



# Contemplating *Palestine: matters of truth and justice* with rage, love and anger

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Accepted: 26 September 2023 / Published online: 2 November 2023  
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## Abstract

In this essay, in conversation with Azmi Bishara’s *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice*, I am wrestling with how to write about Palestine, at the same moment that I am contending with the media’s erasure and dehumanisation of Palestinian life, in January 2023. And here I am again, on 19 October, 2023, with the proofs for this piece arriving in my inbox, while witnessing bombs rain down on Gaza; a second Nakba and genocide that has the world’s full awareness and legitimacy. I wrote and write, full of rage, full of anger and full of love.

**Keywords** Palestine · Matters of Truth and Justice

## Friday

Last Thursday (26th January, 2023), another nine Palestinians were killed in Jenin, as Israeli-state military forces charged into what they consider a ‘hot spot’ of disruption, dissent and violence. From their ‘POV’, this is a place that continues to refuse pacification; that won’t just let things be quiet. And so, the Israeli soldiers went in to do the work of quieting.

And we, outside and inside, (re)count: Numbers 23–32, since the beginning of 2023. We are already outpacing last year’s numbers: 177 by the end of 2022, which was already “the deadliest year in the West Bank since the Second Intifada” (Kubovitch et al., 2023). Another image of bodies wrapped in kafiyas splash across the news. I thought it would be harder to find their names, but Israeli newspapers were quick to celebrate the “successful” raid (Shoval et al., 2023). The one where they took the lives of Abdullah Marwan al-Ghoul (18), Moatassem Abu al-Hassan (40), Wassim Amjad Jaas (22), Nour Ghoneim (25), Muhammad Ghoneim (28), Muhammad Sobh (30), Saeb Issam Zreiki (24) and Izz a-Din Yassin

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Salahat (22). They left out the 61 year-old grandmother, Majda Naefa. I guess they are less proud of that one.

The next evening, on Friday 27th January, there was a mass-shooting on the streets of an East Jerusalem settlement. I was writing this piece as news unfolded of the eight people that died that night, including the Palestinian who shot them (chased and gunned down by police). 42 Palestinians were immediately rounded up, detained in response, allegedly in search of supporters and collaborators, even though initial news already reported that the gunman acted alone; but they must show power, must cause more pain, must show who's in control.

I read the news late on Friday and was already dreading Saturday morning's headlines. I already knew I would wake up to newspapers spotlighting a 'heinous, terrorist act' on International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The sickening tone of 'how dare they' would echo across social and institutional media. I knew President Biden was going to call his friend Bibi Netanyahu and offer his condolences. Newspapers would condemn Palestine, Hamas, the PA, Abbas, Islamic Jihad – everyone except for the colonising and carceral forces that shape this reality. The show of unanimous, unfaltering support would once again be expected, despite the last few months in which cracks finally appeared in the discourse. Even the USA, alongside other Global North powers, were suddenly bristling at Israel's blatantly right-wing Jewish-supremacist government taking power, their nervous concern almost tangible with the realisation that unhindered support of an unhinged Jewish state might no longer be possible, particularly with Israel's Judiciary under the chopping block of radical settler movements. But all that is wiped clean now. They'll bury their concern, and Palestine will continue to bury their dead.

Inspired by Avery Gordon (2008), Hazel Carby (2019), Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012) and Aya Nassar (2018), I teach my students to let their feelings structure their writing, their methods of inquiry, their engagements with material things. How else can they know that what they write and think is real, has resonance, is entangled in the kind of violence that haunts their past and present- and can give them tools for new potentials, new becomings? As I write this, all I feel is angry: the kind of boiling – and somewhat futile – anger that makes me want to scream at my computer screen. And so, anger is going to weave its way through my engagement with Azmi Bishara's new book, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice*. And as I write my way through/with my emotions, I'm also hoping this anger can become something else, something more thoughtful and hopeful.

## Tuesday

It is now Tuesday (30th January, 2023) and I am reading Rana Barakat's beautiful new piece in *Kohl* alongside the news, as I contemplate this book. It quickly becomes another inspiration for engaging with the generative (and potentially destructive) capacities of anger and rage. In conversation with Andre Lorde, located in/with collective life in Palestine, Barakat (2023) writes:



Lorde helps us read through anger as a useful guide for reflection on the generative and potentially destructive flows of rage. In Arabic, the power of the word *ghadab* (غضب) holds meaning and connotation for both anger and rage as two parts of a potential spectrum. Reading through Lorde and her thinking, while grounded by the methodological potentials of *ghadab*, is a journey into and with Palestine. If harnessed in refusal of oppression, *ghadab* is revolutionary, but if turned in on itself, rage is like a fire that can burn she who holds it. Lorde teaches us that both rage (as *ghadab*) and love are guides, while fear and vulnerability are realities, and silence is sometimes a tool of the wicked. (p.27)

I am still working through what productive anger could look like. I suppose Bishara offers an initial clue in his book's first few lines: "When writing on [the Palestine] question, I bring to bear the greatest possible critical and scientific objectivity, though not necessarily neutrality (p. 1)." This distinction between 'objectivity and neutrality' jars, as I read about a promise that this book is about justice; about re-calibrating the idea that Palestine is a dilemma to be resolved with "creative policy solutions" and founding it instead "on a historically shifting equilibrium between two chief components of justice, equality and freedom" (p. 3). I can understand what he's saying about neutrality – we are never neutral, never abstract or removed from what we love, what makes us angry, what makes us act; for even writing is an action. However, objectivity to me is tied up with normative, positivist approaches to scholarship and the idea that we can write without bias – or that we might want to. This approach shapes the tone of the book. Lists, footnotes, endless references, aimed at the objective exploration of Palestine's past, present and future. Bishara is meticulous in his rigorous unravelling of the historic myths, policy illusions and liberal approaches that have offered international shelter and ongoing legitimacy (and normalisation) to the Zionist colonisation of Palestine. This book speaks to the need to reckon with the ghosts of 1948, of 1967, of 1993 that structure the present – not just the violence of expulsion and erasure, but of what it means to search for hope long after the age of anti-colonial revolution and liberation struggles have been subsumed into nothing more than a neoliberal real-estate project. As I read, the fact that anger – in fact any emotion – has disappeared from the text, feels off. I am missing it.

The prevalence of the 'real-estate' project approach to Palestine, the core musings of Chapter Seven, has been the centre of my work for the past six years. I write about Israeli trade and cross-border transit infrastructures; a project that enables me to trace imperial and contemporary shipping and railway corridors from the wider Mediterranean through Haifa, eastward. I work through its ruptures and re-makings, travelling with Ottoman, British and now Israeli projects, as they sought/seek to consolidate land routes to and through the Middle East. "Following this infrastructure" (Cowen, 2019) since 2016 has evolved into a deeper understanding of the entangled circuits of trade, security and finance, as part of stabilisation and pacification efforts across the region, as well as their relationship to and obfuscation of the global unevenness of racial capitalism.

While the real estate project is about Palestine, in a way, it also really isn't (or rather, Palestine is not at the centre of it). It's about the accumulations of capital, the flow of trade deals, the scaling up of high-tech projects (green, agricultural and



desertification technologies, alongside surveillance and war-making materials); and through the making of a corridor from Haifa to the UAE, constructing and securing new centres of order and power. Palestine's containment and ongoing erasure is a by-product of these wider capitalist interests; the ones blatantly on display with Trump's 'Deal of the Century', Netanyahu's 'Abraham Accords' and the billion-dollar trade deals that they enabled. The ones that see no connection between the killing of nine Palestinians in a raid and the financial investment in Israel. Or maybe they do, but they want to pretend they don't.

What I have learned from my research is that disaggregating financial flows from spectacles of violence is essential to Israel's normalisation into the region. Bishara (2022), in his ongoing mission towards objectivity, intricately unravels this relationship through spotlighting the intersplices between Zionist religious discourse and Trump's development plans. Each line offers new revelations:

The text is shot through with the kind of jargon Trump might use to hype up his latest project: 'To support this new development, the economic development program will identify financing for the construction of restaurants, shops, hotels, cultural centres and other tourism facilities within this zone.' Would that differ from the existing settlement economic zones that already employ Palestinians? Israel exploits the impoverished Palestinian workforce, who are paid salaries that range 30-40 per cent of the legal minimum wage a day, not only by importing workers to Israel but also in the West Bank itself. Twenty settlement industrial zones were established along with hundreds of Israeli factories and dozens of agricultural settlements that cultivate over 9,000 hectares of occupied West Bank land. (p. 213)

We don't have to dig deep to see the connection. As he points out, the façade takes little to pull apart, given 'Peace to Prosperity' starts with invocations of the Torah and ends with details about tourism. "The idea of a contemporary international diplomatic text citing scripture is no less ridiculous than a peace initiative that promises the construction of restaurants (p. 213)." Yet, Bishara spends so much time, across this chapter, across the manuscript, to draw out the fallacy; to spell it out to Western/liberal audiences that continue to call for restraint, for moderation, for two-state policy solutions to Apartheid, settler colonialism and endless days of violence.

Coming back to where I started, with Rana Barakat's engagement with Audre Lorde, justice and liberation require emotion—anger, rage, love. And anger/emotion has never gone over well with liberal audiences, which always seem to demand objectivity, lucid arguments, unemotional scholarship. Abstraction. Even when the subject is present, raw, bare. Bishara's book provides this in strides. And in so doing, makes the violence of Israel's project palpable and legible to liberal, Western audiences.

I suppose (perhaps unfairly) I can't help but ask, isn't it time to mitigate this need for calm, 'civilised' approaches to Palestine? I know this is a hard question, because I am genuinely not the target of this book and there is political urgency attached to Bishara's project of bringing this wider audience along. Hard, because Palestinians don't have the luxury to express their anger, their rage, their love – or else they will



be accused of bias, of violence, of emotion – those big ‘no-nos’ in academic scholarship and political messaging. And hard because anger can also debilitate, emotions burn and burnout, and when one lives in/with violence, they might need other ways of contending, reckoning, surviving with it. And so, I imagine emotions are compartmentalised, seething far beneath the surface of the words, as Bishara speaks and writes with poignant, calm precision about the genealogy of colonialism, occupation, carcerality; in his treatise on where liberation must come from and lead to.

Yet, I turn (not for the first time) to Dene Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard (2014), who offers another path for this work, in reminding readers that truth and recognition is not – cannot be – the litmus of Indigenous resistance and resurgence. Or Audre Lorde (1984) – inspired again by Rana Barakat – that the masters’ tools cannot be used to raze the masters’ house. In other words, the justice Bishara is seeking to explore and expose will not emerge from getting those that legitimise colonisation to recognise ‘the truth’ of the colonised. As Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) argues, ‘truth’ is always entangled in power. And hasn’t Bishara’s perfectly crafted testimonies been out in the world for as long as Palestine has been ‘a question’? Bishara himself has been writing since at least the early 1990s, when I first encountered his work on the Jewish state and his political agenda that spoke about a ‘state for all its citizens’; whose words helped to wrench me from my own liberal starting point, into a journey towards what I hope constitutes allyship and solidarity.

It may seem trite and obvious, but as we all saw so easily last Saturday morning, truth easily disappears in media narratives, objective essays and balanced scholarship. As poignant as Bishara’s book is, and as helpful as it will be in teaching and narrating the past, present and future of colonial and liberationist movements in Palestine, the need for something else boils under my own skin. I want to scream, disrupt. No more calm, no more civility, no more composure, no liberal abstractions. Not when I’m looking at those nine bodies on the screen. Anger, rage, love.

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