# On an abyssal edge: a streak of blood, and absence

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The murdered is carried on the shoulders. In haste, a cadaver shrouded in white is slipped into an *indoor mass grave*. War's soundtrack echoes in the background, tearing through atmosphere and space. Unmarked, the nameless are laid in a bombed-out house embalmed in an eternal, silent scream.

No rest in the resting place.

There is "a secret agreement" between past generations and our own, the late revolutionary philosopher Walter Benjamin writes in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. We are endowed with a power to which the past has a claim. It cannot

be settled "cheaply."[1]

# Ghosts

The dead where I come from are buried close to their beloved. *Ghurba*, that melancholic up-rootedness, is unbearable in life, let alone in the narrow graves. In the mass graves of Gaza, Palestinians are condemned to a second estrangement: an exile on the threshold of the afterlife.

The mass graves, freshly dug and fed, are bulldozed. Those beneath earth's surface are murdered anew, assailed and awakened early from a permanent sleep, where Israel's generals also await – their guns loaded.

The late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish saw what we cannot see. In one poem he writes:

Our lives are a burden to the general: "How does blood

flow from a ghost?"[2]

From its inception and rise over the ruins of Palestine, Israel's enterprise of destruction, writes Ariella Azoulay, had as its end both the "*destruction of the mixed society that had developed here [in Palestine], and the removal of anything that might enable its resurrection.*"[3]

Looking at the obliteration and urban evisceration in Gaza and the West Bank, I remember Fady Joudah's words: this destruction entails the erasure of "even Palestinian ghosts from existence."[4]

Ghosts, after all, are dangerous. As Darwish puts it:

"We, who have no presence in "The Promised Land," became the ghost of the murdered who haunted the killer in both wakefulness and sleep, and the realm-in-between, leaving him troubled and despondent."[5]

Yet the tact, the living and the dead are violated not by Israel's machineries of war alone. Pampered Western journalists have their own, no less pernicious part in this gleeful mutilation.

As Lucy Hockings silences her interlocutor to [safeguard Israel's holy narrative](#), supremacist [Julia Hartley-Brewer](#), shorn of her *SS* uniform, gaslights Dr. Mustafa Barghouti on air, slandering him as an evil, Arab misogynist, who requires a spectacular discipline on the evening news.

## Superfluous Nonbeings

Today, as Edward Said noted decades ago in his essay *Permission to Narrate*, Palestinians are booted in a transition from a comfortable place in limbo to the category of "two-legged beasts" and "human animals."[6]

Yet in this silencing and erasure, I, as do Palestinians and comrades, read a different script. Palestinians, Azoulay writes in a recent essay, "are now exterminated in front of the worlds' eyes without being recognized as victims of colonial genocidal violence."[7]

The latter seem to have been dumped somewhere in oblivion, in a corner so distant beyond dehumanisation.[8] Hamas are not the only beasts here. As Joudah writes, Palestinians altogether are now *superfluous nonbeings*.

As Said (among others) argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, the white man has a history of relegating darker humans down the ladder of racial hierarchy or casting them out of "civilization" altogether.[9] In Palestine lives an example of dehumanisation seen in colonised geographies farther afield.

In *Caliban*, the Cuban critic Roberto Fernández Retamar tells us of the Carib-cum-*cannibal* who, in the writings of Columbus and in European eyes, was "an anthropophagus, a bestial man situated on the margins of civilization, who must be opposed to the very death."[10]

Hitherto in the nebula of the uncharted margins of Christian cartography, the mythical monsters of European imaginary were, with the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit, translated into cannibals and barbarians who now could be located in the *Las Indias Occidentales*.[11]

In Columbus's writings, the Carib differs from another American "discovered" over there: the "*Arauaco* of the Greater Antilles—our *Taino* Indian primarily —whom he describes as peaceful, meek, and even timorous and cowardly."[12]

The Caribs' aforementioned *bestiality* necessitated their extermination. What this vision does not explain, Retamar tells us, is "why even before the Caribs, the peaceful and kindly Arauacos were also exterminated."[13]

By the 18th century, Walter Mignolo writes, time was transformed into a colonial device. Barbarians were now primitives, closer to nature, and Europe was in the present moment, civilized and modern.[14]

This conception justified the ideology of progress, which, naturally, still leaves trails of blood behind. In the 20th century, it was an alibi for development and underdevelopment.[15]

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Palestinian *children of darkness*, as Benjamin Netanyahu labels them, are still *there*, behind, sinking in a deep hole – a point I shall return to later.

With the blessings and material backing of the atavistic American empire, Israel eradicates all that moves or stands motionless in Gaza with no differentiation. Our esteemed colleagues in the mainstream press then finish the job.

As Western writers parrot Tel Aviv's line and carefully minimise the scandal, Palestinian civilians vanish from the face of the earth. When some of these hacks

proclaim to offer an *exclusive* look inside the exotic wilderness of Gaza, local reporters, murdered en masse, disappear like ashes.

Golda Meir is not alone. For many, Palestinians *as a people* seem nonexistent. They are *nonbeings*.

## The Palestinian Laboratory

In the early weeks of the Israeli attack, journalist Sharif Abdel Kouddous wrote for the *Guardian* that "[e]ven colour has been obliterated" in Gaza.[16] In a recent essay on the urbicide underway, Arie Amaya-Akkermans writes that "the entirety of northern Gaza (…) have been nearly turned entirely to rubble."[17]

The plentiful, AI-assisted rapid killing turning Gaza into "an assassination factory," the mathematisation, fragmentation, and shattering of urban space Operation Iron Sword involves, makes it a unique episode in this decades-long genocidal campaign.[18]

The cyclical purge of nonbeings' lives and abodes in Gaza is usually commodified – certifying the prowess of the technology at work before going on the market.

Palestine, writes Antony Loewenstein in his book *The Palestine Laboratory*, "is Israel's workshop, where an occupied nation on its doorstep provides millions of subjugated people as a laboratory for the most precise and successful methods of domination."[19]

This subjugation includes what Byung-Chul Han calls the "digital panopticon."[20] The penetrated lives of Palestinians entombed alive in ghettos and a slow-death camp are not only encircled by concrete and concertina wire, they are captured in their smartphones too.

Alas, the terror of the apartheid Israeli state-in-violation does not depart from but *surpasses* the Orwellian surveillance state against which Han poses the "digital panopticon." The latter is merely one layer of besiegement in whose internet and

"social media" Palestinians are entrapped.

The digital panopticon, Han writes in his *Psychopolitics*, feeds on freedom of excess, on voluntary exposure.[21] Israel's voyeurs await, listening to ensnare Palestinians in their private lives and then gaslight and manipulate whomever they decide (or so they hope).[22]

Veterans of the IDF's Unit 8200, the equivalent of the National Security Agency (NSA), then graduate and take their expertise to private companies such as the NSO Group or the United Arab Emirates' DarkMatter, where "they are paid far more than they could ever imagine."[23]

Eduardo Galeano was right when he said wealthy nations teach oblivion. "No wealth is innocent of another's poverty."[24]

## Spatialised Necropower

Israel's domination and control blurs the line between the Foucauldian definition of discipline and security.[25] Achille Mbembe writes that, "[a]s the Palestinian case illustrates, late modern colonial occupation is a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitic."[26]

In invoking necropolitics, Mbembe tries to account for malformed existences of subjugation where humans are reduced to the status of *living dead* who are herded in *death worlds.*

Drawing on Eyal Weizman, Mbembe shows how the exercise of necropower involves "the dynamics of territorial fragmentation—the sealing off and expansion of settlement."[27]

Illegal settlements perch on high grounds like fortified panopticons, as a regime of "vertical sovereignty" disposes planar territorial division for a three-dimensional one: Israeli traffic cruises in exclusive bypass roads that, when intersecting with Palestinians', the two are kept apart through a makeshift

separation.[28]

"Besieged villages and towns are sealed off and isolated from the world. Daily life is militarized. Local military commanders have the discretionary freedom to decide whom to shoot and when. Movement between the territorial cells requires formal permits."[29]

The above skies are occupied, and those herded and bashed underneath include not only the living, but also the dead. For postmortem violence captures Palestinians in-between, from the moment of their killing to the denied burials postponed and left hanging along with the bereaved mothers.[30]

# Extraterritorial Limbo

If transforming Gaza's humans to *nonbeings* and maintaining their unclassifiable, alien status is a unique phenomenon in today's world, reducing their land to a testing ground had its parallels in other *theaters of operations* faraway.

For Washington has a blood-stained record of treating its southern neighbors as laboratories for both counterinsurgency warfare and neoliberal disfiguration.

In *Empire's Workshop*, Greg Grandin illustrates how, "[f]rom the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the U.S. military sharpened its fighting skills and developed its modern-day organizational structure largely in constant conflict with Latin America."[31]

From Havana to Santiago, the Beltway has invaded lands, subjugated peoples, aided dictators, nurtured death squads, and restructured economies to the detriment of generations on whose bodies an imperial insignia was stamped, pernicious techniques tested then traveled elsewhere as *certified*.

"It was a flexible system of extraterritorial administration," writes Grandin, one allowing the United States, free from the burden of formal colonialism, to structure internal politics and economic relations in the name of fighting

communism and promoting development.[32]

Extraterritorial administration is best exemplified in Guantanamo. Fast forward to the terrorist "war on terror," the first 300 Taliban fighters captured early in the war by the Northern Alliance in Mazar-e Sharif required a secure location accessible to intelligence officers.

Fearing potential targeting and depletion of resources, Karen Greenberg writes in *The Least Worst Place: Guantanamo's First 100 Days*, General Tommy Franks, Commander of CENTCOM, wanted the captives to be taken away.[33]

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In Washington DC, Poland, Guam, and even Manhattan were listed as potential destinations. Policymakers, however, needed a location were neither US laws nor any country's protocols applied. In the executive branch, some even viewed international law as compromising of US interests.[34]

They needed "a legal limbo," what Donald Rumsfeld wished to be "the legal equivalent to outer space."[35] The answer was Guantanamo Bay, where the US had a military base on a land leased for 99-years – a perfect solution "exempted from any civilian or extra-governmental protocols."[36]

# Ruination

It is in this light that Gaza, an exceptional space, should be conceptually spatialised: a hole where Israel could dump anything with justification. For unlike other "extraterritorial" spaces, this hole has at its bottom a population of *nonbeings* whose cries are unheard and extermination is normalised.

"In Gaza," writes Amaya-Akkermans, "the rubble and ruin must remain in full view not only as evidence of war crimes, but as living testimonies of shattered

lives."[37]

But commenting on a "before-and-after" image of Gaza, where colour and architecture are wiped out in the latter, Azoulay warns readers of being misled by the "before" image. It is there, she insists, that genocidal violence is also inscribed.[38]

It is for such reason Ann Laura Stoler brings *ruination* to our minds – those "protracted imperial processes that saturate the subsoil of people's lives and persist, sometimes subjacently, over a longer *durée*."[39]

It is what people are *left with*: the afterlives that linger after violence is first inflicted, and that perpetuate the violation of lives and minds of beleaguered populations that Stoler (as do the natives) calls our attention to.

In Palestine, the enterprise of destruction upon which the state-in-violation was erected, writes Azoulay, is *a regime feature*. The sovereign demolishes homes, creates a spectacle and issues no permits for Palestinians to build homes anew.[40]

Keeping Palestinians in the status of passive subjects, Azoulay continues, "necessitates subjugation mechanisms that operate everywhere, all the time."[41] This entails daily humiliation, systematised whimsical oppression at checkpoints through which Palestinian bodies, dead or breathing, may trickle through or not.

In Gaza, writes Sara Roy, violence has also "been a matter of everyday, ordinary acts: the struggle to access water and electricity, feed one's children, find a job, get to school safely, reach a hospital, even bury a loved one."[42]

This Kafkaesque violence, Roy writes in her book the *Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development*, "is distinguished by its ordinariness, prosaism and invisibility."[43]

Since 1967, she writes in her recent *New York Review of Books* essay, Israel has transformed both Gaza and the West Bank from "a functional economy to a

dysfunctional one" with an impoverished society.

De-development in Gaza, the Zionist catalogue of destruction stipulates, includes "expropriation and dispossession; integration and externalization; and disindustrialization."[44] Thusly, both natural resources and institutional capacities are appropriated and crippled to maintain the unviability of Palestinian life.

The tact between the living and the dead, then, is violated by the mere acceptance of a *normal* that unfortunately has been disrupted by regretful scenes of violence played on TV. Had it not been for Hamas's attack on the seventh of October, all would have lived happily ever after.

As Israel commits the mélange of less-spectacular atrocities Baruch Kimmerling once described as *politicide*, it maintains Palestinians' manufactured status as threatening "other" against whom all of the drastic measures above are justified.[45]

When photographs of this violated existence emerge, it is only normal. The Palestinian as a distortion to a Westerner's field of vision is in her rightful place within the frame as a refugee, a terrorist or a *superfluous nonbeing*.

The Palestinian self is terminally *handicapped* and is never allowed to be whole.

*Handicapped* also means inferior, never thought of as equal. Their violence, as one commentator wrote in the *London Review of Books*, where posh pseudo-leftists scribble from their hammocks, is *pathological*.

Like the "sneaky" Iraqi soldiers newsmagazines' neo-literates scribbled about before Iraq was bombed back to the pre-industrial age, Hamas's "dominion of the underground," in the words of our author Amaya-Akkermans, is *cowardly*.[46]

Verily, Palestinians always seem to suffer from some sort of an incurable ailment that requires an uninvited diagnosis from "allies" and foes alike.

# Policing by Word

Said, writing in the aftermath of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, says a "disciplinary communications appartus [*sic*] exists in the West both for overlooking most of the basic things that might present Israel in a bad light, and for punishing those who try to tell the truth."[47]

Indeed, a multiplicity of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) were and remain at play. When Said says "disciplinary," it is because – as the late Louis Althusser tells us – like the Repressive State Apparatus, the ISAs function by ideology *and* violence as well.[48]

The ISAs, writes Althusser, include the scholastic and the news and information apparatuses, and are united by a dominant ideology. Through them state power is exercised for the shared end of the reproduction of the relations of production – that is, the capitalist relations of exploitation.[49]

Silencing Palestinian comrades on America's elite campuses, disfiguring their story on the altar of "the news," are two examples of *policing by word*.

Despite their diversity and geographic diffusion, these ISAs function under the ideology of a global capitalist ruling class with vested interests in the state of Israel.[50]

Ideology, as the myths it deploys at its service, is everywhere.[51] But it is naïve to presume, as someone argued in *The Nation*, that Israel's propaganda, increasingly futile on the streets, dictates the politics of the "only audience that counts" – that is, US policymakers.[52]

Joe Biden needs no treacherous spell to leap from a sympathetic stance to the side of war criminals – a category to which many White House residents belong. This foggy view presumes the presence of innocence in the Beltway, some good faith and naiveté at the decision-making level.[53]

As Azoulay rightfully argues, "[i]mperial governments do not represent humanity but the logic of their racializing regimes. This endows them with imperial rights to support each other when they use genocidal violence."[54]

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The ruination of Palestinian life, the rampant bombardment in Gaza, have been historically perpetrated with both the blessings of US veto power in the Security Council, and – in the latter's absence – disregard for passed resolutions.[55]

This impunity is partially earned by the fact that, as Max Ajl writes, investing in Israel to boost "world-wide accumulation through wars on republicanism and revolution served the US ruling class well."[56]

As a protector of "the political architecture of global capitalism," sanctifying Israel's comfort, then, has as its corollary an oscillation between policing and bombardment of generations of the Palestinian nuisance until its coveted demise.

# A Hole

For those, a hole needed to be dug in the ground.

Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, defines space as "*a practiced place.*" Like a word when spoken, "the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers."[57]

Marc Augé builds on this argument to introduce his concept of hypermodernity's "non-places."

Unlike the social anthropological places, non-places create solitary contractuality.[58] These include supermarket aisles, motorways and airport lounges – all "defined partly by the words and texts they offer us."[59] The bewildered commuter looks for these signs for guidance.

Words, Michel de Certeau tells us, in the act of naming somewhere, can create "*a nowhere in places* [emphasis added]."[60]

By naming, he argues, "that is, by imposing an injunction proceeding from the other (a story) and by altering functionalist identity by detaching themselves from it, they create in the place itself that erosion or nowhere that the law of the other carves out within it."[61]

Can a name produce this "erosion or nowhere?" Augé asks.[62]

Or, let me rephrase the question: how to define a forgotten, caged shred of shrinking land inhabited by *superfluous nonbeings* mostly kept alive on scarce aid, frequently battered on the head, and irreversibly tattooed as human animals by a racist lexicon?

Gaza, with its population of already-expelled refugees, is transitory for many. But to which destination? Again and again, the thousands born in its refugee camps transition to an early, violent deaths by Israel's warplanes. Some are killed in the womb, even before acquiring a name.

But a home where generations resist and build life-worlds despite besiegement and isolation, in being depicted as a hostile terrain inhabited by *nonbeings* outside any criminal category, the Gaza Strip sinks in an abyssal void, transforms into a black dot on the map.

When photographed scandal seeps from underneath the wreckage into the comfort of a Western audience, these *statements of horror*, as Azoulay calls them, fail to turn into *emergency claims* because, in dominant discourses where they shall be inserted, they are not "an exception to the rule."[63]

There exists a preconditioned life in news articles (as in official gibberish) where Palestinians dwell. There, they are mostly *handicapped*, at fault, ahistorical, spoken about and over. At times, leading rags may allow a select few to plead in a muffled voice and a tamed alphabet (for *diversity*, of course).

Israel's hallucinations tell a different story, one articulated by the denuded denial of its allies, by headlines articulating anything but the screams of photographs, and by the eloquence of crimes written, photographed, recorded, and taking lives as we speak.

It cannot but be seen.

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