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Hope in the ruins: Seeds, plants, and possibilities of regeneration

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Abstract
As space in the West Bank is increasingly threatened, Palestinians are turning to agro-activism to reclaim it. Alongside the established olive activism, there has been a flourishing of generative projects by which my interlocutors attempt to reclaim their space from the environmental damages of the ongoing occupation. I situate these regenerative practices in anthropological discourses about imperial ruins and the blasted landscapes of capitalist ruins. In Palestine, the debris of Israeli military incursions and the ruination of the environment with "security" infrastructures like the Wall produce ongoing occupation ruins. However, as in Tsing's work—where ruins are presented as productive of new possibilities—here, too, hope underpins my interlocutors' projects of planting, saving, and regenerating seeds. Their projects involve reclaiming nature through heritage seeds, eco-farming initiatives, farming cooperatives, and food circulation initiatives, thereby encouraging Palestinian food reclamation. Through their activism, Palestinians regenerate a sense of value in themselves and their futures as they attempt to reclaim their landscapes in an embodied way, rather than giving in to ruination.

Keywords
Environmental justice, regeneration, dispossession, seeds, agro-activism

My contribution to our discussion of environmental justice in Israel–Palestine addresses the recent efforts to reclaim distinctive plants, seeds, and knowledges, which can be imagined as "sprouting from the ruins" of contemporary Palestine. Although there is no central coordination, in many parts of the West Bank, practices such as seed sharing, community farms with shared labor and shared produce, and fresh takes on recycling are springing up in the spirit of generating ecological resistance to the occupation ruins. There is a burgeoning

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interest in seeds, eco-farming, and organic agriculture; food tours of the markets of Bethlehem, East Jerusalem, and Nablus have begun; and I heard more than one story about "recovering engineers" reviving family farmlands! The mother of an individual central to this revival seemed bemused as she told me that her generation thought they had to leave to make money abroad, but her son's generation want to remain in Palestine to create meaningful, beautiful, and tasty lives. While many young Palestinians still dream of leaving Palestine and its ruins behind and I heard enough commentary to support Lori Allen's (2013) argument that "cynicism" about politics in Palestine is still the sentiment of the day, since 2017, I have also heard about many hopeful and generative practices. The occupation of Palestine is made rhetorically (and practically) complex by what Massad (2000) calls "the post-colonial colony" whereby the Palestinian Authority claims recognition for an aspirational state in a territory (and airspace) over which it has no permanent control. Many of the activists with whom I work envision themselves as working within another form of ruin, the ruin of a possible positive future outcome of the Oslo Accords, hardly helped by what many agro-activists call, critically, the "NGO-ization" of Palestine. The hope for a Palestinian state is not an imaginary that they find particularly persuasive, or at least not any more. Although there is no obvious reason to assume that a fair and just future is to hand for Palestinians (far from it, given the recent American legitimation of Israeli claims over Jerusalem and existing settlements), my job as an ethnographer is not to dismiss hope as unrealistic but to listen carefully to the ideas espoused by these Palestinian agro-activists and the reasons they give for their practices.

Particularly compelling at this time are the generative practices that engage with the nonhuman (soil, seeds, plants) and the preservation of local knowledges essential to the activities of planting, harvesting, and foraging. In some respects, what is going on in contemporary Palestine resonates with global concerns about food homogenization, industrial food, and fast food, all with their health consequences, a concern in Palestine as they are in other parts of the world, as Galvez's work in Mexico (2018) and Yates-Doerr's in Guatemala (2015) demonstrate, to name just a few. I examine how the influence of cosmopolitan discourses about possible transformations through food (knowledges, agendas, politics) is brought to bear on a very local Palestinian reality. For instance, the sometimes unthinking valorization of the "local" that goes on in foodie discourses does not take into account the political and economic circumstances: "local" food means something different when the land on which it is produced is being taken from you, or you are forbidden access to it, or the foods that you have grown up eating are celebrated under the name of the colonizer of your land (see Hirsch, 2011 on hummus, for example). Ethical production and consumption become embodied practices of reasserting Palestinian rights of belonging that they think should not have been questioned in the first place. Highlighting plants and the foods they produce is part of an unfurling of artistic and aesthetic belonging in the eyes of these agro-activists as they face a problem of how to preserve a "taste of place" in this context: what is a "terroir" of a disappearing land?

My first trip to Palestine in 2006 was to study another project of agricultural rejuvenation, that of Palestinian olive oil, a product that moved for centuries along vibrant trade routes in the Levant and beyond, as Beshara Doumani (1995) has pointed out. At first glance, the extent of ruination from which olive oil was supposed to rejuvenate shocked me. Hostile settlers routinely uproot, burn or poison olive trees, leaving them in a devastated state, surrounded by other blights on the human and nonhuman landscape: buildings with broken windows marked by bullet holes, piles of rubbish, and "aesthetically challenged" infrastructures of containment like the Separation Wall. The imaginary Biblical Land of Milk and Honey looked more like a battered moonscape of Concrete and Asphalt. I was

intrigued to see how, in order to market olive oil as a fair trade product abroad to highlight the harsh conditions Palestinian farmers face under the Israeli occupation (Meneley, 2008), olive oil had to be transformed to conform to the "extra-virgin" standards often associated with elite foodie discourses of distinction (Meneley, 2011, 2014d). (It is hard to imagine extra-virgin fair-trade olive oil from Tuscany, for contrast.)

Here I extend my focus on olive oil to investigate other recent agricultural initiatives in the ruins. I draw inspiration from Ann Stoler's (2013) concept of "imperial ruins." However, Stoler's "imperial ruins" evokes an imperial period that is, at least in some respects, over. In contrast, the occupation ruins that the Palestinians face are not things of the past. Over the last decade, as I visit Palestine every year or six months, I see the ongoing creation of occupation ruins; for instance, the roads that are made impassible by concrete blocks or new grand highways that Palestinians are not allowed to traverse. Anna Tsing's (2015) work on the "ruins" of capitalism also shapes my envisioning of the "occupation ruins" from which Palestinian agro-activists are trying to rejuvenate.[1] The settler highways, the settlements themselves and the sewage which sometimes runs down from them, the blight of the Separation Wall, have all destroyed Palestinian agricultural land. Ruins of the occupation differ from that of the "capitalist ruins" that Tsing describes: the once cultivated forests left to their own devices after the American lumber industry retreated. Yet, Tsing's concern with the "dynamics of life on a damaged planet" and her mushroom foragers finding edible treasures resonates with the concerns and practices in Palestine.

For most English-language speakers, "environmental" is a term which claims a neutral or apolitical space, but in the context of occupied Palestine, it is neither. As Irus Braverman (2009) has pointed out, "environmentally friendly" tree planting continues to be used by the Zionist Jewish National Fund as a means of colonizing; Israeli "nature" areas in the West Bank continue to exclude Palestinians from their own land and forbid them from foraging certain edible plants like *za'atar* (wild thyme) and *akoub* (an edible cactus) (see Kamisher, 2018). Foraging for edible plants in Palestine is an ancient practice that has recently become a topic of some concern as people wonder if they will be able to pass these "ways of seeing" and "ways of finding" onto their children (see Meneley, 2019 for a description of a pedagogical foraging walk).[2]

Helpful here is Stoetzer's (2018: 297) play on "ruderal," the Latin word for rubble in her concept of "ruderal ecologies:" "ecological communities that emerge spontaneously in disturbed environments usually considered hostile to life." Stoetzer's example is apt because it highlights the potential of life to flourish in counterintuitive spaces. In her consideration of post-World War II Berlin, she discusses how the infamous Berlin Wall, like the Wall in Palestine, was not about *facilitating* movement, as many infrastructures are, but about stopping and constraining it. As well as disrupting property ownership through confiscation, both refigured the visual landscapes in unforgettable ways. Including the nonhuman with the human, Stoetzer also highlights the potential for rejuvenation from military waste. Post-WWII citizens of Berlin had to clear rubble to cultivate vegetables because they were short of food (2018: 301), but green growth also became a part of a larger program of reclaiming a livable city from the ruins of war (2018: 302). Palestinians face similar problems reclaiming liveable spaces from the ruins of the occupation: the tear gas canisters, spent bullet casings, the remains of home demolitions. But in contrast to the rubble of World War II and the Berlin Wall itself, in Palestine there is no end in sight. The rubble of the occupation continues and the Palestinians are the ones who have to live within it, finding ways to work around it or even with it.

An example of a ruderal ecology particularly prized by Palestinian agro-activists is grape vines growing out of rubble, one that symbolically and practically illustrates the limits of infrastructures intended to control or forbid Palestinian movement. The Israeli army had destroyed a vine field to make a road to a settlement, blocking it with large boulders. Despite the attempts to eradicate them, the grapes grew around the boulders, allowing the wine-maker, Sari Khoury, to have his farmers harvest enough of the grapes to produce a wine he called the "Grapes of Wrath" (see Evans, 2017). This is an example of plant persistence in a hostile environment, an outcome of, and indicators of "ambivalent and radically changing ecology" (Stoetzer, 2018: 304).

I heard this story and was shown a bottle of Grapes of Wrath, in a café in Beit Jala with Emily Jacir, a central figure in Dar Yusuf Nasri Jacir for Art and Research, founded in 2014 in a house originally built by her great-grandfather. Their recently renovated house is near two refugee camps, Israeli watchtowers, and the Wall, close to the now Walled-Off Hotel of Banksy fame (see Shahin, 2020). Although an artist herself, Emily noted how she had expanded it from a pure artist center because she found herself intrigued by the plant and seed experiments going on in the Bethlehem area. Vivien Sansour was one of their first artists-in-residence, planting one of the terraces with heirloom seeds, after she organized a considerable clean-up of tear gas canisters and broken glass. Mohammad Saleh, a permaculture expert and educator was the second artist-in-residence, with his Urban Farm initiative, teaching the young children from the nearby refugee camp how to farm on other terraces. I return to this project later on in the paper.

Rejuvenation projects

I discuss here how plants and foods become entwined in issues of environmental justice through discussing several contemporary initiatives: seed sharing, community farming, and a selective use of elite foodie discourses of distinction to reclaim Palestinian food heritage. I examine how the influence of cosmopolitan discourses about possible transformations through food (knowledges, agendas, politics) are brought to bear on a very local Palestinian reality. As Besky and Padwe note "... territory also refers to the more subtle forms and practices of non-state actors who seek to establish control over resources or space" (2016: 9). I focus here on how distinctive seeds, plants, and foods become an assertion of belonging to a Palestinian territory. Land is not disappearing, but Palestinian access to it *is* as the settlements expand, along with the infrastructures like checkpoints that curtail their mobility as do "green spaces" which often appropriate Palestinian land and exclude their access to it (Braverman, 2009 and this volume).

While plants have often had a starring role in Palestinian art (the olive tree in the work of Khalid Rabeh, Sliman Mansour, and Khaled Jarrar spring to mind), I focus here on the recent Palestinian efforts to transform foraged and agricultural plants within an artistic frame in order to reclaim them from the infrastructural and political ruins of their everyday lives. I will discuss the aesthetic elements further on, but these food movements more prosaically have the pragmatic function of working toward a goal of viable local food economy less dependent on foreign aid and Israeli food products, as elusive as that goal may be given the continuing political economy of the occupation. I use examples mostly from my recent field research with agro-activists (April–May 2017, October–November 2017 and 2018, and April 2019), although I also draw on my decade plus research with olive oil producers and as a volunteer olive picker. Archival materials, including films, documentaries, popular press articles, and social media posts, are the means by which agro-activists communicate and promote their work and provide important data for me. This paper is my attempt to listen

(anthropologically) to the contemporary ideas of agro-activists about how best to make their livings in a precarious occupation-agro-gig economy, and how to reap, forage, and sow some joy, beauty, meaning, and value from these occupation ruins that surround them.

It is worth pointing out explicitly here too that while the activities of the people discussed here are part of cobbling together a living, they are also part of embodied self-making practices that are increasingly coming to define a form of quotidian lived activism. I am inspired here by another example of creating an honorable self through everyday activism, Kroijer's Danish left radical activists who choose urban foraging (including dumpster diving) which becomes a way of embodying their opposition to capitalism, an honorable, exemplary "style" (Kroijer, 2015). I explore Palestinian inventive, artistic engagements with agriculture and food which express their vulnerability, but also attempt to *counter* it in ways that produce lives that are anything but bare. One activist conveyed how while many people do not see participating in conventional politics a way of producing a plausible future, they find futurities of hope in preserving of the physical environment and food practices like foraging, planting, cooking, and feeding. I note the proliferation of webs of social ties between Palestinian activists which facilitate and produce a "gig economy" of dynamic, ephemeral projects related in spirit and content to rejuvenation, recycling, and reclaiming, designed to generate income and embody creativity. What is particularly relevant is that the infrastructure of personal networks *facilitates* connections in spite of the infrastructures which *constrain* movement in the West Bank. These networks often involve people at very different positions in the class hierarchy in Palestine and unite those with different educational levels and different capacities to travel (including financial and language) and interact abroad. In some sense, these complex, cross-hierarchical networks are what are required to make a piece-work living in these ruins.

Seeds

Vivien Sansour is a charismatic spokesperson for the practices of seed preservation and exchange: reproducing the seeds that could produce agricultural products pleasing to the eye as well as the mouth, nose, and stomach. Sansour's Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library provides a notable example of a practice of reclamation that takes inspiration from cosmopolitan discourses, like the global movement to save and protect the world's plant diversity (for instance, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway.)[3] But this seed library is rooted in the specifics of Palestine: it is located in Battir, an agricultural community finally given UNESCO protection when its ancient terraces were in danger of being eradicated by the Wall. For Vivien, the idea of a seed "library" (rather than a museum or vault) means that sharing and using are highlighted rather than mere seed preservation: seeds should be planted every year and *shared* with farmers who want to preserve their heritage. Mohammad Saleh, a Palestinian eco-farmer, made me laugh with his objection to the idea of freezing and storing seeds in a vault: he said it reminded him of a bad sci fi movie where a disoriented hero wakes up in a completely different historical time! Sansour does not advocate "reclaiming" the homeland in the sense of going back to an untouched bucolic Palestinian past. Rather she and like-minded activists imagine that plants and distinctive food preparations can be a way of shaping a positive future through saving Palestinian diverse agricultural possibilities. These are, in Sansour's words, the resources to save and *heal*, and keep "alive the gifts of our ancestors." In a conversation with me (Beit Sahour, April 2017), and again at an eco-farming workshop she held in tandem with Mohammad Saleh on her family's land in Beit Jala, Sansour invoked Ba'al the Canaanite god associated with deity of rain and agriculture prior to the introduction of monotheism to Palestine.

As is evident in the work of Tawfik Canaan (the Palestinian doctor and ethnographer), many folk beliefs preceding monotheism informed agricultural and religious traditions in Palestine (Canaan, 1927, Meneley, 2014c). These *ba'ali* seeds produce plants that can thrive only on rain water and dew, adapted over centuries to produce plants that can live and thrive without regular irrigation. Sansour is equally concerned with what happens to a "local" environment (perceived as dynamic rather than static, primitive production) under occupation when one's land is often under threat. Sansour's work involves travelling to farmers, asking if they have seeds to share, offering them some *ba'ali* seeds, seeds that can thrive on only rain-fed terraces, something of particular value now when Palestinians communities receive only a fraction of the water that Israeli settlements do.

On El Beir, Arts and Seeds Facebook page (8 May 2018), she announces: "North and south everyone participating knows that baladi seeds are our salvation in the face of a rapidly changing climate!" Sansour situates the *value* in the seeds in two domains: (1) the realm of international value as these seeds are perceived as insurance against water shortages produced by global climate change and an alternative to the sterile hybrid seeds of agribusiness dependent on chemical fertilizers; and (2) in the realm of local value, as these traditional Palestinian seeds are an assertion of long Palestinian presence on the land. The presentation of the seed issue by Palestinian agro-activists refers in part to wider discourses of global critique: that the generic seeds of industrial agriculture do not reproduce themselves and need expensive chemical fertilizers. In the Palestinian agro-activist discourse, this type of capitalist agro-industry is associated with Israel's occupation of the West Bank, via Israeli companies. The Palestinian water wells fenced off by the water company Mekorot provide visible signs of the Israeli control of the underground aquifer, a control with a long and complicated history (see Alatout, 2009, for instance). In addition, the theme of loss or erosion of knowledge, again, a prominent theme in global environmental discourses, emerges in the extensive popular press coverage of Sansour's work. For instance, Mac Greigair (2018) describes the eradication of Palestinian seeds as an example of "epistemicide" and the seed saving activities as a form of rescue of the knowledge that is needed to make them productive: "It is an attempt to prevent what Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called 'epistemicide'." Epistemicide inflicts damages on seeds and plants; it is similar to what Abu Hatoum (2019), among others, refers to as "urbicide," the deliberate elimination of the distinctive qualities of urban lives and infrastructures, undermining the notable and beloved parts of Palestinian every day existence. The seeds—and Palestinian expertise in nurturing them—become a testimony to Palestinian rights to belong on their own land. This connection to global discourses about seeds allows Palestinian entrance into a shared transnational discourse about the state of the global environment.

Sansour's interest in the intersection between art and farming is captured in her memorable slogan: "Farmers are Artists." She is concerned with preserving the knowledge, pride, and distinctiveness of Palestinian agricultural heritage. Sansour, variously described as an anthropologist, activist, and eco-farmer, is an articulate spokesperson for reviving a set of historical practices that are also insightfully approached in a more academic fashion. While Sansour emphasizes the artistry and aesthetics of distinctive seeds and the power of their foods produced from them to create a sense of belonging, Tesdell and his research group (Tesdell et al., 2018) bring an historical approach to a shared concern with agroecology and the contemporary position of farming under occupation. They criticize the idea that rainfed agriculture was necessarily unchanged over millennia; according to this literature, "Most of this literature emphasizes the 'primitive' practices of cultivators and sometimes extends into the primitive nature of the cultivators themselves" (2018: 4). Rather than asserting a timeless peasant and set of peasant practices that remained untouched, they propose that *ba'ali* crops

(studied in the Dayr Ballut agroecosystem with data over the last 75 years) offer a telling example of "long-term persistence" (2018: 5). Their account describes the effects of transformations in the region's agriculture with the influx of refugees (and seeds) from the coastal regions after the Nakba, the effect on agriculture with male wage labor migration to Israel in 1970s (see also Tamari, 1981), and the transition to mostly women farmers managing the cultivation of the rain-fed crops. Sansour's highlighting of the *artistry* of the farmer notes their dynamism and their spirit of experimentation over time; her work complements the academic work of Tesdell et al., by noting the aesthetic appeal and the beauty of the embodied sensation of belonging through consuming foods produced by local seeds instead of generic seeds.

Describing running across stone terraces in bare feet as a child, Sansour explained her philosophy of the reciprocal relationship between plants and humans which is embodied in food preparation, infused with a love of being close to the land *and* a concern for the children who may not have the opportunity to harden their feet and test their balance on Palestine's famous stone terraces, or be nurtured by the olive trees on them. Sansour wants to preserve the intergenerational stories about these seeds and the delicious produce: "The idea is to create life and to keep something so beautiful alive, and to keep a culture alive" (interview April 2017). Seeds and plants, bred in harmony with Palestinian microclimates, and the stories about them, become material vehicles for the maintenance and transmission of Palestinian culture. The persuasiveness of this form of agro-activism lies in its embodied potential to evoke visceral memories and *sharing*. Part of Sansour's activism involves a "traveling kitchen," an innovation on traditional Palestinian hosting practices, where she cooks up local foods made from local plants often nurtured by her seeds; this process is captured in Shahin's documentary (2018). She also hosts lectures and dinners at her center, El Beir Arts & Seeds; internationals and locals are the guests at lecture–dinners. Interested participants listened to the talks and then share a collective meal (for a modest sum) fitting of the center's mission.[4]

Sansour relayed to me a story she has told many others: how, after a long search, she found seeds of a rainfed *ba'ali* watermelon [*jadu'i*] remembered by many, which had been displaced by larger Israeli monocropped, watery watermelon. This generic dark green watermelon, quick to spoil, lacked the distinctive stripes of the *jadu'i* and its famous taste: Muhammad Saleh cracked a joke about it being so delicious that he loved it more than his wife. Sansour looked all over the West Bank for the seeds and finally found them in the possession of a farmer in Beit Jala; the farmer had kept some seeds, not in a vault, but in a drawer in his shed along with his tools. Her goal to distribute 3000 seedlings to interested farmers was achieved in May 2018. This particular example of a beautiful, delicious watermelon has become emblematic of the wider process itself: Sansour tries to distribute the seeds and seedlings to all parts of Palestine. One of the distinctive elements of this seed sharing is the commitment to trying to overcome the fragmentation of different parts of Palestine by the checkpoint/permit regime (for discussions of permits, see Berda, 2018, Tawil-Souri, 2011, 2016; on checkpoints, see Hammami, 2010, 2015, 2019). While it is easy enough to dismiss the connection to foodie narratives as itself part of capitalist agro-eco wash, agro-activists like Fareed Taamallah, see it as a legitimate way of critiquing the Palestinian Authority as well as the occupying forces. He posted on Facebook (May 26, 2019) a complaint that the Palestinian Authority was unable to protect the Palestinian watermelon farmers when the market was flooded with Israeli-produced generic watermelon.

Sansour's vision of seeds as a cultural site of creativity inflects her presentation of the farmer as an artist. In her presentations of the seeds, artistic representations are part of the cultural heritage. Her seeds packets are accompanied by sketches, by Bethlehem artist Ayed

Arafeh, of the fruits and vegetables springing from the seeds. These illustrations are designed to "inspire a conversation about the importance of bio-diversity," according to the elegant label. Postcards made of photos of the crops produced by *ba'ali* seeds are available at her shop. As is common in elite food shops, Sansour also includes recipes with her visual representations of the food. On a cooking apron made of Mansouri fabric from Hebron ("sewn and produced in Palestine"), Sansour has a recipe for *m'loukhia* (her transliteration) printed. In this respect, El Beir, Arts and Seeds shares a great deal in common with other foodie discourses, which feature aesthetically pleasing visual representations of food items along with instructions for their preparation.

Part of the reclamation process for these activists is to encourage these networks of creativity. Music is included when introducing a distinctive heirloom wheat called Abu Samara. A recent video posted to Facebook shows a local Palestinian artist, Zaid Hilal, singing his ode to the revival of Abu Samara, a heirloom Palestinian black wheat [*habeh soda*]. Sansour also records her encounters with the farmers who are growing this wheat in Nablus:

> "Abu samra" the dark and handsome one also known as baladi wheat growing and doing well in the fields of Nus Ijbail! #palestineheirloomseedlibrary #baladiseeds #health #freedom El Beir, Arts and Seeds is with Khader Khader and Khader Abu Ghattas. 7 March 2018 · Nablus, Palestine ·

Sansour works to bring the conditions in Palestine to international attention as do many Palestinian activists and intellectuals. For instance, she recently brought the plight of Palestine's seeds to an international audience sharing the same concern with using heritage seeds as a means of countering the depredations of industrial agriculture at the *Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC 2019)*. Sansour posted a quote from her presentation:

> In today's world the great revolutionary act is to love yourself and to love your community. We are all on the same boat. Seeds belong to community not to companies. (Vivien Sansour from the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library #ORFC19)

She also posted the following:

> Fantastic illustration by Envirovisuals of the talk on the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library. #Oxford #envirovisual #realfarming #palestineheirloomseedlibrary (Facebook 3 January 2019)

This intriguing illustration was done by a member of the Envirovisuals group, whose mode of representation was serendipitously close to Sansour's own position that art and farming are connected. The illustrator illuminates Sansour's seed saving philosophy, including the fundamental principle of reciprocity in the organizing agriculture (reciprocity between plants and people and between people who share the *ba'ali* seeds with other interested people).

While Sansour acted as a seed ambassador for Palestine at the above conference at Oxford with committed group of international alternative farmers, she also hosts similar activists at El Beir, Arts and Seeds in Beit Sahour. In April 2018, she hosted members of the Seeds of Time international collective, The Flatbread Society, tracking the global movement of seeds over land and sea (http://www.flatbreadsociety.net/stories/41/further-on-to-land). Like many of the agro-activists, Sansour is aware of the necessity and productive potential of connecting farmers and local cooks with international scholars and celebrities with a wide audience range.[5] Sansour and I joked about how

celebrity chefs are capable of reaching an audience much wider than anthropologists are, for instance. Palestinians, along with foodies the world over, joined in mourning the sudden death of Anthony Bourdain in 2018, who Sansour had helped shepherd around the West Bank as he made his memorable episode of his famous TV show, "Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown" in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza (this episode first aired in 2013). This episode was particularly beloved by Palestinians as he cooked with Leila al-Haddad, the author of *The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey*, dined with her family while sitting on plastic chairs at the back of her modest house in Gaza, appearing to be perfectly comfortable. In her brief memoir of her time as Bourdain's field guide (2018), Sansour recounts how Bourdain's listening to and recording of a Palestinian cook in Aida refugee camp dramatically changed her capacity to make a living.

Om Sleiman farm

The Om Sleiman Farm in Bilin is a notable example of the use of seeds and agriculture as a means of sprouting from the ruins of the occupation. Established in 2016, it highlights a number of different cosmopolitan discourses employed to address environmental injustice. Bilin's weekly protests against the Wall were a classic example of what Koopman (2011) calls "alter-geopolitics," employing solidarity connections across distance and difference. This alter-geopolitics can be seen as a form of transnational political labor. These non-violent protests by the local villagers and Israeli and foreign solidarity activists against the Wall which was destined to take over agricultural and olive land of the village of Bilin were met with violence by the Israeli army. Their excessive use of tear gas and bullets on these peaceful protests has been amply documented, for instance, in the film *Five Broken Cameras*.

After years of Friday protests, the Israeli court agreed to move the route of the Separation Wall: Om Sleiman farm was established on the land of a Bilin villager who got his land back and donated it to Om Sleiman farm. The central figure in the establishment of the cooperative farm is a Palestinian refugee, Abu Jayyab, who had spent time in the United States where he had trained and worked on Community Shared Agriculture farms. He returned to Palestine through the Jordanian border and tried (unsuccessfully) to get a permit to go to Gaza to visit his parents (Mansour, 2018). While he was in this limbo, he met Al Alami, who runs a hostel in Ramallah where activists often stayed when they were joining the protests. Abu Jayyab and Al Alami describe the Om Sleiman philosophy: heirloom seeds, organic fertilizers, a reciprocal relationship between plants and humans and between farmers and consumers rather than depersonalized agro-industrial capitalist exchange. Families buy into the farm at the beginning of the season, volunteer on the land if they are able, and get a weekly share of the produce. The Facebook photos of the farm show the vibrant agricultural land despite the Wall and the expanding settlements in the background. The farm facilitates shareholders who want to boycott of Israeli food products, produced on settlements constructed on confiscated Palestinian land, on an industrial farm model. They also oppose the idea of involving the PA or international aid donors. Indeed, the slogan for this farm is "Made with No Aid" (Mansour, 2018). Although some of the local food movements highlight the boycott of Israeli food products, Mansour, a member and a volunteer for Om Sleiman who has promised to connect me with this group of volunteers in April 2019 said, "I would rather focus on this model as developing a strong local economy and ensuring food sovereignty, rather than just a boycott" (17 December 2018, personal communication).

I note that these revivals of agricultural production are facilitated through networks of people, infrastructures of people who share their envisioning of a meaningful life and help each other to embody it. These networks are informal, but durable, between Palestinians of various stripes (those who were products of the forced cosmopolitanism of being involuntarily displaced from their homeland, brought up in the United States or educated abroad) and foreigners of various stripes (those who have married Palestinians or who have long-standing research or volunteer ties). I met some of these farmers and activists when I was olive picking with them in 2007–2008; we jokingly started to refer to each other as "olive kin." When I used the classical Arabic word for these ties [*wasita*] I was shut down pretty quickly, as for my interlocutors *wasta* (in the Palestinian dialect) is tainted by its current association with the patronage politics of the Palestinian Authority. Those involved with agricultural resistance have jaded opinions on the PA; further, they are critical of its dependence on foreign aid, which they consider supporting Israeli occupation of the West Bank. They are particularly reluctant to perform abjection in order to get foreign aid (see Hammami, 2015 on the Palestinians as the "suffering subjects"). Nonetheless, most of them are aware of the fact that their work also may depend on foreign fundraising, international clients/volunteers, and certainly in a broader sense, their activities speak to international discourses and sympathetic international audiences with similar politics.

In generating networks of agro-activism, what is highlighted is the environmental injustice they collectively face. Their creative endeavors try to work around these, looking for alternate sources of funding and exchanging labor and space with each other. Informal alliances and connections facilitate loosely related projects and endeavors. Landless refugees with training in eco-farming share ideas and expertise with similarly committed agro-activists who do have access to land. While the Om Sleiman farm is modeled on an American style Community Shared Agricultural model, it is situated on local land which has been rescued, at great cost, from illegal confiscation behind the Wall.

These discourses of rescue and reclamation are central to the recent documentary Al-Jazeera documentary about Sansour by Mariam Shahin (2018) where Vivien is described as "The Seed Queen of Palestine." Sansour hints at changing subjectivities as people change their relationships with agriculture. In Sansour's words, people have begun to see the heirloom seeds as "cool and desirable." This documentary was widely circulated by others sharing Sansour's concern for reviving and preserving Palestinian heritage in a material sense, the seeds. For instance, the following is the Facebook review of Shahin's documentary from Aisha Mansour, Sansour's friend and collaborator on seed sharing projects:

> Community philanthropy is the growing global movement led by indigenous communities to preserve local resources - knowledge, skills, culture, local economies, and most definitely heirloom seeds!!!! Bravo Vivien Sansour and all the other fallaheen growing food and preserving local seeds. . ..there are seed libraries in every village across Palestine preserving our ecological and cultural capital. (14 December 2018)

Shahin follows Sansour to another of her projects, as "Landscape Resident" for Dar Yusuf Nasri Jacir, a new cultural center in the Jacir family home originally built in 1890. This initiative, like the Palestinian Museum, is supported by the A.M. Qattan Foundation. They announced on their Facebook Page:

> In July 2018 we began our first Landscape Residency with Vivien Sansour who will be conducting a workshop this October. In July, we also initiated a joint project with Rowwad, an art, education, and skills building community center in the heart of Aida refugee camp, that brings children to learn about agriculture.

We see Sansour and eco-farmer Muhammad Saleh attending the neglected terraces and gardens of the Jacir house. Sansour refers to the "violence in the soil," the duality of death and life, as she discusses how the first job of her volunteers is to clean the yard of tear gas canisters and broken glass, given the location of the house close to the Wall. Not for the first time, I was provoked to think about the "terroir of tear gas" given the amount of it that is sprayed on the "Holy Land" by the Israeli Army. When I visited Dar Jacir in April 2019, I was shown but a fraction of the tear gas canisters which they had collected over just a week.

The goal of Mohammed Saleh's residency was to promote an experiment in "urban farming" to the children in the nearby Aida Refugee Camp. Shatha Al-Azza, a young woman refugee in Aida camp, has been a key actor in the environmental justice movement in Aida camp (Bishara et al., this volume) especially in managing a rooftop garden in Aida Camp where agricultural initiatives are inhibited by the need to try to manage the effect of tear gas and collect and dispose of the canisters (Wallace, 2019).

Conclusion

I had a conversation in Jerusalem with an anthropologist and friend in April 2019, when she reminded me how the long prominent "We've lost everything, they have taken it all" narrative is increasingly confined to Palestinians of an older generation. Most of the activists of a younger generation object to this narrative, finding it a form of side-stepping the obligation to try to stand up and preserve what they can despite their considerable and ongoing losses. I have situated the Palestinian narrative front and center here, especially after critiques that I myself have sometimes received for seeming too "hopeful" about the latest agro-activist projects. Sansour told me that she had also recently received a similar complaint from American audience who chided her for not sufficiently highlighting the oppression of the Israelis; she responded that she did not want to have the Israeli narrative (critical or supportive) completely dominating the Palestinian story yet again. I find myself unable to disguise my admiration for the energy of these activists, many of whom are friends, or to denigrate their projects as hopeless.

Sansour articulates a vision of the aesthetic reaction to the concrete and a refiguration of resistance. She said that what she does is not so much resistance as the "creation of beauty," something living rather than dead concrete that surrounds them. Sharing seeds, knowledge, and eating Palestinian food made collectively is presented as an intrinsic part of preserving cultural and material from the environmental and occupation ruins. These agricultural initiatives seem to represent a "structure of feeling" of hope, which has a surprising tenacity in the political economy of seeming unrelenting occupation, as participants gather things of value from the ruins of their land and take joy, pride, and pleasure in their creative accomplishments, not that they have any illusions about the capacity of their endeavors to right all the wrongs of the contemporary world. These efforts are about trying to decolonize the Palestinian diet and reclaim older traditions where food was to heal as well as nourish, to provide pleasure and comfort and strength. While seed, plant, and recipe reclamation is a burgeoning concern in many parts of Palestine, Sansour's seed library is resolutely opposed to what Rana Barakat, in her trenchant way, calls "The Museumification of Palestine."

They do want to preserve and record but do not naively assert the possibility of a straightforward mechanical reproduction of practices of the past. They are trying to use plants and their preparation to rekindle connections to the land, between different generations of Palestinians, between Palestinians in different parts of the West Bank, and abroad. Not everyone agrees on priorities and some promote farmers' knowledge versus the knowledge of new foreign educated permaculture experts. But there is some space that is shared where most reflect on how easily one could lose touch with the foodways and practices of earlier generations under circumstances of war and exile; how such practices could or should best be reconstituted; and what those reconstitutions might augur for the future. The past is not to be mourned as lost, or "museumified," but used toward futures of hope, hope foraged or sprouting from the ruins, to be shared at a moment in time when life is anything but easy.

Postscript

On 24 January 2020, Sansour gifted distinctive Palestinian seeds, including the Abu Samara wheat seeds described above, to Prince Charles, heir to the British throne. She also assisted in his planting of an olive tree in the garden of the Carmelite monastery, named Alice after his grandmother, who is buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. While it is doubtful these acts will have long-term consequences for the fate of Palestine, they are worthy of note as they highlight the potential of the seed discourses and practices to draw attention to the harsh conditions in Palestine.

Highlights

- Seed libraries as sites of preservation and regeneration in contemporary Palestine.
- Networks of agro-activists connect in informal ways to attempt to preserve local agriculture.
- Nonhuman actors like seeds and plants become testimonials to long-standing Palestinian presence on the land.

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Notes

1. There are also fierce critics of post-Oslo neoliberal capitalism in Palestine (see Haddad's 2016 Palestine Ltd and Clarno's 2017 Neoliberal Apartheid).
2. See Braverman (this volume) for a discussion of the consequence of "nature areas" in Jerusalem for Palestinian residents.
3. See Sarah Curry's (2019) introduction to the latest edition of the journal *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment* which is devoted to seed preservation movements in Britain, Norway, and elsewhere.
4. At Vivien's request, I gave a lecture on auto-ethnographic methods to understand food histories which she thought might be useful at this moment in time.
5. The Palestine Festival of Literature (PalFest), started in 2008, also connects Palestinians authors with famous foreign authors and has a similar capacity to reach wider audiences.

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