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The decolonial wor(l)ds of Indigenous women

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Indigenous women's narrative and storytelling tradition and its relation to decolonial ecologies. It argues that Indigenous women's narratives, both written and orally transmitted, constitute sites of defiance to the eco-social structures of settler colonialism and imperialism. Drawing on the case of Palestine, the article reveals that 'zoocentric environmentalism,' as represented by an Israeli installation at the Venice Biennale, incarnates the material and symbolic constituents of Zionist blooming enterprise. That is, such presumed forms of progressive 'non-anthropocentric' engagements with ecological calamities unveil the historical continuity of the Zionist project that aims to erase Indigenous Palestinians and their multigenerational, more-than-human place thought. To counter universalising environmental projects and their inherent colonial violence, the article engages with place-based stories of a Palestinian woman's novella; more-than-human ancestral knowledge shared by Palestinian women elders; and a visual-media project showing Palestinian refugee women returning to their ancestral villages. The article's overall aim is to advance an Indigenous situated approach to decolonising today's environmentalism and to centre Palestine in the wider social and cultural geography debate on Indigeneity, decolonial ecologies, and storytelling.

Los mundos (y palabras) decoloniales de las mujeres indígenas

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina las ecologías decoloniales que las mujeres indígenas promueven a través de sus narrativas, tanto escritas como transmitidas oralmente, en respuesta a las estructuras eco-sociales del colonialismo y el imperialismo. Basándose en el caso de Palestina, este artículo sostiene que el 'ambientalismo zoo-céntrico', representado por una instalación israelí en la Bienal de Venecia, encarna los componentes materiales y simbólicos del floreciente empeño sionista. Esto continúa borrando a los

palestinos indígenas y su pensamiento multigeneracional y más que humano. Para contrarrestar los proyectos ambientales universalistas y su inherente violencia colonial, el artículo aborda historias basadas en lugar de novelas cortas de mujeres palestinas; conocimiento ancestral más que humano compartido por las sabias ancianas palestinas; y un proyecto de medios visuales que muestra a mujeres refugiadas palestinas regresando a sus aldeas ancestrales. El objetivo general del artículo es promover un enfoque indígena para descolonizar el ambientalismo actual y centrar a Palestina en el amplio debate de geografía social y cultural sobre la indigeneidad, las ecologías decoloniales y la narración de historias.

Les mots-mondes décolonisés des femmes indigènes

RÉSUMÉ
Cet article étudie les écologies décolonisées que les femmes indigènes font progresser à travers leurs récits, transmises par oral aussi bien que par écrit, en réponse aux structures écosociales de l'impérialisme et du colonialisme de peuplement. Il se sert de l'exemple de la Palestine pour soutenir qu'un « environnement de zoocentrisme », tel que celui que l'Israël avait présenté à la Biennale de Venise, incarne les composantes matérielles et symboliques de l'entreprise florissante du sionisme. Cela continue à effacer les Palestiniens indigènes et leur idée multigénérationnelle du lieu plus qu'humain. En opposition à l'universalization des projets environnementaux et à la violence coloniale qu'ils contiennent, l'article s'intéresse aux histoires localisées dans le court roman d'une femme palestinienne ; les connaissances ancestrales plus qu'humaines que partagent les anciennes Palestiniennes ; et un projet artistique visuel qui montre des réfugiées palestiniennes retournant aux villages de leurs ancêtres. L'objectif global de cet article est de contribuer à une approche avec la perspective indigène envers la décolonization de l'environnementalisme contemporain et pour placer la Palestine au centre du débat géographique, social et culturel plus général sur l'indigénéité, les écologies décoloniales, et la narration.

Introduction

This article examines the decolonial ecologies that Indigenous women's narrative (written and orally transmitted) advance in Palestine's settler colonial context. Its argument builds on and contributes to critical geographers' engagement with narrative construction and storytelling at the nexus of human-environment and nature-society issues (Barron, 2021; Cameron, 2012). Stories, as practices of world-making, contest predominant environmental narratives and solutions 'call[ing] into account the types of social realities they produce and for whom' (Houston & Vasudevan, 2018, p. 242). The case of Palestine provides a unique opportunity to explore these debates for several reasons.

First, numerous scholars have identified how Israel utilizes a green discourse to enable its settler encroachment on Palestinian land and lives (Alqaisiya, 2023; Braverman, 2009; Hughes et al., 2022). The existence of such an eco-imaginary can be traced back to the

founding mission of Zionism, that is, to 'make the desert bloom' (George, 1979). Blooming enterprise, in other words, is the eco-social structure that has played a key role in 'performing both the erasure of Palestine as an Arab space and the naturalisation of Israeli presence' (Boast, 2012). At the same time, such a process also entangles with Zionism's transformative vision of the formerly diasporic Jewish Man (Schnell, 1997, p. 73). From early *halutz* (meaning: pioneer) construction of Jewish-only agricultural settlements, such as Kibbutz and *moshav* (farming villages), to Jewish National Fund (JNF)[1] ongoing afforestation policies, the Zionist Jewish Man has sought to settle and replace the Indigenous Palestinian presence (Schwake, 2020).

Second, Zionist blooming enterprise should be situated within the broader history of colonial/imperialist ecological violence instructing Western environmentalism past and present, especially in the Arab region. Being a settler colonial formation, as much as the United States, Israel incubates a mode of social reproduction that promotes imperialist values and secures US interests in the Arab region (Ajl, 2023; Kadri, 2015). Historically, what binds them together is a racist, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal conception of space, place, and environment needed for the continued domination of the Indigenous, poor, and racialized people of the world (Bacon, 2019; Ferdinand, 2022). Undertaking the role of civilizing the nature of the wild savage, settlers rely on a Euro-Western Cartesian conception of the world necessitating a human/nature and man/beast divide (Watson & Huntington, 2008). The Cartesian Man of the settler colonial world incarnates the master/slave relation maintaining mind/body, human/nonhuman and eventually settler/indigenous mode of domination (Ferdinand, 2022). This Cartesian logic continues to inform the dualism between environment and humanity, seen in much of Western environmental and anthropocentric perspectives (Davis & Todd, 2017). Cartesian ideals of cultural and scientific superiority conform with capitalist-led solutions to environmental concerns (Massé & Lunstrum, 2016).

Geographers' engagement with Indigenous world-making practices disrupts the epistemic approaches inscribing monistic understandings of the natural world (Prolux & Crane, 2020; Barron, 2021). Decolonial methodologies and Indigenous more-than-human stories contest dominant environmental narratives that 'not only obscure the colonial violence that dislocates more-than-human worlds, but also marginalize the Indigenous socio-legal orders that sustain plural assemblages of life' (Theriault et al., 2020, p. 898). Drawing on the case of Palestine, this article contributes to these frameworks, while engaging with Indigenous feminist responses to environmental issues. Situated at the intersection of colonialism, imperialism, and heteropatriarchy (Arvin et al., 2013), Indigenous feminism challenges predominant Western responses to environmental problems, including through anthropocentric perspectives, which fail to account for these connections (Simmons, 2019).

Indigenous feminism brings together the gendered, racial, and class positionality of those who are at the receiving end of the violence informing the eco-social structure of imperialism and settler colonialism (Ferdinand, 2022). Gendered and sexualized violence against Indigenous women not only dates to early colonial conquest of the woman/land (Smith, 2015) but also is manifest in their continued disposability and violability through extractive industries upon the same stolen native land (Chase & Johnson 2023). For these reasons, Indigenous women's bodies and narratives are sites of witness and response to the femi- and eco-cide facets of [settler] colonialism

(Anderson et al., 2021). To recover the Indigenous *muted* narrative, therefore, is to attend to the task of a decolonial ecology, identified by Ferdinand as 'a matter of challenging the colonial ways of inhabiting the Earth and living together' (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 175). The article advances feminist geographer's insights emphasizing the value of the situated experience as counterpoint to totalizing and 'grand' narratives (Valentine, 1998). In such a context, stories should be understood as sites of more-than -human relations, enfolding conceptions of place, time, and environment that are intimately linked to Indigenous struggle for emancipation and decolonization (Whyte, 2018; Country et al., 2016).

The article's methodology is based on the use of various forms of narratives that pertain to questions of settler colonialism and environmental degradation (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). The place-based stories of Palestinian Indigenous women, unveil the social, temporal, and ecological counter-geographies to universalizing environmental projects and their inherent colonial violence. The article is divided into two major sections with two subsections in each. The first section draws on the Israeli Pavilion[2] at the Venice Biennale's 17th International Architecture Exhibition (Biennale Di Venezia, 2021), entitled 'Land. Milk. Honey. Animal Stories in Imagined Landscapes'. The exhibit centres the role of animal and land testimonies to rethink the tackling of current environmental problems. It offers a zoocentric approach over one solely invested in examining the role of humans (i.e. Anthropocentric). A contrapuntal reading of the exhibition through the narrative of Palestinian writer, Adania Shibli, *Minor Detail*, situates Indigenous women as a central site of bearing witness and voicing defiance of femi- and eco-cide facets of settler colonialism. In its aim 'to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented' (Said, 1994, p. 66), a contrapuntal reading demonstrates three minor details of Zionist environmentalism.

First, it places the body and story of the indigenous woman at the heart of 'reading back' Israeli environmental historiography. Second, the narrative of the Palestinian Indigenous woman, the actual writer, and her main female character, conflate in the attempt to recover history beyond the material and cultural conditions of Zionist eco-social difference. In this sense, *Minor Detail* is representative of a broader argument proposed by scholars on the connections between gender and ecology in Palestine (Amira, 2021; Shaqir & Soliman, 2022). It encapsulates the violent facets of Zionist settler colonialism, unveiling the historical processes of ecocidal (Jaber, 2019) and femicidal violence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian et al., 2014). Third, the narrative stresses, more broadly, the transformative power of Palestinian grandmothers' stories, which allow shifts to *places* one did not expect, as Shibli herself contemplates (ERC Minor University, 2021).

The more-than-human dimension of these stories have guided my engagement in the second section of the article with Palestinian women's oral narratives. Examining the content of archivally located stories, both written (Muhawi & Kanaana, 1989) and digitally formatted (Tarek Bakri), this section analyses the role of orally transmitted Palestinian grandmothers' stories. *Hikayat 'ajayiz* (Old women's tales) captures more-than-human bonds of interdependencies, found at the core of Fellahin (peasants) and Bedouin's conceptions of time and place, matter, and spirit. Stories like 'the Little She Goat' and 'the Louse' generate eco-social relations and local-place meanings that challenge colonial conceptions of Indigenous nature in its pristine form. Similarly, refugee grandmothers' digitally documented stories animate Palestinian futural return-mappings through the

more-than-human decolonial entwinements. The story of a second-generation Palestinian woman's return to her depopulated village, captured through Bakri's shared photos and online videos that document *teita*'s (grandmother's) stories of the village, encapsulate the generative power of the counter-archive as a site/sight where life-affirmative wor(l)ds dwell against settler geographies of blooming and zoocentric decay.

The epistemic base of decolonizing research (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012), by recognizing the author's own positionality as an Indigenous Palestinian woman, informs the analytical and methodological focus of this article. Born and raised in a village in the south of the West Bank, my late grandmother's stories played a huge role in shaping who I am. The summer of 2021 marked the conflation of various personal/political/environmental events that shaped the article's focus. These included the death of my grandmother from COVID19, the Venice Biennale exhibit – I am based in Italy for work – and the eruption of the Unity Intifada. The Biennale happened at a time when the duress of exile from home, accentuated by the inability to attend my grandmother's funeral because of Israeli restrictions on entry, reached an unbearable level. My nostalgia for my grandmother and her stories compounded my political and scholarly engagement within decolonial feminist and activist online spaces, in Palestine and beyond, in response to the Unity Intifada's struggle. A decolonial feminist positionality underscores the article's aim to advance the intellectual and political sovereignty of Indigenous peoples everywhere.

Colonial zoocentric testimonies

In its participation in the 17th International Architecture Exhibition of the Biennale, the Israel Pavilion unveiled archaeologically dug-out stories of 'the far-reaching environmental changes' that the 'land of milk and honey', came to embody since the onset of the Zionist project (Biennale Di Venezia, 2021). Recounting stories of the land and its animals, the zoocentric exhibition sheds light on the theme of abundance and plenitude that captures the 'Zionist project of modernisation' (Biennale Catalogue, 2021). In such a project, the biblical premise of 'a land flowing with milk and honey' has turned from 'a religious promise to an action plan: the environment was reshaped by urbanization, infrastructural projects, mechanized agriculture, intensive afforestation, and the manipulation of animal bodies into food-producing machine' (Biennale Catalogue, 2021). The exhibition, along with an illustrative book, walks the viewer/reader through various archaeological and archival materials that its curators gathered to show the transformation bestowed upon topographies, animals, as well as waters that 'radically change the landscape, its inhabitants, and animals' (Gottesman et al., 2021, p. 28). One such example is an exploration of the draining of the celebrated Lake Huleh, conducted by Zionist settlers during 1951–58. The curators offer their thoughts on plenitude through the figure of 'a woman with a dog', which was found during the draining project carried out by the Israeli National Water Company in the Huleh basin. Laying bare the world's oldest historical evidence of stone house construction, the finding shows what the curators contemplate as 'Huleh's unique environment with its abundance of freshwater zoological and botanical wealth' that has enabled 'this ancient group of people to settle down, build a home, bury their dead, sanctify them, and tie their fate with that of animals' (Gottesman et al., 2021, p. 348). Throughout the book the curators show how Lake Huleh and its

marshes were noted for their abundance and unique biodiversity. They share images, maps, and expedition findings from European travelogues of the late 1800s.

Overall, the exhibition's land and animal testimonies, as its curators declare in the introduction to the book, correspond to the goal of addressing the Biennale's 2021 key theme 'How will we live together?' The curators affirm the 'need to establish a new contract between humans, animals and the environment' (Biennale Catalogue, 2021) and explain why they opt for an exhibition that focuses on recounting animals' stories:

> Today as the environmental consequences of modernization become apparent, the time has come to break away from anthropocentric perspectives [...] to tell the story of this place, we therefore must move away from the world of humans and focus on the earth itself. We shall recount the story of animals – those that were extinct with the destruction of their habitats, those that barely survived [...] the story of the farm animal, whose numbers have dramatically risen under the rule of man [...] of this land, which so many have dreamed of and longed for ... (Gottesman et al., 2021, p. 30).

The exhibition's investment in environmentalism beyond the dominant anthropocentric perspective aims to challenge the numerous problems at the heart of Man – or Anthropos – as a universalized figure. For Anthropocentric approaches, humans constitute the most important element conditioning geological changes (Crutzen, 2006), thus the colonial and white Man remains the centric agent of history and nature's futural salvation (Davis & Todd, 2017). From such a perspective, the non-anthropocentric focus is seemingly applaudable. However, by framing the current environmental crisis as the general and inevitable effect of modernization, the exhibition obscures questions of settler colonialism and imperialism. In doing so, it winds 'up implicitly align[ing] itself' with the logics of white and colonial Man (Davis & Todd, 2017, p. 763) it seemingly sought to refute. The framework of modernization in fact coheres well with the central theme of plenitude with which the curators grapple. Modernization is a lens to locate 'Zionist plenitude project', underscoring an idea of growth in its economic, political, and national aspects:

> Zionism is a feeding plant – a systematic agenda aimed at supporting the unprecedented demographic growth that took place throughout the 20th century ... by 2050, the population is expected to top 20 million' (Gottesman et al., 2021, p. 29).

What is troubling in the above observation is how this idea of population growth, so entrenched in Zionism, remains devoid of any analytical or referential discussion to the fate of its native Other – the Palestinian, its Nakba (meaning: Catastrophe), and systematic replacement/dispossession. For Palestinians, the word Nakba is an ongoing process defining the structure of Jewish settler colonial domination on expendable Palestinian land and peoples. The exhibition re-entrenches the Zionist blooming enterprise by upholding the plenitude thesis as a defining characteristic of modernity's productive potential. Although the curators do register 'the heavy tolls' that the plenitude project had left on the environment and native inhabitants, they nonetheless remain unapologetic of the 'impressive successful aspects' (Gottesman et al., 2021) of the same project's scientific advancements. Furthermore, the exhibition's findings on past instances of plenitude – the Huleh basin environment – reify rather than troubles the long trajectory of abundance instructing Zionist environmentalist historiography.

Zionist environmentalist accounts relied on an abundance of thesis to enable open immigration policies for European Jewish settlement in Palestine (Alatout, 2009). The Israeli environmental paradigm of plenitude, therefore, entrenches, past and present, well-known Zionist biblical premises, i.e. a *land flowing with milk and honey*, for advancing its political promises, '*a land without a people for a people without a land*'.[3] At the opposite spectrum of plenitude stands the threat of scarcity that the exhibition's 'extinct' animal stories seem to warn against. Such warnings echo the same discourse adopted by contemporary Israeli environmentalists, assuming a protective role for the wild and the natural that is often pitted against the eco-threats of the Palestinian Other[4] (Braverman, 2021).

Moreover, the exhibition absolves uncritically the environmental historiography of Zionist settler colonialism. It leaves one wondering whether the land and its animals can *in fact* speak for themselves when the testimonies they articulate originate from the archival material, interpretive discourse, and archaeological digs of the same colonizer. The erasure of the Indigenous aligns with Zionist blooming enterprise, inherent to which is the constant wasting, i.e. genocide-ecocide of Indigenous people and their ecologies (Crook et al., 2018). An Indigenous situated approach to the [non]anthropocentric can challenge the eco-social paradigms of imperialism and settler colonialism, advancing instead a decolonial ecology (Theriault et al., 2020). For these reasons, I propose a contrapuntal reading of the Biennale exhibition through Adania Shibly's novella, *Minor Detail*, to uncover three minor, albeit central, details to Zionist environmentalism and its zoocentric expressions.

Three Minor Details of Zionist Environmentalism

> The dog barked louder, and she wailed louder, and the sounds merged as he pushed the girl's head into the ground . . . (Shibli, 2020, p. 25)

The extract above reveals the violent set of social and ecological relations between Settler/Indigenous that remains obscured in the 'Land. Milk. Honey' exhibition. The passage is from Adania Shibli's novel *Minor Detail* in which the narrator recounts a true story of gang rape and execution of a Palestinian Bedouin girl carried out by Israeli soldiers in Al Naqab in 1949 (Lavie & Gorali, 2003). Shibli's novella is divided into two parts: the first, written in the third-person, follows the mission of an Israeli battalion and its commander in the southwest part of Al Naqab. The commander instructs his battalion to:

> prevent [Bedouins and their animals] from being here, and to expel them for good. After all, Bedouins only uproot, they do not plant things, and their livestock devour every bit of vegetation that lies before them, reducing, day by day, the very few green areas that do exist. We, however, will do everything in our power to give these vast stretches the chance to *bloom* and become *habitable* [my emphasis], instead of leaving them as they are now, desolate, and empty of people.
>
> (Shibli, 2020, p. 36)

Upon the soldier's extermination of the unarmed Arabs and their camels, only a weeping girl and a howling dog survive. After taking them back to camp, the narrator presents the most gruesome details of how the commander, with the soldiers surrounding him, first undresses the girl before he points a water hose 'at her stomach, then her head, her back, her legs, and her feet, where grains of sand stuck to her skin, then at her torso again' (Shibli, 2020, p. 30). Following what appears to be 'disinfecting' of both the girl and the

dog, which also entailed, on the camp medic's advice, rubbing the latter's fur and the former's hair with gasoline to 'prevent lice from spreading in the camp', the gang rape of the girl occurs until she is killed and buried in a hole dug in the sand.

The second part of the novella is the first-person narrative of a Palestinian woman journalist's quest for the complete truth of the girl's story. Being haunted by a 'minor detail' regarding the date of the killing, which happens to coincide with the narrator's own birthday, the journalist embarks on an arduous search for information about the case through the inevitable 'trespassing of borders' (Shibli, 2020, p. 54). The narrator's West Bank Green ID card does not qualify her to visit the Zionist archival and museum sites she requires. Nonetheless, determined to undertake the journey, the narrator hazardously drives through roads and streets of what current maps designate as Israel to find an alienating and disorientating topography, unlike what she had always known and remembered. The Palestinian villages no longer exist in what is now Israeli physical space and/or all cartographic depictions, as their inhabitants have been erased.

A contrapuntal reading of the Israeli Pavilion through Shibli's novel uncovers what I call three minor details that Israeli environmental historiography of modernization and plenitude absolves. First, at the heart of Shibli's inquest is the body and story of the Indigenous woman whose violation and extermination capture the femi- and eco-cide facets of settler colonial domination. As Palestinian feminists argue, 'Zionist movement's imaginary of conquering and settling the Palestinian body is inseparable from the project of conquering and settling Palestinian land and erasing Indigenous presence" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian et al., 2014, n.p). Shibli's novella not only discloses the gruesome violence structuring settler/Indigenous relations but also accounts for how nature—i.e. moths, lice, dogs, camels, water springs, desert vegetation, and processes of its control – is central to that relation. The commander's promise to fulfil a 'national mission', which 'must not let the Negev remain a barren desert prey to neglect and misuse by Arabs and their animals', resonates with the JNF's mission of 'turning the Desert green' (Keren Kayemeth, n.d.) through ongoing dispossession of its Arab inhabitants (Abu-Saad, 2014). These enforced eco-social structures define the contours of Zionist blooming enterprise.

As mentioned above, the logics of scientific/cultural superiority and material productivity inform the settler blooming mission. Settler epistemology depreciates Indigenous thought and values, presenting it as a clash between civilization and barbarism in which the former is called upon to bloom the land and modernize the lives of the wild native (Da'na & Khoury, 2013). Shibli's narrative highlights this aspect when she unveils the hostility of Zionist pioneers (the commander and his battalion) in interacting with the nature of desolate and uninhabited Palestine. For them, this desolate nature ought to be converted into an environment mirroring the developmental and civilizational needs of the new settler society. While preaching to his soldiers about the agricultural, industrial, and scientific attributes of their blooming mission, the commander in fact comments: 'Man, not the tank shall prevail' (Shibli, 2020, p. 36). More importantly, such a violent mode of cultural domination is tethered to a capitalist mode of production that makes the constant wasting of Indigenous peoples and nature an end in itself (Kadri, 2015). The domination and wasting of Indigenous peoples and nature are not unwanted outputs or collateral damage, but rather an intrinsic characteristic of the system of social reproduction of the settler colonial state. Therefore, waste serves as a domain of capital

accumulation and advances the metabolic rate of social reproduction that Zionism requires.[5] This is how the annihilation of the material presence of the native is coupled with her cultural elimination.

This aspect also is revealed through the voice of the narrator in the second part of Shibli's novel: 'I look at the Israeli map again. A very large park called Canada Park now extends over the area where all these villages used to be' (2020, p. 73). She further shows the striking differences in water availability between Ramallah and an Israeli Kibbutz in the North-western Negev, where the narrator is now 'nearly certain that I've used more water during this shower than I usually do in a week of showering day' (2020, p. 94). Abundance of kibbutz water is grasped in relation to its scarcity in Ramallah. More importantly, spring water is the site beside which Arabs and their animals are executed. The narrative, therefore, situates the racial politics of Jewish settler supremacy at the heart of environmental arguments around abundance (Alatout, 2009). Overall, Shibli's narrative exemplifies what scholars identify as Zionist weaponization of environmentalism for advancing war and the goals of Jewish colonial supremacy in Palestine (Braverman, 2009; Hughes et al., 2022). At the same time, the narrative contests the plenitude logic found in both Israeli zoocentric environmentalism and scholarly apologetic accounts of the productive potential of Zionist modern science and technology (Orenstein et al., 2013; Tal, 2021).

The second minor detail relates to the centrality of the Indigenous women's body and language, both embodying a threatening site of eco-social difference that must be annihilated and regulated under the cultural and material conditions of a blooming enterprise. As the novel recounts, following the cleansing process, which also entailed shaving her hair, the girl undergoes a physical transformation that renders her seemingly familiar within the camp's environment, until the moment where she becomes a stranger again, leading to her final killing:

> … as her mouth released a language different from theirs, the girl became a stranger again, despite how close she resembled the soldiers in the camp. (Shibli, 2020, p. 35)

The language of the Bedouin girl is the site of threat because it harbours and transmits stories of eco-social relations *against* the will of the colonizer. The dog's frantic and endless barking and howling merges with the sounds the girl makes, articulating a narrative on violence, trauma, and loss.

The third minor detail lies in the novel's ability to journey towards places where more-than-human bonds of responsibilities and interdependencies map into Indigenous collective insistence for continuance (Whyte, 2018), capturing elements of what Palestinians identify as *Sumud* (steadfastness). Following the publication of the novel and its translation into English, Shibli reflects on the novel in various talks, on how the act of narrating and writing not only remains central to Palestinian anti-colonial struggle and identity claims but also to recovering what has been muted in 'History'[6] (ERC Minor University, 2021). Shibli reflects sorrowfully on the mass destruction of Al Sakakini's[7] books before she alludes to the transformative role the narrative plays in Indigenous people's lives and ongoing political struggles (ERC Minor University, 2021). This aspect comes out clearly in the second part of the novella, where the narrator likens her inexplicable relationship with

the girl from the past to the stubborn continuity of the same (un-pluckable) grass-human species:

> as one sometimes finds with plants, for instance, like when a clutch of grass is pulled out by the roots, and you think you've got rid of it entirely, only for grass of the exact same species to grow back in the same spot a quarter of a century later. (Shibli, 2020, p. 60)

The sense of haunting that the novel relays in relation to the past is explained through the more-than-human—i.e. dog, wind, trees – interactions that bring the narrator to 'trespass borders', arguably capturing the very act of writing and narrating:

> … that is until I am awoken one morning by the dog barking, followed by the wail of a strong wind … I see how mercilessly the wind is pulling at the grasses and trees …. (Shibli, 2020, p. 61)

Upon encountering an old Bedouin woman who 'looks directly into my eyes' before walking into the sandy hills, the narrator realizes that the truth she so eagerly seeks lies with *that old woman*, 'not the military museums or the settlements and their archives' (Shibli, 2020, p. 103). However, it was 'the silence' which 'stretches on as vast as nature's silence expanding around us' (Shibli, 2020, p. 102) that seemed to have kept the narrator at bay from that detail.

In such a context, these three minor details come together through the role that wor(l) ds play in the Palestinian Indigenous context of recovering the past in its transformative potential. Shibli explains that language is where one feels most alive, and it is what the colonizer seeks the most to alienate Indigenous peoples from who they are and thus essentially eliminating them (ERC Minor University, 2021). In the same setting, Shibli reflects on the significance of her own mother's oral stories. Shibli's words articulate a commitment to language and narration that has always been at the epicentre of Palestinian identity and anti-colonial struggle. Most crucially, they bring us to understand the central role of our ancestral matriarchs in narrating (her)story and attending to what has been silenced within the linear grand narrative of the colonial settler state and its environmental-blooming enterprise. Stories map the *worlds* that ancestral matriarchs have long woven between more-than-human relations.

In what follows I examine Palestinian women's folktales and return narratives to demonstrate their value in unearthing Indigenous decolonial ecologies.

More-than-human relations

In *Speak Bird, Speak Again* (Muhawi & Kanaana, 1989) Muhawi and Kanaana compile, annotate and translate 45 folktales, mostly narrated by women, selected from among the most popular Palestinian tales that have been passed down orally for hundreds of years, from one generation to the next. Such a collection captures 'active scholarly – and potentially subversive – attempt to document, safeguard' and highlight the significance of oral narratives 'in framing Palestinian identity and memory' (Aboubakr, 2019, p. 19). These words resonate with other Indigenous contexts where taletelling is seen as the 'one place where the most subversive elements of our history can be safely lodged' (cited in Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. III). To engage with the Palestinian tale-telling tradition is to map the Indigenous relationship to/with the homeland, reinvigorating the continuity of space

and time of Indigenous sociality beyond the Nakba rupture. As I aim to show in this section, tales not only are discursive articulations of what is known in the local Palestinian context as *hikayat 'ajayiz* (Old women's tales) (Muhawi & Kanaana, 1989, p. 50). Most importantly, they represent more-than-human bonds of interdependencies, found at the core of Fellahin (peasants) and Bedouin conceptions of time and place, matter, and spirit.

Focusing on the group of tales presented under the theme of 'Environment', we see what compilers identify as a 'reflection of the existing harmonious interdependence and connection between the individuals and their environment, both animate and inanimate' (1989, p. 290). For example, The Little She-Goat (*Al-ˉ anza al-ˉ nayzīa*) recounts the story of the She-Goat who is trying to liberate her children from the belly of the hyena that had eaten them. The story captures the circular structure of these tales, with the end contained in the beginning. It starts with The Little She-Goat and her children living in harmony until the hyena eats the children by pretending to be their mother. The narrative weaves the sequences of events from when the hyena goes to ask the ants to chop off his tail so that he deceives the children:

> 'No', answered the ant, 'I won't chop off your tail unless you go to the threshing floor and bring me a measure of wheat'.

> So to the threshing floor he went . . .

> 'I won't give it to you', replied the threshing floor, 'unless you bring a team of oxen to tread the wheat on me'.

> The hyena then went to the oxen . . . ..

> 'We won't go treading', replied the oxen, 'unless you tell the spring to give us water to drink'.

Going to the pool by the spring, the hyena said, 'O pool, let the team of oxen come and drink so that they will tread the wheat on the threshing floor, and the threshing floor will give me a measure of wheat, and the measure of wheat I'll give to the ant, and the ant will then chop off my tail so I can eat the kids of the little she-goat'.

'Let the team come and drink', said the pool. So the team of oxen went and drank at the spring, then they trod the wheat on the threshing floor, and the threshing floor gave a measure of wheat to the ant, and the ant chopped off the hyena's tail". (Muhawi & Kanaana, 1989, p. 936).

The narrative then shows how the She-Goat pierces the belly of the hyena and liberates her children after having asked the blacksmith to make her iron horns. Similar to other tales within the same group, The Little-She Goat story serves an analogical function to reality, capturing the idea of alliance and cooperation within the village sphere. The tale indicates the importance of alliance and interdependence between the various organisms in maintaining the cycle of continuity, as well as dynamism, that is at play within an ecosystem and its physical environment. The web of exchanges between the various more-than-human subjects brings forth a spiral or accordion conception of temporality echoing 'the idea of being in the essence of movement that is in a continuum'; a constant evolution that reconnects and folds us back (Cited in Whyte, 2018, p. 130). This accordion motion of time is best grasped in relation to place, defining the Indigenous identity and socio-ecological configuration. The threshing floor or *baydar* is the place where Palestinian villagers traditionally store and

thresh their crops with oxen and other animals, whose treading on the harvest is usually performed in a circular back and forth motion. At the same time, the *baydar* also reflects a communitarian and social function where families and neighbours meet during harvest time, help each other and 'spend the evenings singing, eating and chatting until dawn' (Aboubakr, 2019, p. 197). The tale, therefore, advances 'the temporal and spatial weavings of people and nonhumans in, through and with place' (Country et al., 2016, p. 42).

Notions of place and time in the tales evolve continually through the web of interactions between more-than-human subjects, and language plays an important role in engendering this entwinement. Tale 41 of the same group, entitled 'The Louse' uses rhymed formula verbs (see Arabic words in brackets) to relay unity and inter-dependence within the Indigenous social structure. Following the death of the flea's husband, i.e. the Louse who burns in the oven (*qahmasane*), the narrative unfolds the impact of that loss on the rest of the community. The flea smears herself with soot from the dump (*saxmana*); the dump collapses (*hailane*); the sheep become lame (*arjane*); the trees wither (*salallaneh*); the birds are plucked (*matane*); the spring dries up (*nashfaneh*); the Bedouin Arabs break their water-jars (*karsaneh*); and the group of nomads leave (*rahlaneh*) (Muhawi & Kanaana, 1989, p. 963). The tale shows how the life of the Bedouin Arab adapts to the ecological conditions determining a nomadic social structure (*rahlaneh*). The rhyming formula captures the unity and interconnectivity between human and more-than-human agents or as Muhawi and Kanaana comment: 'It is as if the end rhyme, which unifies the tale, also unites human with nonhuman nature' (1989, p. 221).

Furthermore, in relaying how an individual's fate can influence the rest of society, the tale shows how collectivity is 'understood in its native context to be not necessarily an oppressive force, but a community of feeling wherein an individual's fate can act upon the society at large' (Muhawi & Kanaana, 1989, p. 973). On a par with Shibli's novella, this community of feeling, particularly during trauma and loss, disrupts the temporal and spatial bounds of human/nonhuman, i.e. trees, 1949 Bedouin Arabs, spring water, camels, lice, girl, dog, wind, desert, post 1967 West Bank, young West Bank woman, old Bedouin woman. Shibli's narrative and the tales demonstrate the centrality of Indigenous women's testimony, unveiling socio-ecological conceptions of the world that question the human/animal binary of Israeli zoocentric environmentalism.

Tales also highlight how the Indigenous more-than-human entwinements imbue a relation to the living power of the supernatural, which sets further apart the ecological worlds of Indigenous peoples from the logics of scientific superiority and productivity of Zionist blooming enterprise. In this regard, the writings of Tawfik Canaan (1922; 1927), Palestinian researcher and physician, provide a rich source of historical documentation of the popular and folk beliefs that shaped peasant relations with water springs, wells, and cisterns before and during British mandatory Palestine. In one study, Canaan documents peasant perceptions of water springs that were believed to be inhabited by spirits who took the forms of holy persons (male and female), animals (i.e. sheep, camel, gazelle and donkey), young women, as well as ghoul and jinn figures (1922). Canaan traces the genealogy of such folk beliefs to pre-monotheistic history of Palestine:

> I do not doubt that serval of the springs and wells which are thought at present to be inhabited were believed in former times to be sacred and were devoted to the cult of one of the numerous gods of Palestine. And it is not improbable that some of the old deities continue to haunt the same springs although ages have passed by. (Canaan, 1922, p. 16)

The power that waters and their sites, stagnant or running, hold for the Palestinian Fellahin (peasants) is revealed in the interplay between woman, animal, and the supernatural. Some of the women spirits inhabiting the springs were believed to have majestic and prophetic natures of telling the future of the village (Canaan, 1922, p.11). At the same time, other women and animal spirits denoted connections to demonic figures (jinn and ghoul) where performance of certain rituals to avoid harms was then required (Canaan, 1922, p. 14). Canaan further shows how these spirits were believed to change, shape, and turn into other animals that roam around in search of grass and herbs at night or would disappear completely, revealing their complex societal perception (Canaan, 1922).

This latter aspect also resonates with the folktales collected by Muhawi and Kannana: The figure of the *ghouleh* (female ghoul) not only shifts between the human and the animal, embodying both at times; but also carries various qualities combining kindness and cruelty simultaneously (1989, p. 183). The supernatural seeps through Indigenous identification with the surrounding more-than-human elements who are, like the human agents of the tales themselves,[8] in constant motion between the imaginary and the real, the physical and the spiritual, the tangible and the ethereal. This relates to the Fellahin system of belief, which sees life on earth as a meeting point where material and non-material elements unfold. Heaven and hell are not abstract conceptions of an afterlife but are felt and imagined within day-to-day life, and its material and earthy existence (Muhawi & Kanaana, 1989, p. 212). Despite being invisible sometimes, the *ghouleh*, in the tales, can make her presence felt, just like 'the soul of a dead person may be heard, imagined, and felt; but it can also materialize and stand next to, talk to, or even touch someone' (Muhawi & Kanaana, 1989, p .205).

Fellahin understand their surroundings as potentially containing living spirits. In doing so, they acknowledge the role of more-than-human agents in the constitution of society, what Watts (2013) identifies as 'a place-thought' conception of agency. The site of a well, a cistern, or a spring was often a place for performing certain rituals on humans and animals alike to enable healing. Certain utterances (name of Allah) and ethical practices were also required in places where spirits were believed to reside (Canaan, 1922). Thus, agency not only is restricted to humans but also circulates through 'human and nonhuman worlds' in the maintenance of Fellahin society (Watts, 2013, p. 21). Seemingly, this is the exact goal of the Israeli exhibition. Yet, Israeli zoocentric environmentalism remains bound to the material and epistemic logics of the settler colonial blooming enterprise. By blaming environmental catastrophe indiscriminately against all humans, zoocentric environmentalism propagates the anthropogenic worldview of (Man/Nature) where the colonial Man emerges, once again, as the sole protector and saviour of 'nature'. This attempt to recover the stories of animals and the land emerges out of the historical and epistemic violence of Zionist environmentalism, relegating to obscurity any trace of the Palestinian Indigenous and her wor(l)ds.

Fellahins' animistic world-view contrasts with British colonial and Zionist desolate conceptions of nature as that which ought to be dominated for a blooming enterprise.

For instance, Sandra Sufian highlights how Fellahin interactions with the swampy marshes of Palestine noted sacredness through the performance of therapeutic rituals. These conflicted with Zionist views of the marshes as 'secular, pathological, instrumental, and economic objects' (2007, p. 51). Sufian further comments:

> the same spaces seen as desolate by a Western eye were almost always filled with local history and meaning where animals, plants, and topographical features had uses and functions not necessarily visible to or acknowledged by a foreign viewer. (Sufian, 2007, p. 52)

The stories that Palestinian grandmothers carry and narrate from one generation to the next are the *matter* (Cameron, 2012) of Indigenous local history and place-thought meaning, which Zionist blooming enterprise erases. In what follows I examine the political significance of refugee grandmothers' stories. These stories animate the 'living protocols' (Theriault et al., 2020) whose significance for the project of decolonization transcends liberal and bourgeoisie notions of stories in their depoliticized multicultural or, in the Biennale exhibition, zoocentric 'show and tell' (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. V).

Mapping return

Tarek Bakri is a Palestinian-born researcher from Jerusalem and initiator of the 'We Were and Still Are . . . Here' project (Bakri, 2019), a visual documentation initiative of Palestinian personal stories and narratives mapping return to their displaced villages. On 14 February 2020, Bakri shares a story of a third-generation Palestinian refugee, named Nour, who manages, after obtaining a European passport, to visit the site of her displaced village on northern coast of Akka: Al Zeeb. Throughout Nour's visit, Bakri captures photos and videos documenting Nour's phone call with her *teita* (grandmother), who remains at Hama refugee camp in Syria. Nour calls her grandmother to relay, in an overwhelmingly emotional moment, that she is 'right next to the palm tree, that you told me about ya sitti!' (Bakri, 2020). A caption to one of the photos Bakri shares of Nour reads:

> What is that secret of the bond between Palestinians and their grandmothers? The grandmother is expelled from her coastal hometown north of Akka in 1948 to become a refugee in a camp in northern Syria. Second and third generation Palestinians are brought up on a diet of stories told by their Teitas (grandmothers), memorising the minutest details, despite the 72 years' time-difference (Bakri, 2020). [Author translation from Arabic]

In the video that Bakri shares, Nour kneels and cries to the voice of her grandmother as the latter instructs her on the location of the house in the village, most of which has been destroyed and turned into 'an Israeli national park' (Bakri, 2020). However, the big palm tree, which Nour tightly embraces, represents a return to home for her. After all, Nour's grandmother vividly remembers how the house 'stood between the mosque and the old mayor's house, at the foot of the big palm tree' facing the sea (Bakri, 2020). Nour keeps her grandmother's stories alive by imagining and feeling at home despite the spatial and environmental grammars that the colonizers impose to keep the Palestinian Indigenous at bay. The grandmother's stories are the vessel that maintain an enduring relation with the village's ruin and the more-than-human subjects[9] remaining there after 72 years of dispossession.

The narrative of Palestinian intergenerational refugees and their living practices of return 'underscore the novel human-nature entanglments and political claims the after life of nature sustains' (Salih & Corry 2021, p. 11). Nour's desire for home demonstrates how Palestinian grandmother stories are living archives of the loss, violence, and pain that the social structures of a settler environment silenced. The documentation of Nour's journey and the recovery of her grandmother's map of the village shows how stories are also generative sites of counter-archival practices where counter-stories persist (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In revealing 'the hidden links between politics and profit, extraction and dispossession, and life and death' (Salime, 2022, p. 1), the counter-archive seeks Indigenous life-affirmative wor(l)ds against settler grammars (Goeman, 2014) of blooming and zoocentric decay. The story, in its continuity, and openness to the multiple shifts of minor details and fabulous elements of village-return, incarnate decolonization as a living process of defying and re-imagining the ecologically (im)possible.

Conclusion

Land and animal testimonies of Israeli zoocentric environmentalism rely on and reproduce human versus non-human binarism, which defines the eco-social structure of Zionist settler colonialism. Whilst rallying itself beyond anthropocentric logics, Israeli zoocentric environmentalism absolves settler colonial history and reproduces the very epistemic notions that underscore the modern/imperial/settler-colonial/capitalist/patriarchal world order.

Social and cultural geographers have been at the forefront of advancing analytical and methodological tools that challenge environmental universalizing conceptions tethered to the ideological and historical tenets of settler colonialism and imperialism (Davis & Todd, 2017). Simultaneously, a growing engagement with Indigenous ecologies for survival, resistance, and resurgence animates our commitment to the living worlds of decolonial ecology (Theriault et al., 2020). Drawing on the wor(l)ds of Palestinian women, this article emphasizes stories as decolonial sites for advancing alternate place relations (Country et al., 2016; Hernández, 2020; Kielland, 2017). In other words, stories enfold living praxes beyond the material, political and symbolic taxonomies undergirding the continuity of settler colonial and imperial eco-social order. To recover Indigenous women's *muted* narrative is to engage 'the broader social and cultural processes within which that story is articulated' (Cameron, 2012, p. 578). Tales' formulaic and fabulous elements, denoting relations to the living spirit of the supernatural, animate Fellahin and Bedouin social and *affective* relations (Gibson-Graham, 2006) that escape the temporal and spatial bounds of human/nonhuman. Old women's tales, therefore, vocalize Palestine's Indigeneity context and the role it plays in imagining and advancing possibilities for eco-social relations beyond Zionist and Western meta understanding of place and environment.

Our grandmothers' narratives of return mappings exemplify the stubborn continuity of the same 'clutch of grass' that 'shall grow back a quarter of a century later' (Shibli, 2020, p. 60). Such grass-growth continuance lays bare the structure of colonialism that governs the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settler states, while challenging the latter's incorporations of Indigenous peoples into its environmental policy regime (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). The narratives this article engages not only disclose the colonial premise to modernity's plenitude thesis but also bear the potential to lay the seeds for planetary delinking from the imperatives of the 'exclusive bourgeois vision' of environmentalism

(Amin, 1985, p. xii). The 'Land. Milk. Honey' plenitude thesis re-entrenches Zionist blooming logic, and the current enabling of Palestine's ecological incorporation into the frames of 'development and peace' that Israeli environmentalism[10] supports. This article's inquiry sits within the broader urgent need to unearth forms of more-than-human reciprocal adjustments, where opposition to 'unilateral adjustment of the weakest to the strong' (Amin, 1985, p. xii), is a gesture towards other possible wor(l)ds.

Notes

1. Non-profit organization whose aim since establishment has been to develop land for settlement in Palestine. See: MB, Kershnar S, et al. (eds) *Greenwashing Apartheid: The Jewish National Fund's Environmental Cover Up*. Oakland, CA: International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network, pp. 47–80. Available at: http://stopthejnf.org/documents/JNFeBookVol4.pdf (accessed 1 October 2021).
2. Commissioned by various Israeli Ministerial institutes including Culture and Sport and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
3. Curators' conclusion with respect to population growth coheres well with this early Zionist mantra.
4. For instance, Israeli growing criminalization and incarceration of Indigenous Palestinians for picking wild herbs.
5. On the functionality of the Zionist settler state to secure US imperialist interests in the region, see Kadri (2015).
6. She says 'Capital history' as she reflects on how the novel's *minor* narrative matters in relation to the grand claims of History.
7. Indigenous Palestinian scholar and poet.
8. The local dialect term *xurrafiyye* is derived from a root that captures the imaginative dimension of the tales.
9. Other stories that Bakri documents show how returnee-visitors mark their return to their villages through picking *Za'tar* (wild thyme) that remained on the ruins site (Bakri, 2019).
10. One example is the organization: 'ECOPEACE Middle East' with offices working across Amman, Ramallah and Tel Aviv. Its primary objective includes the 'promotion of cooperative efforts to protect our shared environmental heritage. In so doing, we seek to advance both sustainable regional development and the creation of necessary conditions for lasting peace in our region' (https://ecopeaceme.org/about/).

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