

NAMING PALESTINE

Tal Dor

*Université Paris-Est Créteil (UPEC), LEGS and LIRTES
research centres*

ABSTRACT: I enter the conversation and the celebration for the centenary of Paulo Freire from a feminist perspective that enhances a critical reading of political Zionism and the State of Israel as a settler colonial project in Palestine. In this paper I seek to transcend Zionist essentialist nationalist paradigms by shedding light on what it means to deconstruct the *Master* consciousness while “feeling at home” (Ahmed, 2006). I would like to suggest that enabling the “disorientation of encountering the world differently” (ibid.) is a learning process that involves engaging in a profound transformation of consciousness

תקציר:

אני נכנסת לשיח חגיגות המאה לפאולו פריירה מפרספקטיבה פמיניסטית הבוחרת קריאה ביקורתית של הציונות ומדינת ישראל כפרויקט של קולוניאליזם התיישבותי בפלסטין. במאמר זה אני מחפשת להתעלות על הפרדיגמות הלאומיות והמהותיות של הציונות בהשמת דגש על המשמעות של פירוק תודעת האדון 'המרגיש בבית' (Ahmed, 2006). אני מתבססת על שרה אחמד (שם) המציעה אלטרנטיבה למפגש עם העולם שבאה דווקא מתוך חוסר ההתמצאות כתהליך למידה שמצריך שינוי תודעה משמעותי.

KEYWORDS Nakba, Occupation, Settler-colonialism, Intifada, Home

“The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance.” (Freire, 1970 [2000]: 90).

“Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.” (ibid: 87).

My encounter with Paulo Freire’s work happened through activism within the Israeli radical left, namely with my political engagement in “Mahapach”¹. Facilitation of Israeli and Palestinian radical encounter groups, recognition of the Nakba and the right of return among Jewish Israelis through the work of Zochrot², participation in direct anti-occupation actions and activities against the Israeli army – to all I was strongly devoted and very much engaged in from the start of the Second Intifada.

In Mahapach, our choice to speak about *Toda’a* (consciousness in Hebrew) was drawn from Freire’s work. We were inspired by his concept of *Conscientização* (Freire, 1970 [2000]) and the way he refers to the dynamic movement when one learns to perceive, in a complex way, the socio-political contradictions of domination. A better understanding of reality, Freire taught us, leads political actors to actions in order to change reality and resist oppression. The language of consciousness transformation within contexts of domination, racism and colonialism was

1 Mahapach-Taghir is a feminist, educational, communal organization that operates in a Jewish – Palestinian partnership among and within communities on the social and geographical periphery. The organization operates through local activism to promote social justice, solidarity, and community resilience, with the aim of building an equal and democratic society. <https://mahapach-taghir.org/en/home/>

2 Zochrot ("remembering" in Hebrew) is an NGO working since 2002 to promote acknowledgement and accountability for the ongoing injustices of the Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948, and the reconceptualization of the Return as the imperative redress of the Nakba and a chance for a better life for all the country's inhabitants. <https://www.zochrot.org/en>

constantly present within our speech and praxis in the field. It is at the heart of my intellectual development but also at the heart of my own process of consciousness transformation and development of a counter hegemonic awareness to political Zionism.

My quest to better understand the ways in which Jewish Israeli political actors liberate themselves from Zionist settler colonial thought is profoundly inspired by Paulo Freire and bell hooks' development of knowledge, and in particular, the necessity and urgency to engage in praxis of decolonization with Palestinian partners.

Both Freire and hooks taught me that dialogue enables to critically gaze at the multiple authoritarian power dynamics of Israeli coloniality. Critical dialogue deconstructs hegemonic thought that looks down at knowledge that is considered low in the hegemonic pyramid (Freire and Faundez, 1989). Accordingly, liberating ourselves, as Jewish Israeli activists, from what I now call colonial arrogance allows us to look at others and the world as equals and partners in struggle and in reconstruction of new and perhaps critical, knowledge.

Following bell hooks' work on consciousness transformation and reflections on pedagogies of transgression (1994, 2003, 2010), I thus choose to position myself, and speak from a standpoint bringing into perspective settler colonial present/ce in Palestine within a clear historical understanding that embraces the possibility to transform reality, as Freire (Macedo, 2000) would put it, I believe. Naming the world, according to Freire, is the basis of true, and radical dialogue. It is the starting point of a conversation that can transform the world.

Through the telling of my multiple colonial stories - as Sara Ahmed (2015) says "we all have a story, right?" - I

would like to speak about home “defined as from where one came” (Peteet, 2007, in Abuaker, 2020). I allow myself to speak about *home* rather than “*homeland*”, from a standpoint of “whiteness” (Ahmed, 2007). In this sense I am not trying to recenter the conversation on whiteness (Tuck and Yang, 2012) or seeking to enter processes of settler appropriation. Rather, to take responsibility when engaging in concrete praxis of change towards profound decolonization of the place I call home.

we want to be sure to clarify that decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. (ibid: 3)

Being from somewhere in France

I have been living in France for the last 14 years. After I say a single sentence in French, I am constantly asked: *Tu viens d'où ?* Where do you come from?

For Anaïs Duong-Pedica in “Thinking Kanaky Decolonially”, this question must be understood in context. Within hexagonal France, thus from a Eurocentric perspective, being asked “where do you come from?” is “a way to assign people to imagined geographical places and cultural racialized communities” (2021:145). When asking this same question from an Oceanian perspective, it does not necessarily seek for a name of a nation state, but rather a question that would allow positioning when entering true dialogue: “where are you in relation to me/us?” (ibid.).

While my skin color does not reveal my “strangeness” to French hegemony, my accent does. But having two

mother tongues – two languages that are part of my colonial trajectory, it is hard in French to detect my *origine*. My white skin and queer accent destabilize the hegemonic order of French migration (Soumahoro, 2020).

The expectation to the question “where do you come from?” is that I would have a simple answer that would just give a *word*, a name of a nation state, a country. According to Freire, within this encounter people hegemonically seek for the “unauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality...” (Freire, 1970 [2000]: 87).

At times I ask back, “where do you think I come from?” Yet the “correct” answer, if there is one, is never found.

I would like to unsettle that which they already know of me when encountering the stranger (Ahmed, 2000), to unsettle the colonial frames (Ahmed, 2007) in which they seek to fit me. Rather than fulfilling the expectations of a simple answer, I would rather tell my multiple and intergenerational colonial stories.

I was born in the beautiful city of Haifa, into a Jewish Anglo-Saxon, South African family. I never lived in South Africa but always wished I could be part of the life that my grandparents had left behind. They always used to say that Haifa reminded them of Cape Town.

I grew up to the “heroic” story of my Grandfather answering the Zionist call in 1948 to engage in building a sovereign home for Jews – a Kibbutz Galuiot, the “ingathering of the exiles” (Shohat, 2017). I know today that 1948 is a key date in the contemporary history of Palestinians and Palestine:

That year, a country and its people disappeared from maps and dictionaries... ‘The Palestinian people does not exist,’ said the new masters, and henceforth the Palestinians would be referred to by general, conveniently vague terms, as either ‘refugees,’ or in the case of a small minority that

had managed to escape the generalized expulsion, 'Israeli Arabs.' A long absence was beginning (Sanbar, 2001: 87, in Abu-Lughod and Sa'di, 2007).

Ironically, my grandparents had always portrayed the colonial Western life they had left in South Africa as superior to the Middle Eastern one we led within the Jewish State. Life "*there*" seemed better than life "*here*" (*here referring to where I was born not where I am now, at my desk writing these words*) due to my interiorization of colonial arrogance³. This arrogance is drawn from Zionist Eurocentrism "as an oppressive shaping-force of culture and identity" (Shohat, 2017: 307⁴). Shohat has shown in her work the dynamics of *inferiority/superiority complexes with regard to both "East" and "West"*. Particularly in her critical analysis of the Zionist concept of "*Return to the Motherland*" (ibid:177⁵) she develops the double relation to the land due to the Zionist ambivalent relation to the East.

At the age of twenty-one my grandparents took my cousin, who is more like a sister to me, and me to visit what they transmitted to us as our *motherland*, South Africa. It was our family colonial return. I felt passionately connected to that land. I did not expect that during that trip, the cracks within my own colonial consciousness would start through my encounter with Mabel, the woman who had to depart, or was dislocated, from her own home and family in order to raise my mother and her siblings. When Mabel saw me after twenty years, she opened her

3 I refer here to my PhD dissertation, entitled: "Towards Radical Consciousness Liberation: Palestinian, Israeli Recounting Decolonial of Trans/formation", defended in 2017 at Université Paris 13, USPC.

4 I refer here to her piece "Postscript to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*" in her *Selected Writings*.

5 I refer here to her piece "Exile, Diaspora, and Return: The Inscription of Palestine in Zionist Discourse" in her *Selected Writings*.

arms and said: “*My grandchild*”. I was touched by her connection to me but did not share the same love. And then she turned to my grandparents and said: “*Master, Madam*”. My cousin and I looked at each other surprised, realizing we were unfamiliar with these codes. I then turned to my grandfather, who looked embarrassed.

Mabel naming my grandfather *Master* ended up becoming a *Radical Encounter* (Dor, 2018). I am not sure she meant it, but she brought in to the conversation the colonial power dynamics positioning me directly as a dominator. Using the *word* Master – the *true word* (Freire, 1970 [2000]: 88) – transformed my world. She allowed the dissonance to take place in the space. The dissonance between me being at the same time her grandchild and that of a *Master* unsettled the Knowledge I had of my so-called “Motherland South Africa” – the Knowledge drawn from colonial frames (Ahmed, 2007). The capital K was removed, as Freire and Faundez suggest when referring to authoritarian power of scientific knowledge (Freire and Faundez, 1989: 45), of the knowledge I had of South Africa and later on of Palestine.

In a conversation with a feminist Jewish activist living in Haifa she recounts that throughout her process of liberation from Zionism, she understood that to liberate herself from colonial consciousness she has to constantly confront her *sense of entitlement*. She went further and said that being Jewish-Ashkenazi one walks the land as a *Master*. According to her, deconstructing the consciousness of the Master is an important, perhaps even essential, part in her liberation process to radical consciousness.

Parting from Zionism seems to be related to the separation of the embodiment of a *Master*. The settler colonial project of Zionism defines the space in which one

acts, where some bodies would feel entitled while others cannot. In Ahmed's words, "bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world 'white', a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual's arrival." (2007: 153).

The definition of *Master of the land* is situated within Zionist settler colonialism. While a Jewish-Ashkenazi Israeli walks the land as a Master, neither Palestinians nor Mizrahi Jews experience the colonial space in the same way. Even more so, being a Master of the land prevents those who were dispossessed of this land from returning.

Sarona Abuaker (2020) shows us that for Palestinians in the diaspora, the rupture from Palestine produces a connection to the land through the production of what she calls, Palestinian-ness.

The reality of dispossession impacts Palestinians' ways of engaging, moving in, and experiencing Palestine on the physical realm of being able to access the land. Out of this physical uprooting, and the response to it, is a production of Palestinian-ness tied to a "place-bound definition (which) focuses on return, and home is defined as from where one came" (Peteeet, 2007). (Abuaker, 2020: 245)

Abuaker's definition of Palestinian-ness urges me to think of ways to return home when undoing the Master. Is there a way to return outside the embodiment of colonial borders? My entrance to the land is not forbidden, nor am I in exile, I am just away from home as "...home is defined as from where one came".

Naming home Palestine

“The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. It is thus necessarily the task of responsible Subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination.” (Freire, 1970 [2000]: 89).

In hooks’ terms (1990), the possibility to build a liberated feminist consciousness is the dynamic work towards change; it is resisting to become part of the hegemonic center. It is the dynamic process that would embody the margin as a site of resistance (ibid.). Embracing the marginal space, allows a complex understanding of reality, of coloniality and of the possible ruptures from it. “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (ibid: 341).

Insisting to think from the margin allows me, I believe, to deconstruct the Knowledge I have of the space I call home. It would necessitate working towards a radically different future. It is the path towards the deconstruction of the Master. It is a form of political resistance that can transform “our ways of looking and being” in the world and creates the conditions “to move against the forces of domination” (hooks, 1992: 20).

Acting from the margin, is thus a space from which one seeks creative and alternative actions – “A space of radical openness” (hooks, 1990). It perhaps answers the call to bring the idea of diaspora back to Palestine and find ways to think about what it means to live with the Other (Butler, 2012: 15).

I think of home while embodying the margin, resisting colonial return, returning home from the margin and working towards the dismantling of the Master's house, without internalizing the tools:

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. As Paulo Freire shows so well in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships. (Lorde, 1987 [2007]: 123)

I come from Palestine, I say. But I'm not Palestinian. I'm Israeli⁶.

These are the true words (Freire, 1970 [2000]), the word that allows entering a dialogue, an encounter, that do not name the world "on behalf of others" (Freire, 2000: 89).

Naming *home* Palestine, as an Israeli, is a praxis to rupture the *colonial Master Narrative* towards the re-creation of a shared *Arab-Jew* space in Palestine (Shohat, 2017). It enables radical dialogue, while understanding my multiples positions and positionalities as a constant process "in the making", in constant quest of asking questions and seeking to understand and deconstruct colonial power dynamics.

6 In a recent text written by Ariella Aisha Azoulay entitled "Dear beloved children" she deconstructs the Zionist master narrative (and that of French coloniality as well) through conversations with her Arab Algerian Jewish ancestors. She says: "coming close to our ancestors means calling the place where we were born its name, Palestine, as they did."

It is, as Freire puts it, a joint attempt to learn more than what we already know (Freire, 1970 [2000]: 90). By speaking the *true word* (ibid.), I join those who seek to return to a place that was taken off the map (Abuaker, 2020: 246). To think “beyond what we see” (ibid.) within settler colonial frames.

Calling where I was born Palestine is the satisfaction from the margin (hooks, 1994). Yet it is the acknowledgment that this is only the starting point of a conversation, a task, that can transform Palestine from a land of Masters to a decolonized land for radical return.

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