

Cultivating and Claiming Indigeneity: Agriculture, Capitalism, and Settler-Colonialism in Israel-Palestine

In northern Israel-Palestine, Palestinian farmers are trapped. Diplomacy has not curbed the ongoing dispossession of Palestinian land. While formal Palestinian autonomy seems distant, some farmers survive the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and the racialized neglect of Palestinian citizens of Israel by participating in the global fair-trade market. Fair trade companies, promoted by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and supported by international donors, sell Palestinian artisan food products globally. They market these foods as produced by Palestinians' ancient and native farming practices, and therefore, from a Palestinian indigenous people. These farming practices are also endorsed as resilient to a changing climate (e.g. from a changing harvest season, more pests, and/or decreased yields). As I observed in preliminary field work, however, these Palestinian farmers have complicated ways of classifying their farming practices and their identity, beyond categories of "traditional" or "modern," "sustainable" or "environmentally harmful."

My project asks: 1) *How has a Palestinian "indigenous identity" been articulated under settler-colonialism and capitalism over the past 150 years?* and 2) *How do Palestinians use this indigenous identity to navigate Israeli settler-colonialism and global capitalism to maintain or expand their control over land?* I propose that these Palestinians strategically understand their indigenous identity through agricultural practices and relationships, in the hopes of accessing land. Moreover, Palestinian social and cultural relationships with the land of Israel-Palestine inform a complex identity that exceeds indigeneity as a racial classification, land as a static category of bounded property, and a definition of sovereignty as autonomous territorial control.

Disciplinary Context

I will ground this project in three interdisciplinary subfields of human geography: political ecology, feminist studies, and transnational settler-colonial studies.

Political ecology joins Marxist political economy and natural science to challenge a hegemonic paradigm of scientific development (Robbins 2012). It challenges the nature/culture binary which reinforces both deterministic notions of culture and justifies resource control by capitalist structures

(Braun 2002). Agriculture has been central to the question of the nature/culture divide. What is considered cultivated, and is an agricultural landscape nature, culture, neither, or both? According to Marx's theory of primitive accumulation (1976), as capitalism and the state encloses common land (collectively managed but not cultivated), the working class grows larger and can be exploited. Value can only be accumulated in cultivated land; thus, common land must be transformed into cultivated, private land, resulting in ecological change. Furthermore, collectively managed land is not recognized as value, reinforcing a nature/society binary (Moore 2014). Recent expansions and critiques of primitive accumulation demonstrate how enclosure produces nature and landscapes, rather than Marx's assumption that untouched nature is the pre-cursor to capital (Goldstein 2013).

Furthermore, "environmental Orientalism," building off of Said's concept (1978), has been used in the Middle East to describe colonialism's Othering of both the native environment and local peoples as part of "nature," not "culture." This justifies colonial expansion and reshaping of the landscape—often with adverse ecological and social effects (Davis and Burke III 2011). This has played out in Israel-Palestine historically, and is ongoing today. Positing enclosure as a finished event rather than an ongoing process obscures the racialized power dynamics foundational to value accumulation under settler-colonialism (Coulthard 2014; Melamed 2015). Limited work in general addresses the relationships between participation in capitalism, agroecosystem change, and indigenous identity. Following the call from indigenous political ecology (Middleton 2015), this project critically questions the nature/culture divide created under capitalism, and often reinforced in Marxist political ecology. Additionally, excellent critical political economic scholarship in Palestine studies has analyzed the local actors in transnational circuits of capital (Farsakh 2005; Seikaly 2016). Less work has been done specifically on the environmental and ecological impacts and dimensions of these circuits. This project thus joins a growing body and community of political ecology scholarship in Palestine studies (Alatout 2011; Tesdell 2017).

In addition to understanding how capitalism transformed Palestinian's relationship to the land and the land itself, theories of identity formation from feminist studies illuminate Palestinian indigeneity not as an inherited racial category but as a co-constituted identity. Feminist studies in geography is often co-

terminus with studying women and the environment. There is still much work to do to expand a “particularly narrow reading of gender” in feminist geography (Mollett and Faria 2013, 117). Feminist geography can benefit from understanding spatialized identity creation as the co-constitution of multiple categories of difference at once, beyond just gender, politically and historically situated (Simpson 2014).

Theorization by indigenous feminist scholars argues that indigeneity is not a biological truth, but a political position that constitutes and confuses discrete racial or ethnic categories (TallBear 2013). While state governments have tried to strictly define indigeneity, there is not one settled definition (Corntassel 2003). The lack of a singular definition means this project, on a changing and contested claim to indigeneity, can offer new transnational insights to the question of indigenous identity. Thus, this project aims to contribute to theories of identity formation by arguing that “ecologies and changing environmental conditions bring into existence categories of social difference” (Elmhirst 2015, 523). This project empirically explores how the changing environment in northern Israel-Palestine over the past 150 years, due to imperialism and settler-colonialism, has shaped Palestinian indigeneity as a racialized and gendered (broadly defined) identity.

Beyond simply categorizing identity formation, however, I examine what a struggle for freedom in Israel-Palestine has looked like over the past 150 years. My research addresses broader questions on sovereignty – who holds sovereignty over others, and how? How is sovereignty constricted by the state, and how does it exceed political or spatial boundaries? A transnational settler-colonial studies approach – incorporating theory and method from postcolonial, Native American and Indigenous, and settler-colonial studies – critiques hegemonic definitions of sovereignty (Mbembe 2003).

In this project, I argue that definitions of sovereignty which rely on international legal frameworks for enforcement, or the “freedom” of a global capital market, are insufficient for just futures in Israel-Palestine. New definitions of Palestinian sovereignty must be articulated (Bishara 2017). I contribute to the ongoing conversation on sovereignty not only with empirical insights, but by using my informant’s histories and knowledge production to question territorial notions of sovereignty.

The Wadi Ara and Jenin

The Ottomans' land reform policies of the 19th century enclosed common, uncultivated land throughout historic Palestine (Cohen 1993), and the British Mandate continued to elevate private, cultivated land as superior to common land (El-Eini 2006). Following the *Nakba*, the state of Israel annexed “empty” land (Fields 2017), and continued legal and extralegal expropriation after the occupation of the West Bank in 1967 (Weizman 2007). Indigenous people globally have shared the experience of expulsion and settler states' reclassifying common land as *terra nullius* (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Yet the people of Wadi Ara and Jenin, in the northern West Bank and “triangle” of Israel, may have been affected differently by this tumultuous period than most of historic Palestine.

Today, the Wadi Ara has the highest concentration of Palestinian citizens of Israel in the state and the Jenin governorate has the most land designated area A in the West Bank (Isaac 2002). On a map, this is the largest unbroken area of Palestinian autonomy in Israel-Palestine. During previous visits Palestinians in other regions have said that things are “better” in the north than the rest of Israel-Palestine. There may be a relationship between continuous agricultural cultivation in this region and Palestinian political autonomy. Yet autonomy on paper and sovereignty in practice do not always align. Palestinians in Jenin fight material and political dispossession from Israel's military occupation, while Palestinian citizens of Israel in Wadi Ara have historically faced military and economic violence as well

What stakes – cultural, economic, political – do Palestinians have in being marketed or marketing themselves as “indigenous”? What are the risks? Finally, is Palestinian indigenous identity, because of its relationship to land, gendered (Sharif 2015)? Jenin and the Wadi Ara are rich places to understand how Palestinians' national identity is influenced by social and cultural relationships to agriculture and land (Abufarha 2008), how a claim to indigenous political identity has grown through those relationships, and the possibilities and limits of an indigenous identity to build towards Palestinian sovereignty territorially.

Research Design: Public Feminist Ethnography

I am preparing for nine months of ethnographic field research from September 2019 until May 2020. I will ask Palestinian farmers and NGO workers at sustainable farming organizations about: 1) if

they consider Palestinians indigenous, and how has that changed over time; 2) how different social identities, agricultural practices and/or relationships to the land influence Palestinian indigenous identity; 3) how and why Palestinians communicate their indigenous identity to different audiences globally; 4) the economic and political effects of participating in the global fair-trade market; and 5) their visions for Palestinian sovereignty, and how their indigenous identity informs this vision.

As a feminist research project, my research will be co-constituted through intersections of “power and difference” from myself, my informants, and the institutional actors and global power structures which shape Israel-Palestine (Naples 2003, 38–39), and reflect my “embodied experience” as a researcher (Sharp 2005). As a Jewish woman, I have different access to mobility and resources than my informants, which informs my methodological choices.

Interviews: I will interview Palestinian farmers in the Jenin and Wadi Ara region, of various ages, gender, and education levels. The Center for Organic Research and Extension and the Palestine Fair Trade Association will introduce me to farmers to interview in Jenin, and I will then snowball from those farmers. In Wadi Ara, I will seek contacts from local researchers at the University of Haifa. Interviews will begin with a short survey I piloted in July 2018. I will also use life history methods to ask certain interviewees to share their life story or the life story of a non-human (Dunn 2016), or conduct interviews by walking through a village’s fields and observing landscape changes (Jones et al. 2008). These oral history interviews supplement archival gaps (Sayigh 2015), allow me to hear narratives of landscape change and identity formation over time, and allow informants to demonstrate their agricultural practices directly. I will conduct interviews from September-November during the olive harvest, and from January-April during winter field prep and spring row crop harvest. I aim to complete 45 interviews in the fall (15 per month), visit 25 of these farmers again in the spring, and conduct another 15 unique interviews in the spring. I will also interview 10 NGO staffers in December and January, conducting 70 total interviews.

Participant observation: Participant observation 2-3 days per week will allow me to speak to diverse groups of people, build relationships, and interrogate power relations and my position as a researcher (McDowell 1993). I will participate in the fall olive harvest (field harvest, transport, and oil pressing), and

winter and early spring tree pruning and row crop planting. I will also observe workshops and extension classes for farmers conducted by Palestine Fair Trade Association and Center for Organic Research Extension staff. I observed and recorded two farmer workshops in July 2018. At workshops, I will observe how Palestinian farmers respond to knowledge circulation of globally-standardized sustainable farming practices, while participating in daily farm labor reveals Palestinian farmers as knowledge producers through their practices (Simaan 2017). Empirical observations of agricultural practices may reveal friction between stated histories and actual practices, complicating the neat binary between environmentally-friendly and environmentally harmful practices. I will use these insights to ask questions in follow-up interviews.

Archives: Critical environmental history helps “reveal the hidden relations of power” embedded in human-environmental relationships (Davis 2015, 263). However, access to traditional physical archives poses a challenge to research in colonized areas (El Shakry 2015). There have been intentional gaps created in the archival record of Israel-Palestine told from the point of view of Palestinians (Masalha 2013). Despite these challenges, archival research can uncover documentation of historic Palestinian agricultural practices and how these practices have changed under a succession of imperial, colonial, and native rulers from 1848-present day. Additionally, the archives may contain local articulations of Palestinian national identity, including different ways Palestinians understand themselves as native or indigenous.

Umm al-Fahm hosts a rare archive of formal documents and oral histories since the late Ottoman Era. I will seek permission to use this archive through personal introductions. Additionally, I will use feminist historiographic methods of reading the dominant colonial archive for Palestinian narratives (Lowe 2015; Fuentes 2016). The Central Zionist Archives and National Library of Israel contain legal and scientific documents on Palestinian agriculture and land use from 1917-1980s. I visited both the Central Zionist Archives and National Library for two weeks of preliminary research in July 2018. I plan to conduct archival research in Hebrew and English for three months, in December, April, and May.

Research Qualifications

I have visited Israel-Palestine multiple times. From January-May 2013, I volunteered on an organic farm in Israel and at the Palestine Museum of Natural History (Bethlehem University). There I collected native plant and animal samples for preservation, and participated in informal interviews with Palestinians about the impacts of the Israeli occupation on open space in the West Bank. I also volunteered with Palestinian farmers and shepherds in the northern Jordan Valley on permaculture projects. I returned June-August 2016 for intensive Arabic study and to volunteer with villages in the South Hebron Hills.

In summer 2018, I spent a week with the Center for Organic Research Extension (CORE) and the Palestine Fair Trade Association (PFTA) (both based in Jenin). Both are funded by Canaan Fair Trade, a major olive oil and other fair-trade product company who is the sole purchaser of the aforementioned farmer cooperatives' products. I piloted an interview tool and conducted preliminary participation observation with farmers in three villages surrounding Jenin. CORE invited me to return for my dissertation research, giving me access to their farmer cooperative network and field staff.

My preliminary research interviews showed that farmers in the Jenin region point to Israeli military occupation as their biggest problem, particularly less-visible aspects of the occupation such as water restrictions, mobility restrictions, and economic depression. Additionally, farmers had a complicated relationship to Palestinians as "native people." They both expressed relationships of kinship between themselves and their land which they claimed stretch back through their ancestral genealogy, and resisted being described as "indigenous." Palestinian indigeneity, to them, conjured up ideas of Palestinians as ancient and undeveloped peoples, erased the multireligious history of Israel-Palestine, or implied Israel's dominance was permanent. I anticipate my full fieldwork research will continue to expose complicated relationships to Palestinian indigeneity

I have studied Modern Standard Arabic and Colloquial Palestinian Arabic in both the U.S. and Palestine for nearly three years, and I am at the Advanced level. I conducted interviews and lived with a host family in Jenin speaking only Arabic in July 2018. Additionally, I can read, write, and hold short conversations in Modern Hebrew. I plan to take a Hebrew intensive course in summer 2019.

Bibliography:

- Abufarha, Nasser. 2008. "Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange and Olive Trees in Palestine." *Identities* 15 (3): 343–68.
- Alatout, Samer. 2011. "Hydro-Imaginarities and the Construction of the Political Geography of the Jordan River: The Johnston Mission, 1953-1956." In *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke III, 218–45. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Bishara, Amahl. 2017. "Sovereignty and Popular Sovereignty for Palestinians and Beyond." *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (3): 349–58.
- Braun, Bruce. 2002. *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture, and Power on Canada's West Coast*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cohen, Shaul Ephraim. 1993. *The Politics of Planting: Israeli-Palestinian Competition for Control of Land in the Jerusalem Periphery*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Corntassel, Jeff J. 2003. "Who Is Indigenous? 'Peoplehood' and Ethnonationalist Approaches to Rearticulating Indigenous Identity." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 9 (1): 75–100.
- Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Davis, Diana K., and Edmund Burke III, eds. 2011. *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Davis, Diana K. 2015. "Historical Approaches to Political Ecology." In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, edited by Tom Perrault, Gavin Bridge, and James McCarthy, 263–76. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dunn, Kevin. 2016. "Interviewing." In *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, edited by Iain Hay, Third, 148–88. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- El-Eini, Roza I.M. 2006. *Mandated Landscape: British Imperial Rule in Palestine, 1929-1948*. London: Routledge.
- Elmhirst, Rebecca. 2015. "Feminist Political Ecology." In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, edited by Tom Perreault, Gavin Bridge, and James McCarthy, 519–30. London and New York: Routledge.
- Farsakh, Leila. 2005. *Palestinian Labour Migration to Israel: Labour, Land and Occupation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fields, Gary. 2017. *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Fuentes, Marisa J. 2016. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goldstein, Jesse. 2013. "Terra Economica: Waste and the Production of Enclosed Nature." *Antipode* 45 (2): 357–75.
- Isaac, Jad, ed. 2002. *An Atlas of Palestine (The West Bank and Gaza)*. 2nd ed. Jerusalem: Applied Research Institute - Jerusalem.
- Jones, Phil, Griff Bunce, James Evans, Hannah Gibbs, and Jane Ricketts Hein. 2008. "Exploring Space and Place With Walking Interviews." *Journal of Research Practice* 4 (2): 1–9.
- Lowe, Lisa. 2015. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital: Volume 1*. 4th ed. London: Penguin Books.
- Masalha, Nur. 2013. *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.
- McDowell, Linda. 1993. "Space, Place and Gender Relations: Part II. Identity, Difference, Feminist Geometries and Geographies." *Progress in Human Geography* 17 (3): 305–18.
- Melamed, Jodi. 2015. "Racial Capitalism." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1 (1): 76–85.
- Middleton, Beth Rose. 2015. "Jahát Jatitotòdom*: Toward an Indigenous Political Ecology." In *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*, edited by Raymond L. Bryant, 561–76. Cheltenham:

- Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Mollett, Sharlene, and Caroline Faria. 2013. "Messing with Gender in Feminist Political Ecology." *Geoforum* 45: 116–25.
- Moore, Jason W. 2014. "The Value of Everything? Work, Capital, and Historical Nature in the Capitalist World- Ecology." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 37 (3–4): 245–92.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 2015. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Naples, Nancy A. 2003. *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Robbins, Paul. 2012. *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*. Second. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sayigh, Rosemary. 2015. "Oral History, Colonialist Dispossession, and the State: The Palestinian Case." *Settler Colonial Studies* 5 (3): 193–204.
- Seikaly, Sherene. 2016. *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Shakry, Omnia El. 2015. "'History without Documents': The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East." *American Historical Review* 120 (3): 920–34.
- Sharif, Lila. 2015. "Savory Colonialism: Land, Memory, and the Eco-Occupation of Palestine." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 11 (2): 256–57.
- Sharp, Joanne. 2005. "Geography and Gender: Feminist Methodologies in Collaboration and in the Field." *Progress in Human Geography* 3: 304–9.
- Simaan, Juman. 2017. "Olive Growing in Palestine: A Decolonial Ethnographic Study of Collective Daily-Forms-of- Resistance." *Journal of Occupational Science* 24 (4): 510–23.
- Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- TallBear, Kim. 2013. *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tesdell, Omar Imseeh. 2017. "Wild Wheat to Productive Drylands: Global Scientific Practice and the Agroecological Remaking of Palestine." *Geoforum* 78: 43–51.
- Weizman, Eyal. 2007. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. London and New York: Verso.