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The Arab-Israeli Conflict and Peace Process through 1948 to the present

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Barbed Wire & Palestinian Poetry: Diasporic Frameworks of Memory & Freedom

"Today, my body was a TV'd massacre."

This is how Palestinian-Canadian poet and activist Rafeef Ziadah begins her 2011

spoken-word poem, "We Teach Life, Sir". She describes feeling pressured to abridge and sanitize

her message into "soundbites and word limits" when speaking to a media correspondent about

bombings in the Gaza Strip. Ziadah was born in Beirut in 1979 to Palestinian refugee parents,

and her poems exist in conversation with a long tradition of Palestinian political poetry,

predating the establishment of the state of Israel. Poetry was extremely influential in promoting

Palestinian nationalism and inspiring political action as early as the 1936-1939 Revolt

(Kanafani). Today, some Palestinian diasporic poets illuminate the pain of displacement and state

violence while envisioning a future of freedom in their work by crafting a narrative of natural

versus unnatural, where the 'true nature' of the land as Palestinian must inevitably prevail over

the manufactured Israeli state.

Rafeef Ziadah and fellow Palestinian diasporic poet Olivia Elias both depict olive trees as

symbols of Palestinian sovereignty and identity in their respective works, contrasting them

against man-made barriers such as barbed wire. Elias was born in Haifa, Palestine, in 1944 and

was exiled as a child to Beirut. This is the subject of her book *Chaos, Crossing*, wherein Elias

references "the sound of an olive tree being uprooted" and "the prisons blooming / in the desert /

the barbed wire scraping / your shores" (Elias). In the former passage, she underlines the

connection of Palestinian people to the land and evokes the discomfort of being displaced. In the latter, she subverts the Zionist slogan 'Making the desert bloom' (An idea famously espoused by Theodore Herzl and Prime Minister Levi Eshkol) by drawing the reader's attention to Israeli prisons and violently maintained borders. According to B'Tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories,

> At the end of December 2024, the Israel Prison Service (IPS) was holding 9,619
> Palestinians in detention or in prison on what it defined [as] "security" grounds, including
> 2,216 from the Gaza Strip. At that time, the IPS was also holding 1,705 Palestinians, 3 of
> them from the Gaza Strip, for being in Israel illegally (btselem.org).

By emphasizing the harm of prisons and barbed wire to the landscape itself, Elias frames Israel's treatment of the land as synonymous with its treatment of Palestinian people.

In Ziadah's spoken-word poem, "The Palestine I Know", the poet depicts Palestine as a woman. She describes this woman teaching children to dance and laugh to the sound of bombs instead of being afraid, sleeping in the Cairo airport with her children while pregnant, and even becoming one with an olive tree rather than abandoning it. Ziadah declares, "The Palestine I know does not have a VIP pass / she walks straight past settlers and soldiers with her head held up high screaming / 'my olive tree needs me!' / 'my olive tree needs me!' / and she hugs that tree so tight / her hands become its branches." She then states that the Palestine she knows "...does not negotiate the size of our prison... She breaks the walls" (Ziadah). Ziadah's work mirrors Elias' in illustrating a tension between the natural and unnatural, analogous to the tension between indigeneity and settler colonialism. While Elias focuses on remembering the Nakba and witnessing the ebb and flow of power over time through visceral descriptions, Ziadah reaches for liberatory transformation and active resistance.

Remi Kanazi, a New York-based Palestinian-American poet, writes about loss of generational knowledge in his poem, "Refugee". The first movement follows a female subject who has never visited the Mediterranean sea, but whose father remembers escaping across it and watching many of his community members drown in the process. The second movement describes state/police violence inflicted upon her, perhaps as a result of activism or simply discrimination. The third movement, which is enjambed to evoke the shape of a wave, is a reclamation of her connection to Palestine. Kanazi writes,

> *these fields are ours /* she told me / before the Europeans / and Brooklynites / before the / swimming pools / army jeeps and barbed wire / before the talks, roadmaps / and Swiss cheese plans / before declarations rewrote history / those hills met footprints / and that can't be erased" (Kanazi).

He aptly identifies barbed wire as one of many tools of state-building, but argues that regardless of the State of Israel's efforts to rewrite Palestine's history and borders, the land and its 'true' people will always remember. The poem ends with another reference to the sea and the land, and a call to return to Palestine:

> "*we are the boat*
>
>   *returning to dock*
>
> *we are the footprints*
>
>   *on the northern trail*
>
> *we are the iron*
>
>   *coloring the soil*
>
> *we cannot*
>
>   *be erased*" (Kanazi)

"Refugee" shares the theme of natural versus unnatural present in the previous two poems, blurring the lines between the land and its people. Kanazi implies that while Israeli infrastructure is only temporary, Palestinian identity is so ingrained in the very soil that it cannot be erased: the body and the land are one.

In 2021, Israel completed a 40-mile, 20-foot-high barbed wire fence around the Gaza Strip in response to 'right of return' marches in 2018 and a fear of terrorist attacks (*Morning Star, The Times of Israel*). However, it was evidently ineffective, as Hamas would enact an incursion into Israel only two years later, resulting in over 1000 Israeli deaths and igniting the genocide which has now taken the lives of more than 50,000 Palestinians. "Today, my body was a TV'd massacre" (We Teach Life, Sir). When Rafeef Ziadah speaks of her body, she is speaking about Palestine itself, too. More than a decade after "we teach life, sir", her words resonate more than ever. Images and videos of hungry Palestinian families, mangled bodies, and the desolate landscape of rubble are all over social media, as activists and refugees try to fit themselves into soundbites and word limits to elicit more action from the international community. In the meantime, Ziadah continues to advocate for Palestine, urging people to "[maintain clarity] on the realities of occupation and dispossession, [so that] we can resist being swayed by superficial progress or symbolic gestures. Instead, we continue to expose the ongoing settler-colonial violence and work towards a genuinely anti-colonial future" (Ziadah & Buxton).

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