

ON LOVE, THE PALESTINIAN WAY: KINSHIP, CARE AND ABOLITION IN PALESTINIAN FEMINIST PRACTICE

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Abstract: This article centres the forms of kinship and care work that Palestinian women perform within and beyond the institution of the colonial prison in occupied territory through an analysis of letters expressing grief, care and radical hope as material expressions of an abolitionist feminist praxis of decolonial love. Women's letter-writing practices offer a material expression of the sentient life forms that suture the social fabric of the Palestinian collective, regenerating our connections to each other and to our homeland. This analysis invites consideration of decolonial love as a liberatory method through which Palestinians call each other into intimate relation. It argues that attending to this underexplored feminist praxis enacted from within the space of genocidal duress holds the capacity to amplify a Palestinian sensorium that sharpens our capacity to enact revolutionary struggle against Israeli state violence and settler colonial criminality.

Keywords: decolonial love; Palestine; feminism; kinship; abolition.

This article centres on the forms of diasporic kinship and care work that Palestinian women perform within and beyond the institution of the colonial prison in occupied territory through letter writing as an abolitionist feminist praxis of decolonial love. I begin by offering an overview of Zionist colonialism as a genocidal project that attempts to hold Palestinian bodies, socialities, intimacies and subjectivities captive for eliminatory violence and removal. Here, I am analyzing the relations between Palestinian captivity¹ and the colonial project, underscoring that Israel is

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a colonial formation requiring Indigenous and other forms of captivity in a state of ongoing war. I argue that the rupturing of Palestinian intimacies and kinship relations should be understood as a strategic aim of settler colonial power and a condition of genocidal elimination. This rupturing is based on a white supremacist logic that seeks to purify the white Jewish national polis and its expanding boundaries from the contaminant of Indigenous Palestinian presence.

In what follows, I explore three texts as a window onto what I conceptualize as an abolitionist Palestinian feminist praxis of decolonial love: 1) The letters of Khalida Jarrar to her daughter Suha, written in the aftermath of her death; 2) A letter from *Tal'at*, a decolonial feminist movement in Palestine, to Muna Al-Kurd and the women of Sheikh Jarrah defending Palestinian homes and land, at the outset of what has since been called by some the “Unity Intifada”; and 3) the “Love Letter to Our People” from the US-based Palestinian Feminist Collective, a diasporic decolonial feminist movement organization, released at the height of the uprising in the Spring of 2021. Interpreted ethnographically, these epistolary texts move us across different forms of kinship relations: from the relationship between mother and daughter, to relations between Palestinian women differentially positioned across fragmented spaces in occupied territory, to kinship relations between *shataat*² Palestinians and those in the homeland.

Letters expressing grief, care and radical hope written from the space of genocidal duress are material expressions of an abolitionist praxis of decolonial love³ that transcend colonial borders, boundaries and fragmentation of territories and people imposed by the Zionist regime. Letter-writing practices offer a material expression of the sentient life forms that suture the social fabric of the Palestinian collective, regenerating our connections to each other and to our homeland. Further, their messages evoke affective registers that mobilize what, following Ali Musleh, I will call a Palestinian sensorium (2022), an assemblage of affective and sensory methods of revolutionary praxis that assert a Palestinian *nafs* (Sheehi and Sheehi 2022) or psychic and ontological presence against “sensory genocide,” (Musleh 2022: 146) the production of sensory enclosure that is central to ongoing colonial war. The letters themselves as material archives, and the Palestinian sensorium they evoke, labour in service of transforming grief into radical hope, a key catalyst for emancipatory struggle against colonial violence, marking possibilities for ecologies of life, and giving shape to an ethical transnational community of anti-imperialist abolitionist feminist praxis. In doing so, letters as the expression of Palestinian care and love trace the limits of settler colonial state criminality and map its constant unravelling. This intimate abolitionist praxis, what I name as *Love the Palestinian Way*,⁴ performs the fracturing and collapse of the structural violence of the Israeli state, its legitimacy as a settler colonial genocidal force, and an insurgent imaginary of Palestinian futurity (e.g. Rodriguez 2019). In other

words, Love the Palestinian Way is a life-affirming method that embodies and performs sovereign and communal freedom, even as it exists as a “deregulated gathering. . .that pulsates against enclosure.” (Cervenak 2021: 9)

Whether authored from the space of the actual prison cell or from the prison as an embodied social condition of captivity for Palestinians in occupied territory, the poetic force of the letter has a unique capacity to cultivate an abolitionist imaginary that refuses the legitimacy of Zionist colonialism in Palestine, and ruptures investment in the idea that it will always exist. Rather, these letters reveal that fugitive practices of kinship and connection are happening all the time across geographies of colonialism and captivity that both survive the conditions of genocidal elimination and delegitimize and unsettle the Zionist regime. Hence, *Love the Palestinian Way* emerges as a psychic and sensory method and praxis of communal healing and liberation that displaces the “raciontology” of settler colonial state criminality.

I focus on the ethnographic form of the letter for three primary reasons. First, in the intimacy of its address, the letter is a decidedly feminist method of writing that brings the reader into an intimate, private space, defining the reader’s place and hence *bringing them into relation* with the subject, beckoning them to bear critical witness. It evokes a feminist call and response. Second, the letter is a form that enables speech to subvert and cross the carceral boundaries of the colony, whether it be the actual physical confines of the colonizer’s prison cell, or the carceral geographies of occupied territory and the conditions of native captivity more broadly. Finally, as a Chicana-Palestinian anthropologist born in the space of the *shataat* or *ghurba* (exile), my own access to and mobility across the physical territory of Palestine is not easily incurred, due to the surveillance and violence of colonial authorities that control my entrance to the “field.” These conditions, in addition to the severe censorship currently faced by Palestinian scholars in the US academy (Palestine Legal 2015), require a shift in the way we conceptualize anthropological fieldwork in Palestine, creating an imperative to write, think and engage ethnographic praxis in Palestine in alternative ways.

And why, dear reader, do I choose to write about love? I am choosing to write about love because I am exhausted by the quiet terror my people endure each day in occupied territory. I am writing about love because I cannot forget the face of a 5-year-old girl who wouldn’t speak or eat for days, and who, soon after perished in a Jerusalem hospital after losing her home and family in a Gaza air strike in 2014. I choose to write about love because some nights I still awaken, heart racing, palms sweating, hearing the hum of helicopters overhead, as if it were only yesterday the soldiers invaded my building in the old city, dragging my neighbour away into the darkness of night. I am writing about love because I am tired of writing about death. I am exasperated, as a Palestinian woman, that the violence we must

face is not only in the hands of my colonizer, but also in the hands of patriarchal authorities in my community. I want to write about my sisters and their will and their struggle to survive. I am writing about love because I want to write about how we get free.

Kinship and Care Work Against Captivity

Indigenous and queer feminists have long argued that the imposition of heteropatriarchy through settler colonialism as a form of sexual colonization attempts to “isolate, disperse and eliminate Indigenous modes of kinship and relationship to land.” (Morgensen 2012: 170) In Palestine, this critique of power not only shapes the lives of queer Palestinians but is intertwined with the sexualized racialization of all Palestinians living under Israeli rule (Alqaisiya 2018). As Dakota scholar Kim Tallbear suggests, growing a white population through “biologically reproductive heterosexual marriage—in addition to encouraging immigration from some places and not others” has been a critical aspect of settler colonial nation-building since the post-World War II era, as heteronormative marriage and kinship practices forged through particular intersections of race, class and gender have worked to increase certain populations and not others (2018: 146). White families anchored imagined notions of safety while Otherized communities were “made available for sacrifice.” (ibid.) In short, “white bodies and white families in spaces of safety have been propagated in intimate co-constitution with the culling of Black, red and brown bodies and the wastelanding of their spaces. Who gets to have babies, and who does not? Whose babies get to live? Whose do not? Whose relatives, including other-than-humans, will thrive and whose will be laid to waste?” (ibid.: 147)

In Palestine, the fragmentation of Indigenous kinship networks and social relations more broadly has been a key and strategic component of Zionist colonialism since its inception, as part of what Faye Sayegh names as the “racial exclusiveness” and “self-segregation” inherent to its ideology (1965: 213). Zionism, as a state and colonial project, absorbed the foundational racial logics of white racial and cultural hegemony (Erakat 2015; Ihmoud 2021), in attempts to transform what its intellectual architects understood as “uselessly occupied territories into a useful extension of Europe.” (Seikaly 2020: 113) The racial imperative of the Zionist project is forcefully expressed through a simultaneous attempt at Jewish pronatalism and Palestinian antinatalism; that is, between the enabling of the biological reproduction of a particular aggregate of Jewish bodies on the land pinned against the restriction, containment and elimination of Indigenous Palestinian reproduction (Ihmoud 2021). It is important to note that this politics deploys anti-blackness through the racial and reproductive violence necessary to become part of the

enlightened, European West (Ihmoud 2021; Abusneineh 2021). The carceral management of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish bodies across occupied territory (and beyond) is linked to this central imperative of Indigenous erasure and Zionist reproduction.

Policies that surveil, police and violate Palestinian birth and marriage, energized by biopolitical imperatives that seek to limit and control Indigenous presence on the land stand out as exemplary of such practices, though to confine an exploration of social fragmentation through the lens of the Palestinian birthing body and family as such would be limiting. Broader policies, such as the ID card and permit regimes, work to fragment and police Palestinian populations into separate and unequal territories (Gaza, 1948,⁵ the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the *shataat*), limiting geographic movement, economic mobility, and intimacies through militarized surveillance, control and the erection of checkpoints, walls and boundaries (Hammami 2019; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015; Tawil Souri 2011, 2012; Zureik 2001; Zureik et al. 2011; Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Ihmoud 2014). This fragmentation is energized by a broader logic of carceral power, which gives shape to the various modes, methods and strategies of colonial violence. I take up Dylan Rodriguez's definition of carceral power here as a "totality of state-sanctioned and extrastate relations of gendered racial-colonial dominance," (2019: 1576) a project inseparable from its roots in Western modernity and the "life-deforming algorithms of a Civilization project" wrested in the intersecting logics of enslavement and racial-colonial genocide (*ibid.*: 1610) and hence, global white supremacy.

The Israeli state prison system is exemplary of this racial and gendered carceral project, which has devastated Palestinian society across fragmented territories (Abdo 2014). The creation of Palestinian policing and security institutions along with the Palestinian Authority as part of the 1993 Oslo Accords has further extended this gendered carceral project, as they operate through the framework of "securitized peace," meaning in full cooperation with the Israeli regime, including in the suppression of political dissent (Hawari 2021: 2–3). Still, the institution of the prison must be understood as but one aspect of a machinery of carceral power that holds Palestinian life and kinships captive in service of eliminatory violence. In other words, the Israeli prison system is merely one in a host of strategies for holding "native surplus"; one expression of a broader geography of carceral power. Historian Rashid Khalidi notes that the entire machinery of settler colonial power and the occupation regime established after 1967, which in essence resembles policies and practices implemented in earlier stages of the colonial project from 1948, "can be seen as a carceral enterprise which is designed to control, confine, and dominate the Palestinians living in these areas." (2014: 7)

The most extreme and most perfected example of this strategy is the treatment of the Gaza Strip, which has become the world's largest open-air prison, where 1.8 million people are penned into 360 sq km, a ghetto in which most of them are confined for years. But even in the apparently more "open" circumstances of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the same principles of control, confine, and dominate apply, as in any prison system. (ibid.)

Palestine, then, stands as a space from which we can expand theorization of the relationships between captivity and colonialism. In particular, what comes into focus is the relationship between Indigeneity and captivity, also offering possibilities for expanding analysis of anti-colonialism and abolition (e.g. Rojas and Naber 2022).

Building on the voices of women and children in occupied territory, Palestinian feminist scholars have theorized gendered experiences navigating militarized geographies and the everyday violence of social exclusion in terms of "confinement," suffocation and entrapment. A 2012 study by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian describes how Jerusalemite youths used the terms "*khan'aa*" (suffocation) and "*masyadeh*" (trap) to "describe their lives in Jerusalem and the effects of Israeli policies of exclusion and discrimination." (2012: 7) I want to build on these key insights in theorizing colonial captivity in Palestine as an embodied and lived social condition. At the same time, attention to the intimate geographies of colonial violence as they are lived and experienced in everyday life also brings the intimate, everyday, embodied and sensory worlds of the colonized to the fore as spaces of gendered resistance to captivity and erasure (ibid.)

Despite the imposition of colonial captivity on our bodies, sexualities and kinship relations, we are in a constant practice of persisting, reconstituting and remembering the Palestinian body politic in response to and against the colonial regime. While feminist scholars of Palestine have situated everyday practices of marriage and "kin work" as "sites where Israeli colonialism is contested and Palestinian identity is constituted." (Johnson 2006: 53) I want to push this analysis beyond the biological family structure to explore social relations and decolonial political possibilities more broadly. If kinship matters in the way that, paraphrasing Elizabeth Freeman, "bodies matter" for Judith Butler (2007), the repetition of particular practices of building social relations or modes of belonging to each other matter in terms of what we come to imagine as thinkable for the organization and future of Palestinian social life. To extend this insight, if queerness is a "relation between rather than a sedimented end," (Shomali 2023: 5) might a queer Palestinian archive of belonging to each other, of belonging to Palestine, be loved into existence through the disparate, yet interconnected, constellations of letters that speak out against the genocidal conditions of colonial captivity?

The three letters under examination in this article express a Palestinian feminist praxis of decolonial love that enable expressions of care and affect to travel beyond the prison itself and the carceral power of Zionist colonialism, examining in particular the intimate sites of rebellion that are brought to light as a method for weaving together kinship relations and the Palestinian social body. Following Orisanmi Burton, I theorize Palestinian women's letter writing as "an ethnographic and political modality" (2021: 2) that is part of a broader repertoire of Palestinian feminist praxis and the living archive of Palestinian rebellion deployed to survive within and struggle against racial gendered colonial violence and erasure. Amidst the ongoing oppression Palestinian women face as a result of the intersections of settler colonial and patriarchal violence (Ihmoud 2022), relations of kinship and care constitute an underexplored and undertheorized aspect of Palestinian feminist world-making.

Three Letters: on Decolonial Love

Letter from Damon Prison: on Grief and Mourning

From the depths of my agony, I reached out and embraced the sky of our homeland through the window of my prison cell. . . Worry not, my child. I stand tall and steadfast, despite the shackles and the jailer. I am a mother in sorrow, from yearning to see you one last time. (Khalida Jarrar to her daughter, Suha, Damon Prison, Haifa, July 2021)

Khalida Jarrar is writing from her cell in Damon prison, a site established by the British Mandate government in the forests of Carmel in Haifa. It reopened in 1953 as a camp for detaining Palestinian prisoners, where she is now held captive with 40 other Palestinian women prisoners. She addresses the first letter to her daughter, Suha, on the day of her death. She yearns to be reunited with her daughter, but the occupation forces will not allow an early release. They will not even allow a temporary release to attend her daughter's funeral on 13 July 2021. "I am in so much pain, only because I miss you," she writes:

This doesn't happen except in Palestine. All I wanted was to bid my daughter a final farewell, with a kiss on her forehead and to tell her I love her as much as I love Palestine. My daughter, forgive me for not attending the celebration of your life, that I was not beside you during this heartbreaking and final moment. My heart has reached the heights of the sky yearning to see you, to caress and plant a kiss on your forehead through the small window of my prison cell.

Suha, my precious. They have stripped me of bidding you a final goodbye kiss, so I bid you farewell with a flower. Your absence is searingly painful, excruciatingly painful. But I remain steadfast and strong, like the mountains of beloved Palestine.

Jarrar's words analyze this separation, viscerally experienced as a stripping away of the power to kiss her daughter a final goodbye, as another aspect of the Zionist regime's machinery of violence. This regime attempts to sear its racialized power into the bodies and psyches of Palestinians through legalized carceral technologies of forced separation, in this case through detention in the colonial prison.⁶ Lamenting her painful separation from her daughter, even in death, Jarrar provides a critique of Israel's fragmentation of Palestinian intimacies and social relations, and at the same time mobilizes a decolonial praxis of *sumud* (Meari 2014).

What do we do when we are faced with being forcibly separated from and losing the people we love in ongoing conditions of genocide? Jarrar's love letters to Suha bear intimate, yet public insights into a revolutionary Palestinian feminist politics waged from the space of captivity in the colonizer's prison: how we fight with love to maintain our humanity, in the most inhumane conditions; how this fierce commitment to loving each other is what keeps us connected to Palestine, too. Jarrar's recounting of her will to "remain steadfast and strong, like the mountains of beloved Palestine" both recognize and contest the violence of carceral separation as the dynamics of the colonial encounter. As Lena Meari theorizes, the practice of *sumud*, or steadfastness, constitutes a Palestinian "relational political-psycho-affective subjectivity" that takes place outside the normalized space of formal politics (2014: 549). Under conditions of colonial violence and oppression, *sumud* is a "constant revolutionary becoming, opening up a possibility for an alternative regime of being, for an ethical-political relational selfhood" (ibid.) Jarrar's own emphasis on her steadfastness in this moment of intimate encounter with the colonial regime is thus an assertion of her revolutionary subjectivity that refuses to submit to the dehumanizing conditions of Zionist colonialism.

It is important to underscore that this subjectivity is also one of a revolutionary Palestinian mothering that refuses the ungrievability of Palestinian life. "Death and mourning breathe new life into revolutionary mothering toward an alternative future" (Brown and Puri 2022: 315) in which Palestinian women are not burdened with mothering in a world predicated on Palestinian death and erasure. You may confine me to the prison cell and refuse me the right to bid my child farewell, Jarrar's letter underscores. You may try to break the bonds between a mother and her child, but you will never break us apart. You will never take away my capacity to love, either my child or Palestine. In this moment, they become transposed onto one another: love for Palestine and love for her child, as a part of oneself, a part of one's body that cannot be torn away. These letters to Suha

crystalize a Palestinian feminist praxis that mobilize possibilities for love as an affective force that opens space for an alternative ethical-political regime of being and revolutionary becoming. In other words, this love is not a passive “politics of the heart,” (Bouteldja 2016: 140) but intimately tied to the struggle to reclaim the Palestinian homeland. Revolutionary *Love the Palestinian Way* is about reclaiming the intimate, psycho-social and spiritual praxes of belonging to each other that sharpen our collective vision and form the groundwork for life-affirming communal struggle.

Letter to the Women of Sheikh Jarrah

On the eve of the Palestinian uprising in the Spring of 2021, where the struggles of Palestinian families to protect their homes from theft by Zionist settlers in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of occupied Jerusalem became a catalyst for mass organizing, Palestinians with the ability to be mobile (those with Jerusalem ID, or with citizenship from the state), cross colonial borders to join collective efforts to protect the homes and families of Sheikh Jarrah with their own bodies. Many are assaulted by military forces, who enclose the neighbourhood with arms and concrete blocks in an attempt to quell the resistance. Under these conditions, the *Tal'at* movement (“rising up” in Arabic), a decolonial feminist movement established in 2019 following the murder of Israa Ghraib and organizing under the call of “no liberated homeland without the liberation of women,” delivers a private letter addressed to Muna Al-Kurd, one of the youths defending her home, and leading organizing efforts, and to the women of Sheikh Jarrah more broadly.

“We write this letter because we cannot go to *Al-Quds* [Jerusalem] and be with you, your family, and our family in *Al-Quds*,” it begins. In asserting the relation between a collective “we” as Palestinian women in one fragmented space of occupied territory and “our family in *Al-Quds*,” the letter asserts a social relation of kinship, a belongingness. *You are our family*. The words of the letter work as a mechanism of presence that defies the colonial orders of borders, boundaries and captivity that fragment Palestinian life and relations across occupied territory. The letter continues,

We felt that it was important to tell you how much pride we have in the *sumud* of our family in Sheikh Jarrah, especially that of the women. We knew of your struggle and the story of Sheikh Jarrah before these recent events, and we know that you are strong enough, and you are fighting to share your story and the message across the world about the problem of Sheikh Jarrah.

This radical discourse is energized by a revolutionary love for the Palestinian homeland and an assertion of its embodiedness. This is a feminist ethos that claims communal care for and protection of home and homeland as the centrepiece

through which we “develop the communal structures, political will, and emotional intelligence to sustain longevity in struggle.” (James 2023: 7)

We are watching one of the greatest struggles that proved to us that we can stay steadfast and face and fight for that which is ours. We know that the residents of Sheikh Jarrah are continuing their work day and night, they are giving their lives for this struggle. Our letter [addresses you] here because as women we are learning a great deal from the situation of Sheikh Jarrah which women are a big part of it. You are an example of women who can be a part of this fighting organization and can be on the frontlines of it.

Here again, the concept of *sumud* is evoked as a form of anti-colonial praxis. In addressing the letter to women, and centring Palestinian women’s *sumud* as being on the front lines in the defence of home and land in Jerusalem, *Tal’at*’s letter uplifts Jerusalemite women’s critical role in the material struggle to protect Sheikh Jarrah within the history of the Palestinian freedom struggle. There is also, in this letter, an implicit critique of hegemonic androcentric and patriarchal notions of Palestinian national liberation, which has elevated men as primary revolutionary actors and peripheralized women’s leadership, including revolutionary praxis in the intimate space of the home. Like their Arab sisters and other Indigenous communities who have resisted colonialism, Palestinian women have always resisted oppression and dehumanization, being primary agents of change and revolution (Ihmoud 2022).

“We thank you,” the letter concludes, “because we are learning from your *sumud* and the *sumud* of the neighbourhood. We are with you, although getting there is very difficult.” The *Tal’at* movement’s letter to the women of Sheikh Jarrah works as an expression of care and love extended across colonial borders in a moment of Palestinian rebellion and resurgence to assert a feminist ethos of kinship. It is important to highlight here that “borders are also social constructions of the territory, which establish that the dominant power can impose with varying degrees of ‘institutional right’ on the lands and territories of these people.”⁷⁷ (Gruner 2018: 270) Hence, the letter speaks against the carceral fragmentation of Palestinian communities imposed by Zionist colonialism to assert an intimacy and unity of Palestinians as one people. Further, in its intimate address to and centring on Palestinian women’s critical role in the struggle to defend home and land in Sheikh Jarrah, the letter works against the impositions of colonial patriarchal violence, remapping how we can think about resistance outside of hegemonic Western imperialist feminist and internal patriarchal visions of national liberation.

Revolutionary *Love the Palestinian Way* here is about crossing borders of coloniality and claiming relations of kinship and care, while asserting women’s

presence and leadership in material struggles over home and homeland. This is a legacy, learned from our ancestors and practised by women on the frontlines, that love and protection of home, homeland and each other form the foundation of our culture of resistance and *sumud*, as expressions of Palestinian life and liveability in Sheikh Jarrah and across Palestine, in the face of global impunity of the criminal settler state.

A Love Letter to our People Struggling in Palestine

In the midst of mass demonstrations of Palestinian unity against Israel's occupation and settler colonial regime, in what has since been referred to by many as the "Unity Intifada," the Palestinian Feminist Collective (PFC), a recently established and intergenerational "US based network of Palestinian and Arab women/feminists committed to Palestinian social and political liberation" considered how best to intervene.⁸ The feeling of separation, of not being able to "be there," of watching the violence against land defenders in Palestine from afar, and of the renewed military assault on the captive Gaza strip, alongside the epistemic erasure of our voices and experiences in mainstream media coverage and the silence of international actors felt devastating. At the same time, watching the renewed wave of mass resistance unfold was awe-inspiring. As we discussed, demonstrated, mourned and organized in conversation with our relatives, friends and others in Palestine and across various global spaces, we considered: What might a Palestinian feminist intervention from the space of the *shataat* look like in this context?⁹ What vision did we want to put out into the world at this moment? When we learned that *Tal'at* had shared a private letter with the women of Sheikh Jarrah, we were inspired by this act of love. We decided to write our own version of a love letter to our people with the hopes of helping reignite feminist organizing for Palestinian liberation in the US and beyond.

"Your relentless will to remain on the land is a source of inspiration, perseverance, and fortitude," the letter begins.

Once again, Palestinians from the far north to the far south of our homeland are defying settler colonialism's attempts to partition land and people. From the Galilee to Gaza you reveal the geography of Palestine, in the face of military brutality and international impunity. State and settler violence and ethnic cleansing in Sheikh Jarrah and the Al Aqsa compound are not exceptions. They are part of an ongoing Nakba that has spanned Palestinian time and space since 1948.

The letter offers a feminist analysis of Palestinian resistance to Zionist colonialism in Sheikh Jarrah, historicizing this particular struggle as part of a longer

trajectory of struggle against colonial violence since the 1948 Nakba. Like the letter from *Tal'at*, the PFC's love letter centres on Palestinian women as revolutionary social actors. It offers a feminist analysis that understands gendered violence as central to Zionist colonialism, and affirms and uplifts Palestinian women's experiences and labour as key to understanding life and decolonial visions of futurity.

Your labour has taught us for generations: Palestine is a feminist issue. Love guides our methodology for liberation. We affirm life and implore feminists everywhere to speak up, organize, and join the struggle for Palestinian liberation. . .

To our people throughout Palestine, we are with you. You are protecting a future where Palestinians everywhere can live without fear of colonial violence, a future where our children and our homes are safe, a future free from colonial containment and incarceration, a future where we can freely practice our spiritual worship.

We are rising up across cities in the heart of the US empire, that has fed the colonization and dispossession of the Palestinian people. Our vision for a radically different future is based on equality, justice and life-affirming interconnectedness. We honour your voices, perseverance and *sumoud*, and promise to continue our joint struggle for justice and liberation in Palestine and the *shataat*.

In reactivating the call to recognize Palestine as a feminist issue, a call issued by a long tradition of Palestinian feminist movements and a citation of a transnational archive of Palestinian feminist rebellion (Ihmoud 2022), the PFC both highlights the disproportionate violence and oppression that Palestinian women face in the context of Zionist colonialism, and calls for open feminist solidarity with the Palestinian freedom struggle.¹⁰ This is a vision guided by the PFC's love for the Palestinian homeland, and its values of love as a methodology for anti-colonial resistance and liberation.

Indeed, the call from the PFC's *love letter* was amplified and answered by feminist scholars and activists in gender studies departments across the nation, who signed onto a public statement condemning the ongoing assaults on Palestinian land and life, and committing themselves to solidarity with the people of Palestine, as "proud benefactors of decades of feminist anti-racist, and anti-colonial activism that informs the foundation of our interdiscipline."¹¹ While the public visibility of such acts would in time, fade, along with the more visible aspects of political struggle on the ground, and while many of the signatories would soon come under surveillance and attack by the US-based Israel lobby, I want to hold on to this

moment in time, and think with it as an expression of a resurgence of an ethical community of anti-imperialist abolitionist praxis through an emergent Palestinian feminist politics of decolonial love.

In its assertion of a shared but radically re-envisioned humanity, “decolonial love promotes loving as an active, intersubjective process, and in so doing articulates an anti-hegemonic, anti-imperialist affect and attitude that can guide the actions that work to dismantle oppressive regimes.” (Urena 2017) Thinking with the force of the love letter as a decolonial method and praxis asks us to consider how love can be a radical and infrastructural modality of social change inspiring the reemergence of feminist solidarities between Palestinians and other Indigenous communities, but also in opening space for transforming the landscape of discourse about Palestine. Centring love as a method also uplifts the value of reciprocity, as the wide response to the love letter was not just about the love that we as Palestinians received, but also a continuation of the relational forms of love we have given historically in situating our liberation as interconnected with Black, Indigenous, Third World and queer liberation movements across the globe more broadly. Finally, what is offered here is a broader abolitionist vision for a radically different global future based on life-affirming interconnectedness between communities marginalized by the devastating intersecting structures of global white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism. *Decolonial Love the Palestinian Way*, then, which I analyze as a method that forms part of a constellation of Palestinian feminist practices of which letter writing is a part, also brings to the fore the possibility for deepening fields of intimacy and affective relations needed to create shared horizons of liberation, recognizing Palestinian liberation as part of a broader abolitionist feminist vision geared towards undoing gendered racial-colonial dominance and transforming global relations of power.

Conclusion: *On Love the Palestinian Way*

What is the space between collective grief and love? How do we transform one into the other? And what does it mean to engage decolonial love as a *method* for Palestinian liberation? What is the work that love does in the space of genocidal duress? In revolutionary struggle? What does beginning from a space of decolonial love do to unmoor us from the political imaginaries that hold us captive to the predatory structures of settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, anti-blackness, and imperial power? What unnamable and ungovernable desires, what spaces of belonging—with and for each other, for the Palestinian nation—does a revolutionary love inspire us to reclaim and to imagine?

While decolonial or revolutionary love is difficult to define, traces of its alchemy can be witnessed in the letters of Palestinian women writing against colonial captivity, as

letters labour towards naming and narrating the ephemeral, affective and sensory worlds that are beyond representation. The letters that I uplift here form part of a constellation of resistance practices giving life to the enduring Palestinian freedom struggle, highlighting decolonial love as a transnational Palestinian feminist praxis of abolition. While critical feminist abolitionist movement leaders and scholars have highlighted the urgency of understanding state and intimate violence as deeply intertwined, Black, Indigenous and women of colour feminists and their conjoined movement histories have pushed abolition feminisms to examine the relationships between carcerality and empire. In the words of Nadine Naber and Clarissa Rojas,

engaging in the work of undoing carcerality necessarily beckons the work of undoing a social landscape productive of empire, for carcerality is derivative of and co-constituted by empire. This analysis has the potential to grow possibilities of coalitional abolition feminisms that defy the disarticulation of abolition feminisms/struggles for anti-colonial feminisms/struggles, and lead us toward methods, movements, and visionary practices that build a present and future where prisons/policing and militarism are *incomprehensible*. (2022: 18)

This article builds on this “transnational feminist anti-imperialist abolitionist,” vision (*ibid.*) both by broadening the scope of our understanding of carcerality in Palestine through attention to the lived and embodied aspects of its unfolding, while uplifting Palestinian feminist methods of disrupting the policing and militarized technologies of settler colonial state criminality, as an inherently abolitionist praxis. The abolition of Israeli state violence and the dismantling of settler colonial criminality is made possible through deepening Indigenous practices of life-making that hold alternative social relations, practices of love, care and healing relations with each other and with the homeland, at its core.

Drawing on the intimacies of letter writing, or the epistolary method, and the love letter in particular, brings to the fore a shared horizon of “affective, intellectual, and political possibility” and “world-making praxis,” (Burton 2021: 5) despite the prison bars, fences and militarized geographies that separate us as Palestinian women from each other and from Palestine. I have chosen to focus on Palestinian women’s letters because they provide insights into a central aspect of liberation politics that has long been made invisible in patriarchal conceptions of what it means to “do” politics in the struggle to achieve national liberation: that of reclaiming intimate geographies of the bodily, psychic and affective, of reconnecting the social fabric of Indigenous Palestinian relations, or kinship, that Zionist colonialism has strategically fragmented and violated through carceral politics as a precondition of genocidal elimination; and of elevating the “ephemeral and gestural archive, producing legibility in its specific

moment of enactment, but with the realization that legibility is neither the end goal nor a stable, infinite state.” (Shomali 2023: 5)

As Devin Atallah writes, “decolonial love can be a passageway towards knowing and towards finding a community of resistance.” (2022: 81) Women’s love letters invite a collective witnessing of Palestinian grief—invite the collective into the space of mourning that potentiates collective healing. The love letter also uplifts communal spaces, material struggles over home and homeland, and *sumud* that sustains longevity in this ongoing struggle. Further, the love letter invites renewed possibilities for the regeneration and strengthening of transnational constellations of feminist solidarity with the Palestinian liberation struggle, what I have referred to here as an ethical community. These letters reflect a long history and practice of letter writing amongst captive activist intellectuals throughout various traditions of resistance and resistance literature (e.g. Harlow 1992; James 2005; Nashif 2008).¹²

Drawing on these insights, the letters I am thinking with here illustrate a method through which Palestinians call each other into intimate relation, gathering our disparate, yet interconnected experiments in decolonial love and, in doing so, amplify a Palestinian sensorium that sharpens our capacity to enact revolutionary struggle, to build communities as sanctuaries that enable survival and transformation. Whether between a mother held captive and separated from her daughter, between groups of women fragmented by the carceral geographies of colonial violence, or women based in the homeland and in the *shataat*, the love letter sends fugitive messages in the cracks of settler colonial state criminality, writing against its domination, dehumanization and extraction. In doing so, women invent new routes and pathways towards re-membering the Palestinian social body, reimagining kinship relations with community and the homeland, and liberating our intimacies and senses from colonial captivity.

Author’s note

At the time of writing, Khalida Jarrar was still held captive by Israeli authorities. She was released after nearly two years of imprisonment in September 2021.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article I use the term “captive” rather than “prisoner” or “detainee” following the most precise translation of the Arabic term “تاريساً” mobilized by Palestinians to distinguish the “capture of prisoners of war,” a critical distinction that asserts the context by which prisoners are captured in settler colonialism to be one of ongoing war (Kutmah 2023).
2. While the closest English translation of the Arabic word “*shataat*” is diaspora, I define it here as a still ongoing dispersal and forced exiling of Palestinians across the homeland and the globe. This distinction is a political choice that names a stake in the materiality of decolonization, including the “anticipated future of a return to a liberated homeland.” (Ihmoud 2022: 13)
3. I use the concepts of decolonial love and revolutionary love interchangeably throughout this article.
4. I thank Stephen Sheehi for suggesting the title of this piece as an allusion to the poem by Abdul Lateef A’qel, “Love, the Palestinian Way,” (1982) popularized by the Palestinian folk band *Sabreen*.
5. Palestinians typically refer to what is recognized in broader international policy and discourse as the state of Israel as “1948,” a reference to the Nakba, or the year in which 750,000 Palestinians were massacred or forcibly expelled from their homeland and the state was first recognized as such. In this way, they keep the memory of the Nakba alive, alongside claims to belonging to all of Palestine.
6. While there is a long history of the Israeli state targeting and imprisoning Jarrar, in the most recent events, “On 1 March 2021, Ofer military court sentenced Khalida to 24 months in prison and a NIS 4,000 fine. During the hearing session, the military prosecutor amended Khalida’s indictment, limiting it to her political role and work with the Palestinian Authority. Further declaring that “there are no charges against her relating to affiliation to any military, financial nor organizational activities.” Available online at: <https://actionnetwork.org/letters/write-letter-to-canadian-government-unconditional-release-of-khalida-jarrar-to-attend-the-funeral-of-her-daughter-suha-jarrar/> (accessed August 2021).
7. Translated from the original Spanish by the author.
8. For many of us who have faced patriarchal violence and gendered exclusion in Palestinian political spaces, the PFC has been the first place we can call a political home. Two months earlier, we had launched our first public campaign, “Palestine is a Feminist Issue,” which included organizing to reignite longstanding relations with Black, Indigenous, women of color and queer communities within larger anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist movements in the US, and a pledge asking US women, queer, feminist, social and racial justice organizations and people of conscience to adopt Palestinian liberation as a critical feminist issue (see Elia 2021).
9. One aspect of the conversation involved whether we should write a statement of solidarity to our people, and whether Palestinians in the shatat can be in solidarity with our people in the

homeland—in other words, can we be in solidarity with ourselves? I thank Nada Elia for reminding me of this during a presentation of an earlier iteration of this essay presented as part of a December 2021 workshop, “Love Letters to Palestine,” co-organized with Dena Al-Adeeb and Jennifer Mogannem, as part of HEKLER Assembly’s “Infrastructures of Care,” a series of conversations exploring the relationship between “civic engagement and collectivity through art practice and pedagogy.” Available online at: <https://www.hekler.org/hekler-assembly-infrastructures-of-care> (accessed December 2021).

10. As Palestinian feminists have argued previously, while there is a long tradition of Black, Indigenous and third world feminist solidarity with the Palestinian liberation movement, Western liberal feminist traditions have historically colluded with Zionism in the oppression of Palestinians. While there are cases of explicitly Zionist sympathies on the part of some liberal feminists, perhaps, as other Palestinian feminist scholars and activist have noted, this is in part a consequence of the success of Israeli state-driven messaging that depicts Israel as a liberal, democratic society that is exceptional in the MENA region for its openness to women’s and queer emancipation—what some have called “feminist-washing” and “pinkwashing” respectively. Embedded in this politics are Islamophobic and orientalist assumptions about Arab society: the essential incompatibility of Arab and Muslim societies with women’s emancipation or queer emancipation, which again occludes the deeply heteropatriarchal homonational, violently misogynistic elements at the core of Israeli state formation.
11. See statement entitled *Gender Studies Departments in Solidarity with Palestinian Feminist Collective*. Available online at: <http://genderstudiespalestinesolidarity.weebly.com> (accessed November 2021).
12. These traditions have also been in conversation with each other, forming a radical space of kinship between captive populations and revolutionary movements. For example, Greg Thomas highlights the ways in which George Jackson, an imprisoned Black Panther and member of the Soledad Brothers, was inspired by Palestinian prisoner writings. Angela Davis notes the emotion she felt at receiving a letter from Palestinian prisoners in 1970, smuggled out of an Israeli prison and into her prison cell.

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