

Black-Palestinian Solidarity conference

Contesting settler nationalisms

Gary Foley and Suzannah Henty

The Black-Palestinian Solidarity conference was held at the University of Melbourne on 6–8 November 2019. The central interest of the conference was to strengthen Indigenous solidarity, establish relationships and engage with forms of resistance against the ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Aboriginal nations in the continent now known as Australia and in Palestine. By settler-colonial governance, we refer to colonies in their modern nation-state manifestations that emerge from, practice and are sustained by what Patrick Wolfe terms, in *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (1999), a ‘logic of elimination’. That is, where settlers seek to eliminate, assimilate and replace the *indigene* and their sovereignty with a new national order that is contingent on Indigenous genocide.

The subtitle of the conference ‘Contesting Settler Nationalisms’ referred to modes of domination *and* resistance that are informed by and embody a colonial logic. Against settler nationalisms, the conference aimed to reflect on models of and for resistance beyond the colonial-coloniser binary. It considered solidarity and resistance as intellectual and political praxis informed by what Mudar Kassis describes as a ‘freedom-based epistemology’ which rejects colonial grammar and embraces a transnational and transcultural solidarity strategy; and by the work of scholars Noura Erakat and Marc Lamont Hill, who argue that ‘Transnational Black Palestinian Solidarity’ is a theoretical framework and praxis in which the struggle for justice and the right to return – from Djap Wurrung to Al-Quds, Gaza to Ferguson, Rojava to West Papua, Chiapas to Kanaky, Standing Rock to Aleppo – is indivisible.

Aboriginal and Palestinian solidarity in the continent now known as Australia emerged during the late

1970s and began with the organised political actions of Ali Kazak and Gary Foley, who saw the Palestinian and Aboriginal struggle as part of the same fight for justice against settler-colonial occupation, and who officially opened the conference. Kazak, an activist, former Fatah member and, later, Palestinian Liberation Organisation representative for the Oceania region, migrated to Australia in 1970. Foley is a Gumbaynggirr activist, historian and co-founder of the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Services (1971) and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972). In 1979, Kazak launched the first Palestinian-run newspaper in Australia, entitled *Free Palestine*, which ran until 1990 and which featured Foley’s political actions. In May 1981, Kazak curated the first exhibition of Palestinian culture and resistance in Australia, held at RMIT’s Storey Hall; Foley opened the exhibition. In 2018, Gary Foley and Ali Kazak met once again, this time with Suzannah Henty, a scholar of Anglo-descent researching anti-colonial resistance practices in contemporary art. Together, they decided to collaborate on a conference centred around Indigenous resistance against settler-colonial occupation in Australia and Palestine, framing this struggle as marked by capitalist structures of oppression in their imperialist, colonial, neo-colonial, nationalist and neo-liberal manifestations.

The theoretical questions that underpinned the conference were: What forms of political action can be defined as decolonial practice? What might be a valid proposition for decolonisation when the structures of colonisation – such as land expropriation, incarceration and assimilation – are embedded in modern nation-state models? What is the praxis of intersectionality and solidarity? What is the role of increasingly corporate educational institutions in de-normalising oppression and oc-



Micaela Sahhar and Rabab Abdulhadi (Photo: Ryan Al-Natour)

cupation? This latter question was specifically addressed in Professor Rabab Abdulhadi's keynote lecture, which examined Zionist lobbying on campuses and her own experience as a target of it, which has involved detailed death threats. It is worth mentioning in this context that the conference posters that were put up around the University of Melbourne campus were themselves vandalised during the event. The organisers promptly photographed, removed and submitted them to the Aboriginal History Archive at Victoria University.*

Focusing on transnational Indigenous solidarity and sovereignty as a means to imagine and experiment with liberatory futures, the conference consisted of seven sessions. Each was designed to not only unpack how occupation is exercised by the state and the individual – for example, the expropriation of land by the coloniser through property law, architecture, literature and art –

but also to interrogate how resistance movements have used the language of the coloniser. Taking these two critical perspectives and demanding their confrontation, the contributions, above all, argued for the necessity of breaking away from oppressive hegemonies.

Alternative epistemologies for the exercising of power were discussed throughout the conference. If we accept that the Australian and Israeli nation-states are racist apparatuses, what possibilities do alternative epistemologies of identity – contingent on community, history and identity, rather than nineteenth-century social evolutionary and biological constructs of race and citizenship – provide for a non-racist future? If race is an historical, social and ideological construct, how can clarifying notions of 'Blackness' and 'Black-Palestinian solidarity', as well as extrapolating on the anti-Black structures and devices of the settler nation-state, influence

* For more on the Foley Collection, see <https://www.vu.edu.au/library/about-the-library/special-collections-archives/foley-collection>

forms of solidarity? In Jacqui Katona's talk, entitled 'Aboriginal Power and the State', she argued that in a cohesive social movement we can find a home. Katona argued that spaces for meeting and conversation where Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination are not only discussed but upheld, such as at the conference itself, can become a place for 'careful understanding, listening, of contestation as well, not just to agree but to debate a full understanding of who we are, and what our collaboration means'.

This space of careful understanding and coming together against the triumphalist state narratives that, in Australia, attempt to consume Indigenous peoples as a celebrated 'national character' (on the proviso that 'they' remain pacified, putative citizens of the state), and the self-proclaimed indigeneity by Jewish-Israeli settlers in Israel, was a radical component of the conference. Aboriginal and Palestinian solidarity carries with it a legacy of attempted division. The appropriation of indigeneity by settlers in Palestine, for example, was a critical topic addressed throughout the conference. Micaela Sahhar's paper, '“I have no other land”: Subverting Aboriginal History in Israeli Aspirations to Indigeneity', took on Patrick Wolfe's 'logic of elimination' and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's argument that Israel has attempted to 'eliminate the native as native' to examine how both settler-Australian governance *and* Aboriginal peoples in Australia have provided a model for Israeli 'land expropriation and identity appropriation'.

Against the pacification of the left in a world where we are fighting the rise and normalisation of extreme-right ideologies, Ghassan Hage was critical of the neo-liberal tendencies of the self-fashioned left. There were two key components in his paper. The first was that to merely condemn genocide is not enough for anti-colonial practices. He began his lecture with a story he had written for the conference, describing the fictional 'Museum of Never Again', a museum dedicated to remembering the monstrosities that are occurring today in the Australian-run concentration-style refugee prisons on Manus, Christmas and Nauru Island. The museum consisted of artefacts mentioned in Behrouz Boochani's book *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018), written via WhatsApp while the Kurdish journalist was detained in an Australian detention centre in 2013–2019. Hage's second key point was directed against speaking about genocide

as if it were a *fait accompli* after which attempts at reconciliation are to be made. In fact, both Aboriginal and Palestinian peoples have survived extermination attempts and refused settler-controlled reconciliation. These two arguments led Hage to a radical consideration: just as a gift carries the spirit of the giver, so does the legacy of invasion in a land that was stolen. Hage argued that reconciliation processes are consistently underpinned by a paternalism that seeks to ward off the ghosts that haunt stolen land, in order to prevent an uprising. Settler colonial reconciliation, therefore, is only attempted when the oppressed is pacified or dead.

Gunditjmara elder Alma Thorpe, who was the first matriarch to speak on the Matriarch Panel at the conference, spoke of her first experiences of another culture, which was Anglo culture. Having been 'missionised' as a child and forced to 'obey', Thorpe stated early in her talk that 'assimilation to us is that they haven't come up with a final solution yet.' Put in terms of transnational Indigenous solidarity, Alma's perspective was particularly pertinent and important, as she is a highly respected matriarch of the Melbourne Aboriginal community, being one of the founders and life-members of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS), an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation established almost 50 years ago out of the Black power movement of the 1970s. Not long after it was founded the VAHS became the first Aboriginal organisation in Australia to publicly express support for the Palestinian people against their occupiers, and as such was the first Aboriginal organisation to publicly draw parallels between the historic experience of occupation and colonisation shared by the Aboriginal and Palestinian peoples.

The incarceration of Aboriginal and Palestinian peoples was discussed extensively during the conference. In his keynote, Gary Foley stated:

A good way of judging of whether or not you have a humane and compassionate society is by looking at the jails, at those who are in jail and what those jails are like. I stand before you today, despite all the stuff people reckon I am, as a man whose oldest granddaughter is in jail in New South Wales and whose oldest grandson has just been released from a juvenile detention centre in Melbourne. All Aboriginal people in Australia, like all Palestinian people, are impacted by the ongoing occupation of our homelands. The ongoing attempts to assimilate us, the ongoing and never-ending implications of

settler colonialism that are not diminishing but getting stronger, impacts all people. When I see what is going on in occupied Palestine, it hurts me and I feel that pain in me the same way I see the photograph of Dylan Voller being tied to that chair, with a spit mask on him, as a kid brutalised by the thugs in the Northern Territory juvenile detention system.

Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, the chief investigators of the Deathscapes project – an investigative research unit examining and mapping offshore and in-shore Indigenous and asylum seeker deaths in custody – examined the militarisation of the borders of Australia and its construction as nation state. A central component of the Deathscapes project is to establish transnational relations with other settler states, namely the United States and Canada, as well as the UK as the origin of the empire. Deathscape seeks to critically examine the systems of occupation and oppression that are used in other geopolitical landscapes, and to forge relationships of collective resistance.

The violent appropriation of history in the settler nation-state is a strategy designed to defend a claim to occupy sovereign land. Zionists have appropriated Palestinian land, architecture and history to build their national imaginaries, museums and sites for nationalist self-fashioning, including the Museum of Tolerance, built on the Muslim Mamilla cemetery in Jerusalem, or the Etzel Museum, built on Ottoman ruins in Jaffa. Similarly, Australian national culture has increasingly sought to Aboriginalise 'Australian art', beginning with the crisis of European imperialism in the mid-twentieth century (e.g. Margaret Preston, the Jindyworobak poets) through to the previous thirty years in which Western Desert painting has been made the brand of the Australian na-

tion state. If the aesthetic appropriation of Western modernist art has been compared to forms of colonialism, ethnocide and cannibalism, then Aboriginal and Palestinian artists have used aesthetic appropriation and counter-appropriation as a form of cultural resistance. Such resistant appropriation needs to be considered in the context of other resistant aesthetic practices such as auto-ethnography and alternative ways of imagining community to the dominant national-cultural narrative.

With approximately forty contributors, the Black-Palestinian Solidarity: Contesting Settler Nationalisms conference was a significant moment for critical reflection on modes and temporalities of settler colonial occupation, and a historic moment in the strengthening of Indigenous relationships. The final remarks on the conference must, however, address the absence of the late Sam Watson. Political activist and author, Sam Watson was the co-founder of the Australian Black Panthers in 1971, alongside Denis Walker. Watson was a co-founder of the Australian Indigenous Peoples Political Party in 1993. He has worked on death in custody cases and with Stolen Generation peoples. He published several books and plays, including *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990), *The Mack* (1997) and *Oodgeroo – Bloodline to Country* (2009). In 1995, he wrote and co-produced the film *Black Man Down*, which screened at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival. After hearing about the conference, he made contact with the conference convenors and expressed his keen interest to be involved, to which we responded with joy! His paper, entitled 'The Last Panther', was to examine the successes and failures of the Black Power movement. Unfortunately, Sam was unable to attend because of poor health. Approximately three weeks later he passed away. We will continue to fight for justice, just like Sam, until victory.