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Restoring the Past Won't Liberate Palestine

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Amid the graphic images, fierce polemics and endless media criticism that have dominated my social media feeds since the war in Gaza began late last year, I noticed a seemingly bizarre subplot emerge: skin cancer in Israel.

“You are not Indigenous if your body cannot tolerate the area’s climate,” [one such](#) post read, highlighting [outdated](#) news coverage claiming that Israelis had unusually high rates of skin cancer. (They [do not](#).) Skin cancer, these posts claimed, was proof that Israeli Jews were not native to the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea but are in fact white Europeans with no ancestral connection to the region, enactors of one of the worst crimes of the modern age: settler colonialism.

On one level, the claims about skin cancer — like similar ones about Israeli cuisine and surnames — are silly social media talking points from keyboard warriors slinging hashtags, hyped up on theories of liberation based on memes of Frantz Fanon quotes taken out of context. In the context of the ongoing slaughter in Gaza — [more than 28,000](#) people dead, mostly women and children — such posturing may seem trivial. But even, or maybe especially, at this moment, when things are so grim, the way we talk about liberation matters. And I find this kind of talk revealing of a larger trend on the left these days, emanating from important and complex theories in the academy but reflected in crude and reductive forms in the memes and slogans at pro-Palestine protests — an increasingly rigid set of ideas about the interlocking colonizer and the Indigenous colonized. In this analysis, there are two kinds of people: those who are native to a land and those who settle it, displacing the original inhabitants. Those identities are fixed, essential, eternal.

I have spent much of my life and career living and working among formerly colonized peoples attempting to forge a path for themselves in the aftermath of empire. The rapacious carving up of much of the globe and the genocide and enslavement of millions of people by a handful of European powers for their own enrichment was the great crime of early modernity. The icons who threw off the yoke of colonial oppression — including Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, India’s Jawaharlal Nehru and Fanon — were my childhood heroes, and they remain my intellectual lodestars. But I sometimes struggle to recognize their spirit and ideas in the way we talk about decolonization today, with its emphasis on determining who is and who is not an Indigenous inhabitant of the lands known as Israel and Palestine.

A good deal of the antipathy toward Israeli Jews today is undergirded and enabled, I believe, by something that to some ears sounds progressive: the idea that people and lands that have been colonized must be returned to their indigenous peoples and original state. But that belief, when taken literally, is at best a kind of left-wing originalism, a utopian politics that believes the past answers all the questions of the present. At worst it is a left-wing echo to the ancestral fantasies of the far right, in which who is allowed to live in which places is a question of the connection of one's blood to a particular patch of soil.

Implicit in the emphasis on indigeneity is a promised restoration, albeit one of a very different sort from the imperial fantasies of Vladimir Putin or the gender obsessions of Ron DeSantis. Decolonization “is not converting Indigenous politics to a Western doctrine of liberation; it is not a philanthropic process of ‘helping’ the at-risk and alleviating suffering; it is not a generic term for struggle against oppressive conditions and outcomes,” as the scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write in an influential academic paper published in 2012, [“Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.”](#)

“The broad umbrella of social justice may have room underneath for all of these efforts,” Tuck and Yang write. “By contrast, decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.”

There is perhaps no more vexed question in the world than how this might play out in Israel and Palestine. There is no doubt that Palestinians long lived in the land that became Israel. Jews have deep historical roots in that land, but the vast majority of the people who established the state of Israel came from elsewhere, fleeing genocide and persecution in Europe and forced into exile by Middle Eastern and North African nations. It is impossible to separate Israel's birth from the dying gasps of the old colonial order. It was, in the indelible phrase of Arthur Koestler, “one nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of a third.”

In theory, decolonization includes the disestablishment of the very idea of land as property, of modern notions like nationhood and citizenship. In theory, it is a chance to do it all over and replay history with the benefit of indigenous ideas and traditions to guide us.

But history doesn't work that way. People do bad things. Other people resist those bad things. Humans invent and discover; they create and destroy. There

is no going backward to some mythic state. There is no restoration. The events that unfold over time shape the land and the people who live on it, and those people shape one another in manifold ways, some brutal and destructive, some generative and loving. But time and experience ensure that nothing can ever be the same as it was before the last thing that happened.

As I was thinking through these issues, I came across a series of [social media posts](#) about settler colonialism by Iyad el-Baghdadi, a Palestinian writer and activist whose work has been an indispensable guide for me in the present crisis. I sent him an email, and he agreed to speak with me to expand on his ideas. I explained my unease at the reliance on concepts like indigeneity to decide who has a just claim to live in a place.

“Don’t take these people seriously,” he told me, though he made clear that he has some sympathy for those who espouse such views. “They’re not really motivated by some kind of ideology. They’re really motivated by emotion and they kind of slap together an ideology to satisfy their emotion, but then emotions by their very nature cannot be satisfied that way.” He told me that sometimes when he hears people talk about Palestinian liberation it is almost like they are expecting a literal reversal of 1948, what Palestinians call the “nakba,” or catastrophe, of their expulsion upon the founding of the state of Israel.

“It is as if there will be this magical moment and all our villages are going to appear out of the earth. And then 75 years of settler colonialism is going to disappear,” he said. “But this romantic idea is really unmourned trauma.”

Questions of indigeneity are simply a distraction, he said, from the real challenge of building Palestinian political power. “I don’t care if they’re settlers or not,” he said. “The solution is not to constantly try to moralize. The solution is to fix the power imbalance. The future needs to be rooted in the truth that all human beings are equal, and that Jewish life is equivalent to Palestinian life, and that we can together work on a future in which nobody is oppressed and we can address the inequities of the past.”

Eventually our conversation came around to Fanon, whose writings on political violence are now once again in vogue, taken up with alacrity by the activists focused on undoing settler colonialism — even, or perhaps especially, if it requires bloodshed.

“People are really using him to lend some kind of intellectual legitimacy for political violence,” he said. “And I find that really, really obscene. When I read Fanon, I think he’s talking about power. He’s not really talking about violence. Violence is a weak person’s idea of what power is.”

Fanon, a psychiatrist turned anticolonial political figure, had a lot to say about violence. In his book “The Wretched of the Earth” he wrote that “violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”

There is no question that Fanon, who devoted much of his short life to the often violent struggle to liberate Algeria from French rule, believed that violence was a legitimate tool to fight oppression. But what did he actually mean, and did he write these words as a physician’s description or a revolutionary’s prescription?

The writer Adam Shatz argues in “The Rebel’s Clinic,” [his terrific new biography of Fanon](#), that “cleansing” is actually a misleading translation: “The English translation of ‘la violence désintoxique’ as ‘violence is a cleansing force’ is somewhat misleading, suggesting an almost redemptive elimination of impurities,” Shatz writes. “Fanon’s more clinical word choice indicates the overcoming of a state of drunkenness, the stupor induced by colonial subjugation.”

Indeed, what violence restored to the colonial subject was agency, the ability to shake off the role imposed by the colonizer and begin to act of his or her own volition. Colonized people may harbor fantasies of returning to a long-lost past, before their land was stolen. But it is equally likely that they, like Fanon, want to build a new and different future.

Fanon had a lot to say about history. Shatz’s book details Fanon’s early infatuation with the romantic ideas of thinkers like Léopold Sédar Senghor, the poet and anticolonial leader who would become Senegal’s first president. Senghor and some of his generation of Black colonial intellectuals posited an idealized and mystical pre-colonial African past that needed to be unearthed and revived.

Eventually, Fanon rejected these backward-looking ideas: “In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a Black civilization unjustly ignored,” he wrote in

his book “Black Skin, White Masks.” “I will not make myself the man of any past.”

And yet. How can we not look to the past to try to find a path through the present, just as we look to the future as the repository of some long-awaited justice that never quite arrives? This human propensity leaves us stuck between memory and dreams, neither of which tell us all that much about our present difficulties.

We think understanding the past with hindsight will somehow save us. But what is that hindsight? A perfect knowledge of the past that was not accessible or visible to those experiencing it. Somehow, we believe, the future will be untainted by the passions of the present, and able to see what unfolded more clearly. In practice, it actually works the other way — we see the past through the prism of the present, and often in the blinding light of our hopes for the future, eliding and emphasizing the role of the past as suits our present purpose.

A theory of decolonization that seeks to move backward will inevitably run up against this human tendency. But it also, perhaps unwittingly, strips the formerly colonized of the very self-determination they seek.

Olúfemi Táíwò, a Nigerian philosopher at Cornell University, argued [in his book “Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously”](#) that the Manichaean divide between the colonized and the colonizer and the rejection of everything emanating from the latter stripped the colonized of agency by denying them the creative freedom to make something new out of the experience of being oppressed. “It must and does foreclose the possibility that the colonized could find anything of worth in the life and thought of the colonizer which they could repurpose for their own societies, both during and after colonialism,” he wrote.

Africans, Táíwò argues, should be able to take what they want from modernity and use it, like any free people, to invent their own future, not look backward to a past that in any case can never be recovered.

The agonizing months since Oct. 7 have made it seem all but impossible for any of us to imagine what kind of hopeful future might be invented out of the present nightmare. We have reached a terrifying new stage of the war with the looming assault on Rafah, where hundreds of thousands of civilians have fled Israeli bullets and bombs only to find themselves once again in the cross hairs

with nowhere left to run. But generations of Palestinian activists and intellectuals, people who have perhaps the greatest reason to find sustenance in fantasies of a mythic past free of Israel and its people, do not dream of rolling back time.

“Successful liberation movements were successful precisely because they employed creative ideas, original ideas, imaginative ideas, whereas less successful movements (like ours, alas) had a pronounced tendency to formulas and an uninspired repetition of past slogans and past patterns of behavior,” wrote the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said. “The future, like the past, is built by human beings. They, and not some distant mediator or savior, provide the agency for change.”

Said was perhaps the most influential intellectual heir to Fanon, and in a tragic twist, he too died of leukemia, the same cancer that killed Fanon at the age of 36. Both of them died without seeing their lifelong struggles won. But both went to their graves as modern, cosmopolitan men, engaged with the world not as they wished it was but as they found it, chronicled it and shaped it toward their unshakable vision of self-determination and freedom for the colonized peoples of the world. Liberation requires invention, not restoration. If history tells us anything it is this: Time moves in one direction, forward.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/18/opinion/israel-gaza-palestine-decolonization.html>