, the Jewish people is aboriginal to its ancestral homeland in the same way that the First Nations are aboriginal to their ancestral lands in the Americas.”³¹ Palestinians in return often rely on the same language of Indigeneity to counter Zionist claims or to assert a moral narrative of belonging vis-à-vis the unjustness of foreign settlement. The New England

Committee to Defend Palestine describes the Israel–Palestine conflict as such: “It is a conflict between the indigenous Palestinian people and the Europeans who came with guns to steal their land and resources.”³² When Zionists and Palestinians lay claim to Indigeneity, they are not merely being technical. The term “Indigenous” is infused with numerous connotations about access, belonging, biology, culture, jurisdiction, and identity. Indigeneity is not simply a moral entitlement, but a legal and political category. To access that category is to be positioned as steward and legatee of a particular territory. Thus the appropriation of the language of Indians inherently recognizes Indians as the rightful indigenes of North America—a recognition made infrequently by politicians and commentators—and simultaneously appropriates Natives into an extraneous debate whose conduct invalidates their agency.

The debate invalidates Indian agency because rarely does it visualize Natives as living communities engaged in the work of repatriation—or even in the work of survival. When a person says “Jews are the Indians of the Holy Land,” the statement affixes Indians into a specific historical posture that renders them rhetorical but not legal or contemporaneous claimants against colonization. This is so because the claim is fundamentally statist, referencing a particular history to support an argument of the present. The referenced history does not make it into the present. The argument it informs already occupies that space.

Further evidence that this sort of move invalidates Indian agency is available in the language of the rhetoric itself. One need only read major forums of debate—*The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Slate*, the Huffington Post, and even social media such as Facebook and Twitter—to notice the extent to which visions of the American past bear upon the matter of Palestine. Attenuated notions of Indian dispossession frequently rationalize Palestinian dispossession. As Laila Al-Marayati observes, “Today, most Americans do not believe that the decimation and expulsion of entire Indian tribes in response to ‘terrorist’ attacks against wagon trains was justified. But, as one caller to a syndicated radio program suggested, since we’re not about to give anything back to the Indians, why should the Israelis be expected to return stolen land to the Palestinians?”³³

Unlike the Jews-as-Indians argument, this one acknowledges Indian disenfranchisement (again, only in the past), but excludes any possibility of repatriation. Yet, exactly like the Jews-as-Indians argument, the goal is to justify the original sins of Zionism and the current settlement of the West Bank. This time the Palestinians become Indians and both communities end up consigned to an unfortunate but inevitable antiquity overwhelmed by the progress of a linear history, another powerful example of how a colonial ethos allows people to own history without being responsible for it. The common wisdom and common sense of this argument arise from a settler logic of divine possession and democratic entitlement whose values—the hegemony of its assumptions—render conquest a permanent feature of modern American consciousness. Zionism has adopted this consciousness in its desire to normatize—that is, to render normative, as opposed to merely normal—garrison settlement and military occupation. For Zionists, colonization is permanent even as it happens—in many ways before it has even taken place, for the ideologies of modernity underlying expansionist worldviews emphasize the progress of a distinct state culture with a neoliberal economy and a militarized infrastructure. The idea of returning land to Indians is crazy, indeed, as crazy as the idea of allowing Palestinians to remain on theirs.

Ha'aretz columnist Ari Shavit offered an example of this phenomenon amid the debates inspired by his 2013 book *My Promised Land*, a compendium of settler dissimulation. In an interview with *New Yorker* editor David Remnick, Shavit professes his refusal to condemn the Israelis who participated in massacres of Palestinians in 1948. “Now I think it’s very important to remember,” he declares, “I mean, this country [the United States] is based on crimes that are much worse than Lydda, much worse than Lydda.”³⁴ (The 1948 Israeli massacre in and depopulation of Lydda and the neighboring village of Ramle, which Shavit explores at length, resulted in the displacement of as many as seventy thousand Palestinians. Ben-Gurion International Airport sits atop the site of the two villages.) Remnick then asks Shavit about the difference between U.S. and Israeli massacres. “About a hundred years,” Shavit replies.

Shavit avers that U.S. colonization is worse than its Israeli counterpart and implies that in the near future Zionist ethnic cleansing will matter less, in the same way that U.S. ethnic cleansing has been diminished by the passage of time. The implication likewise downplays the seriousness of Zionist ethnic cleansing in the present. I have negligible interest in the first claim, as I see little use in quantifying and then ranking mass suffering according to the peculiar algorithms of colonial guilt. The United States colonized hundreds of distinct nations; Israel colonized a handful, Palestine primarily. Shavit appears to be unaware of, or indifferent to, the multiplicity of conflicts and encounters in America, or of the ongoing struggles to decolonize the continent. Nor were Zionist massacres limited to Lydda and Ramle. There is nothing useful to say about Shavit's apocryphal one hundred-year gap between U.S. and Israeli colonization; we can merely highlight its spectacular wrongness.

His implications are worth notice, though. Time can only heal the past in specific circumstances—when the oppressive party makes amends, for example, or reverses destructive policies. For Shavit and like-minded commentators, though, time itself can progress beyond the resilience of memory. This conception of the world reinforces the temporal peculiarities of logic motivated by conquest and acquisition. The *nakba* matters less than the triumph of Zionism for no reason other than the triumph of American colonization. Shavit's argument, like those of similar interlocutors, is no more complex than this non sequitur. It imagines a permanent past because it cannot process complexities of the present. Shavit does not write history from the vantage point of the victor; he writes as a tenuous citizen anxious that victories of the past are only historical. The native, in other words, has not accepted the permanence of the colonizer. If Shavit were to acknowledge that Natives do not adhere to settler timelines, his arguments about Israeli timelessness would be impossible.

The Indian interventions into these debates are of special interest. Much of the scholarly and political opposition to Zionism moves beyond moral displeasure at the behavior of Israel and its American sponsor, concerning itself instead with broader questions of power and meaning. As Stephen P. Gasteyer and Cornelia Butler

Flora explain in their comparison of Palestine with Iowa and Patagonia, “the settlement of these areas involved processes of discovery, valuation, settlement, and conquest by outsiders. Part of the last two phases contained elements of equality but restricted equality to the dominant class, the conquerors (Jews in Palestine, later Israel, or European-Americans in the Patagonia and Iowa). Part of the conquest involved a rationale of taming, civilizing, and making more efficient a ‘wild’ land and ‘savage’ people.”³⁵

What, then, does it mean to confront a state whose presence, ipso facto, ensures legal and territorial dominance of its Indigenous communities and its legitimization as a permanent arbiter of its subjects’ destinies? In the interrelated narratives of colonial permanence in the United States and Israel, we have a profound set of circumstances within which to explore this question. Answering the question from a perspective that does not take it as a point of fact that the United States and Israel are permanent has an added benefit of delegitimizing the state, but the primary function of the perspective is to imagine a future outside of the notion that displacement and disenfranchisement must be permanent simply because they succeeded.

I would emphasize that despite an abundance of American–Israeli interactions—military, economic, diplomatic, cultural, historical, religious—the relationship of the two states is most profound at a level of discourse and ideology. In fact, a manifest Holy Land ethos has played an enormous role in the development of American society, both physically and philosophically. As Tim Giago notes in highlighting the interconnectedness of Natives and Palestinians, “The early settlers believed it was God’s will (Manifest Destiny) that the heathens be driven from the land. It was God’s will that the land be settled and populated by white Christians. They looked upon the indigenous population as a mere obstacle to be slaughtered or removed.”³⁶ That ethos predates the creation of Israel, but also presupposes it. In this sense, the ancient Israel of the Old Testament was realized not through modern Zionism but in the settlement of North America.

Steven Newcomb explores these phenomena in his book *Pagans in the Promised Land*. He notes that “when dominating forms of

reasoning (categorization) found in the Old Testament narrative are unconsciously used to reason about American Indians, Indian lands metaphorically become—from the viewpoint of the United States—the promised land of the chosen people of the United States.”³⁷ Newcomb’s analysis is valuable, though I would question the extent to which reasoning about American Indians as biblical Canaanites is unconscious. The teleology of North America as a new promised land is obvious in the early days of European settlement, but even now the inventions of America as a metaphorical Israel, with Indians as a romanticized but ungodly presence, remains common—quite consciously so.

These discursive geographies have traveled continuously between North America and Palestine. In turn, the geographies of American Indian and Indigenous studies have transcended the restrictions inherent to the nation-state, the quintessential entity of colonization. In so doing, the field challenges the probity of the nation-state as a governing authority and progenitor of social organization. As Duane Champagne notes in the introduction to a comparative collection coedited with Palestinian Ismael Abu-Saad examining the future of Indigenous peoples, “Native struggles within nation-state systems are not simply efforts to gain inclusion or access to citizenship. . . . Native peoples wish to preserve land, economic subsistence and means, and political and cultural autonomy. In many cases, nation-states often find the demands of Native communities threatening, at odds with national policies of integration and assimilation.”³⁸

This passage illuminates one of the central features of inter/national scholarship, its insistence on transnational dialogue extraneous and opposed to the physical and legal parameters of the nation-state.

Performing Inter/Nationalism

In closing, I would like to offer a few thoughts about the conditions of performing inter/nationalist scholarship.

In many ways, Palestine has become a test case of one’s bona fides in American studies, ethnic studies, and other areas of inquiry—

likewise in political and community organizations beyond academe. To be opposed to, say, the Iraq invasion while simultaneously supporting Israel ensures, at least among a considerable demographic, a loss or weakening of credibility. Anti-Zionism as test case of one's trustworthiness represents the ascension of Palestine into the consciousness of the political and academic Left and, more important, into the worldwide collective of Indigenous scholars challenging the structures and mores of academic convention. This ascension of Palestine arises from the recognition, always evident but now common, that Israel is not merely an ally or client of the United States, but a profound component of its imperial practice. To support Israel is to support U.S. empire; thus other professions of resistance to U.S. empire come into conflict with their own values in the presence of Zionism.

Any political or methodological commitment as a litmus test is inherently problematic, for the litmus test can render struggle a fashion responsive to the recital of slogans or coded professions of support. Palestine can become a thin signifier of interpersonal belonging rather than a site of serious reckoning vis-à-vis the multidisciplinary spaces that accommodate its presence. Those inherent problems notwithstanding, the juxtaposition of Natives and Palestinians represents a deterritorialization of traditional disciplinary areas. In many ways, it makes more sense for Palestine studies and Indigenous studies to be in conversation than Palestine studies and Middle East studies, as Middle East studies encompasses vast geographies in which liberation of Palestine is but a specialized subset and has traditionally accommodated various incarnations of Zionism as well as institutional acceptance of Israel, in its current ethnocentric form, as a permanent reality.

For scholars serious about better comprehending Palestine's present and working to ensure its future, American Indian studies offers more groundbreaking and germane critique than do the Cold War-era area studies. In Palestine, American Indian studies participants can access a view of history as it has been reinvented in the present, wherein the residue of conquest continues in North America through plutocratic governance and functions in Palestine through the old-fashioned use of soldiers, tanks, tear gas, guns,

grenades, and armed settlers, a violent continuation of the U.S. legacy of Holy Land mythmaking and ostensible reclamation.

Conducting this type of work on campus presents challenges, some of them irreconcilable with the ethical commonplaces of American Indian studies. We do much of our teaching and research on public space, in the case of those who work in state institutions, so immediately the task of decolonization extends to the very site of our sustenance. The task of American Indian studies, then, involves constant attention to the seemingly benign iterations of land theft and dispossession. Adding Palestine to the mix intensifies the task, but to our enrichment, and, importantly, to the detriment of those invested in the colonial university.

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