

Jerusalem Live

What Does Settler Colonialism Look Like?

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What does settler colonialism look like in the eyes of Palestinian women? How does it appear to Aida, a 29-year-old pregnant woman from occupied East Jerusalem? How is state terror inscribed on her body? What do we see, or do we not see, in settler-colonized East Jerusalem? What do we hear? Smell? Feel? Sense? What can be said and what remains silent?

Let me take you on a brief journey into the aesthetics and politics of settler colonial technologies of violence and what I term the colonizer's occupation of the senses, as Israel's everyday terror aims to erase the truth of Palestinian experience. Such colonial liquidation of truth faced Aida as a non-resident in her home and city of birth, and this is why she decided to take the risk to challenge such untruth.¹ She explains:

The past three days were the worst days of my life... having the baby under such stress, needing to catch a bus while experiencing the pain of severe contractions, knowing that I might have the baby on the bus.... I had contractions, bad ones; I was dying from fear, pain, *ru'b* [terror] ... real terror ... holding on to my bag ... as if the bag can carry the pain, crying my body in silence, wanting to go back to my house ... to have the baby there ... But then, the baby would end up without an ID, undocumented, unsecured, displaced ... *mshahhata* [displaced] all her life ... I was giving birth, but living death at the same time ... and I stopped myself from giving birth ... hanging onto my bag, squeezing it, promising my unborn to reach the hospital, and have her in Jerusalem.... I had her ... thank God she was healthy ... but I am tired, still anxious, upset, and agitated ... but I also feel like I did it.²

Aida's fears and anxieties – both on the verge of giving birth and also after giving birth – are a physical and psychological manifestation of the treatment of Palestinians bound by the geopolitics and biopolitics of settler colonial military occupation. The invasion of the occupied body in an occupied *time* and *space* situated Aida and her newborn in a geography of fear and within an archeology of constant uncertainty. At the same time, it impelled her to resistance, for indeed, existence itself is a form of resistance for Palestinians, and each day lived a kind of victory.

Aida is not alone in her ordeal and her resistance. In the testimonials of various Palestinian women gathered in my study on the politics of birth in occupied East Jerusalem, the body space, the physical space and time, become implicated in their experiences; ironically, time comes to be conceptualized in their words as a place/space of timelessness, an eternity of waiting and wishing for the multiple assaults on their daily lives to be over. Days, months, and moments merge together in a confluence of suffering that is so continuous that the measuring of time passing becomes meaningless, nothing short of impossible.

Establishing the Palestinian as a feared “security threat” rather than as the colonized sustains the settler state and enhances and naturalizes its power.³ Constructing fear in the settler colonial context requires the dispossession of the aboriginal, rendering the latter's bodies out of place. As Sherene Razack explains: “While indigenous bodies haunt settlers, a too-present reminder that the land is indeed stolen, these bodies must also serve to remind settlers of their own modernity and entitlement to the land.”⁴

In pursuing the logic of the colonial framework, Achille Mbembe suggests that colonial occupation combines biopolitical and necropolitical disciplinary power over the body, that is, “the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.”⁵ In Palestine, Mbembe writes, infrastructural warfare – the control of water, air, and terrain – allows for the “invisible killing” and “outright execution” of Palestinians, producing just such a death-world: “The extraction and looting of natural resources by war machines goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to unleash the, to force them to scatter over broad areas no longer contained by the boundaries of a territorial state.”⁶ The spatial fixing of people corresponds with fear of their resistance, actions, and movement, creating zones where life often becomes unlivable and where dying becomes the regime of living.⁷

What the settler colonial regime often claims to be a “let live” praxis when “approving” Aida's accessibility to the hospital – in which Aida is considered, like all Palestinians, a “potential terrorist” – is understood in liberal terms as less violent than killing. It appears on the surface to be a “humanitarian” approach to warfare, a “security necessity.” Settler colonial biopolitics and the discourse of the “demographic threat” and “terrorist other” thus lead us to a condition that conforms not to Foucault's maxim of “make live and let die,” but to Jasbir K. Puar's definition of maiming, which “masquerades as ‘let live’ when in fact it acts as ‘will not let die.’”⁸

Going back to my first question, what does settler colonialism look like? How is it written and inscribed on bodies and lives? How do the aesthetics of violence and its visual depictions instill fear, spreading terror into everyday life? A second example may help us understand.

On Sunday, 17 May 2015, over thirty thousand young religious and nationalist Israeli Jews rampaged through the Old City of occupied East Jerusalem, chanting “Death to Arabs,” “Muhammad is Dead,” and other racist slogans. Some attacked bystanders and journalists and banged on shutters of Palestinian stores that had been ordered to close at midday. This “walk” inside the Old City, is the climax of “Jerusalem Day,” an Israeli national holiday to celebrate the occupation of the Eastern part of the city in 1967. On the scene, journalist Charlotte Silver reported to the *Electronic Intifada*: “The atmosphere quickly shifted to that of an angry mob, which first turned on two women who held the Palestinian flag and then, with increasing frequency, toward random Palestinian bystanders and journalists.”⁹

Jacques Rancière suggests that the state is a system that establishes the distribution of the senses.¹⁰ In the settler colonial regime, such distribution of senses becomes very relevant, as it enables the policing and control of the colonized and their spaces and places; but also the reproduction of spaces, places, and bodies. This aesthetics of racialized separation, as Gabriel Rockhill explains, “presupposes a prior aesthetic division between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable.”¹¹ Through the performative/theatrical characteristic of the “Jerusalem Day” parades in the Old City, the division is made clearer, and Palestinians are obliged to close their stores on that day, be confined to their homes – or, more precisely, imprisoned in their own homes. Their own streets pose danger to them while these parades take place, and they are obliged to listen to scurrilous songs and provocative calls. They are obliged to reduce their sight and hearing, as the scenery and the soundscape of their streets are replete with calls for their death.

Meanwhile, when Palestinians in Jerusalem gather, the political aesthetic of settler colonialism disrupts the distribution of the senses in other ways, mixing policing with tear gas bombs and skunk water that turns the colonized neighborhoods into a blinding, putrid space, making room for the colonizer, while denying space and access – but also sight, hearing, and smell – to the colonized. It is in this politics of everydayness, and in the epistemology of details, that we truly see what settler colonialism looks like.

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Endnotes

- 1 As Fanon explained, we should “pay attention to the liquidation of all untruths implanted in his [the colonized’s] being by oppression.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 309.
- 2 This interview was conducted in the context of my study of the politics of birth in Jerusalem, “The Politics of Birth and the Intimacies of Violence against Palestinian Women in Occupied East Jerusalem,” *British Journal of Criminology* 55, no. 6 (May 2015): 1187–1206.
- 3 I discuss this at length in *Security Theology, Surveillance, and the Politics of Fear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- 4 Sherene Razack, *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 32. As Suvendrini Perera has shown in relation to the bodies of refugees trying to enter Australia, these bodies – and especially the voice of the survivor Amal Basry – function as borders, thresholds, and points of connection between spaces and times. Moreover, following Allen Feldman, Perera claims that “the transgressive bodies killed on the wrong side of a map both affirm and undo the logic of the border.” See Suvendrini Perera, “‘They Give Evidence’: Bodies, Borders, and the Disappeared,” *Social Identities* 12, no. 6 (Nov. 2006): 637–656, quote at 651. In that sense, these bodies of the dead and of the living, of the survivors – whether counted or not by the authorities – enable us to see how regimes act, how their policies generate a different aesthetic, a different orientation of the body in the world, and how bodies are marked by these policies.
- 5 Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, quote at 40.
- 6 Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 38.
- 7 On regimes of living, see Stephen J. Collier and Andrew Lakoff, “On Regimes of Living,” in *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 22–39.
- 8 Jasbir K. Puar, “The ‘Right’ to Maim: Disablement and Inhumanist Biopolitics in Palestine,” *Borderlands* 14, no. 1 (2015): 8.
- 9 “Video: Israeli Mobs Celebrate ‘Jerusalem Day’ with Anti-Palestinian Rampage in Old City,” *Electronic Intifada*, 18 May 2015, online at electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/video-israeli-mobs-celebrate-jerusalem-day-anti-palestinian-rampage-old-city, accessed 26 July 2015.
- 10 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).
- 11 Gabriel Rockhill, “Editor’s Introduction: Jacques Rancière’s Politics of Perception,” in Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, xiii.