

FrameWork 11/24

Simi Kang on Beth Stuart

**Dear Beth, from a distance & with the buzzing in my ears, too
Or: if our hearts must shatter, at least they have good company**

Our language and metaphors about the environment reflect and [impact] how we perceive and manage it. The scientific discourse on 'invasive species' of vegetation is dominated by violent representations of 'aliens' and 'invasion'...Categorized as invasive plants, the mythical and practical dimensions of their everyday use by the indigenous community simultaneously becomes a 'nuisance'—a hindrance toward enlightened understandings of growth, development, profit, and by extension, societal progress. In this process, it is not only weeds themselves that become 'natural enemies' of the land, but also the indigenous Palestinian community by extension...colonial violence is foremost an ecological violence.

...organizing life through an ongoing occupation of land and appropriation of culture, settler-colonialism informs practices across societal domains that actively obscure or erase indigenous peoples...Here, the division between indigenous and settler—or colonizer and colonized—is diluted or normalized within public consciousness, conferring indigeneity upon the settler population and state.

- Shourideh C. Molavi, "Introduction: Colonial legacies of farm warfare," in *Environmental Warfare in Gaza* (New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2024), 2-3

Friend,

I'm finalizing this letter on the 40th anniversary of the Indian state's genocide of my people. I have been trying to write you for over a month and have deleted every sentence at least twice. I usually have too many words, but for 390 days, there has only been the buzzing—and now, well, it's today.

A few months ago, I was in a meeting with a perfectly nice man who identified himself as Indian Canadian. He decided to tell a story about visiting India following the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, the leader of Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, on Coast Salish lands (Surrey, British Columbia) in 2023. In spite of knowing my ethnicity, the storyteller casually substituted the word "terrorists" for "Sikhs."

Midway through his next sentence, I sputtered "we Sikhs aren't terrorists," to which he replied "oh, I know," and picked up where he'd left off. No one noticed—everyone else in the room was white

and almost all of them were students. I held back rage-filled tears as the conversation continued, unabated.

It's a particular kind of violence for anyone to call brown ethnic minorities "terrorists;" to do it during the televised genocide of Palestinians, whose men are targeted as terrorists with impunity, is a very loud choice. Triply so, when Modi is providing weapons to aid in the Zionist entity's genocide of Palestinians while simultaneously enacting anti-Sikh and anti-Muslim laws grounded in Hindutva at home.

I woke up this morning feeling exhausted and in a pain flare. I always forget about this anniversary until it arrives.

Operation Blue Star, Indira Gandhi's death, and the pogroms against Sikhs in India all happened before I was born; they live in my body all the same. Maybe that's because I have spent my whole life watching journalists and policymakers demand that Sikhs apologize for the violence our people experience; wonder if Sardars with dastars (turbans) are "orthodox" (whatever that means to them); bully our boys into taking their own lives and kick Sikhs of all genders with kirpans out of Ivy League libraries.

When your only dream is to save your seeds and tend to your land without bankruptcy; when you are inconvenient for profits; when you wish it was possible to bring trees back to life, un-burn homes, de-traumatize your youth and keep your men safe...

when you grow weary of being the sacrifice...

when you get tired of being told to appeal to the powers that be to recognize your humanity—when you demand its recognition instead...

that's when they call you a terrorist. And then, they never stop.

Like Sikhs, Palestinians have been deputized into the role of terrorist boogeyman to save white femininity and protect the West's economic interests. Like Sikhs, this has been done to Palestinians via dispossession and dehumanization. These are not equivalences; they are, damningly, just two experiences of knowing empire's machinations in the body and on the land.

For the colonized people, the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.

- Franz Fanon, "Concerning Violence," in *The Wretched of the Earth*
(London: Grove Weidenfeld, 2021), 43

I sent you an Instagram reel a few weeks ago. I'm not sure if you noticed, but I deleted it almost immediately.

I was searching for the account of a young boy who has been documenting his progress growing food near his family's tent in Gaza to tell you about him ("Ahmed the little farmer's account is maintained by his father Aaed Abusweilem at @tasnemaad and the joy he derives from making life is everything we are fighting for daily). I couldn't remember Ahmed's name that day, though. Instead, the algorithm produced a @humanitiproject video of a smiling man carrying wide, interlinking plastic sheets full of weeks-old food plants. Youth and children followed him with excitement, grins on their faces as they cried "I want a seedling!!"

The green draped over farmer Yousef Abu Rabee's arms was so vibrant that it took me a minute to understand that this sweet scene was taking place in northern Gaza. It was at least a week into the complete siege and starvation of the region.

I have spent 390+ days watching videos of the zionist entity's atrocities; I know the landscape has been reduced to dirt roads and piles of concrete, rebar, and dead wire where buildings should be. I know the water is sewage and the air is lethal. I know the land is rubble-beige from the International Space Station; know that everything indicating life is meant to cede to the occupier.

For a moment, Abu Rabee and his plants took up the whole frame, pushing the rest to the margins.

The post was initially shared two weeks before I saw it to amplify Abu Rabee's urban farming efforts; it variously shows him giving workshops where elders and young people planted seedlings in front of their tents, tending to an ad hoc hoop house full of food, and distributing food to the people Beit Lahia, where he had fled in October of 2023. Watching him felt like a spell—was as though the acute aliveness of the leaves had the potential to transmute each violence etched into the ground he walked on; that the potential they contained could will the rubble itself back to life.

His goal was to intervene directly in the zionist entity's use of starvation to break the spirits and capacity of his people. I wanted you to see how gracefully this 24-year-old's work drove home something Palestinians have always told us: the people *are* the land.

I wanted you to see the magic.

I watched with sincere joy, neglecting to read the caption.

On October 21, 2024, Yousef Abu Rabee was murdered by an IOF drone strike near his nursery; three other young men were killed alongside him. @humanitiproject ended their post imploring: "What was his crime? Trying to prevent famine in northern Gaza."

I went back to our DMs and spared you for a few hours.

...the world we live in is somebody's utopia...the question is whose utopia?..in many academic spaces [utopia] is seen as something created by white cis straight males...the fathers of imperialism, settler colonization and colonization.

Utopia is not a destination and the journey is not grasping with the impossible, for utopia is always here. Believing utopia as something unattainable is something that only benefits systems of oppression...as we [queer and trans Palestinians] explore utopic work we engage more and more with utopia as a practice, as a daily way of breathing, inhaling the world that exists and exhaling out utopia.

- Yaffa AS, "Grounded in Utopia," in *Inara: Light of Utopia* (Toronto, ON: Meraj Publishing, 2024), 17-20

I come from farmers.

A mixed Sikh and white settler whose grandparents were forced to flee the Punjab during the partition of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, I think about the 'crime' of feeding people almost daily. Because it became unsafe to tend to their ancestral fields in the wake of 1947, my dadaji (grandfather) purchased parcels of land the new Indian government was selling to refugees. They were in what is now Uttarakhand, a week or more away from home by bullock cart.

He was 18. He had fled Lahore after seeing so many of our people slaughtered in the street that "there was no place to walk." With an ox and his hands, dadaji cleared acres of jungle on soil that was not his (nor was it the state's to give away) to make a life.

A farmer-made-refugee knows the value of the land better than anyone.
Knows that kin can't be quantified in rupees or pounds, shekels, dinars, or dollars.

Once he realized the land was no more "vacant" than his family's own, Dadaji got the village chief's consent to grow and live there (there's a story about winning a wrestling match and a Hanuman tattoo, but I'll save it for another time). He built a home—for now three generations of Kangs—in the absence of his own.

When the British left, Punjab was shattered. Dadaji was only 18 years old when they, alongside the newly minted heads of state, turned Lahore into a tomb. For weeks, trains arrived on either side of the border full of corpses.

Did you know the person who drew the current borders between Pakistan and India only visited the subcontinent for a few weeks? That he never met local geographers or community members, but made these choices based on maps the occupier gave him? That he split the Punjab open—two thirds West, one third East? Did you know the border is still called the Radcliffe Line?

...the evidence we have of racism and sexism is deemed insufficient because of racism and sexism. Indeed racism and sexism work by disregarding evidence or by rendering evidence unreliable or suspicious—often by rendering those who have direct experience of racism and sexism unreliable and suspicious. This disregarding—which is at once a form of regarding—has a central role in maintaining an order of things. Simply put: that evidence of something is deemed insufficient is a mechanism for reproducing something.

*The removal of evidence of something is evidence of something.
And so: our evidence is often evidence of the removal of evidence.*

- Sara Ahmed, "Evidence," on *feministkilljoys*, July 12, 2016,
<https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/07/12/evidence/>

There's a running joke that every Sikh is related to a farmer or a soldier. It's one of those jokes that works because it is true—we are stewards and have been forced to become good at defense.

Since our faith was established by Guru Nanak Dev Ji in the 15th century, Sikhs have been understood by many as an ethnic minority to be subdued and snuffed out. Our holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, is our living teacher. A compendium of our living Gurus' wisdom—from Nanak Dev Ji through our 10th, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, who was martyred in 1708 at the age of 41—Gurbani (the hymns, poems, and teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji) teaches us that our lives should be lived in seva (service) to the wellbeing of all.

After his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, was beheaded by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, Guru Gobind Singh Ji founded the Khalsa (or "pure ones"), an order of baptized, devout Sikhs. In so doing, he committed to word the codes by which Sikhs must comport themselves; they include "seeing the whole human race as one" or Ek Onkar (the force of Oneness), and supporting anyone in need, from making langar (free communal food) available to all at any time of day in our gurdwaras, to defending those experiencing oppression. When all else fails, Sikhs were called upon to take up the sword, among other shastars (weapons), to fight injustice everywhere.

The tenets Guru Gobind Singh Ji outlined emerged from hundreds of years of skirmishes with Mughal invaders and other imperialists who wanted Sikhs to convert and cede their homes and lands to outside authority.

Significantly, Guru Gobind Singh Ji chose the first day of Vaisakhi, our festival that honors the beginning of the harvest, to initiate the Khalsa. Like everything else about the faith, this choice underscores how fundamental the land, the seasons, and the edict of interdependence are to Sikhs past, present, and future.

The Khalsa is understood both by Sikhs and others as a militaristic order. British colonizers adopted a simplistic understanding of Sikhs, dehumanizing us as savages and backward for being both so close to the land and so "militaristic." This was to their benefit—during colonization, the British gleefully conscripted Sikhs into all of their armed forces to die for their causes. Alongside Nepalese

Gurkhas and Punjabi Muslims, Sikhs were written into colonial law as “Martial Races,” or ethnic minorities reduced to the traits of being brave and fit for fighting.

This narrative persists; today, in spite of being 2% of India’s population, Sikhs make up 15 - 20% of its army. For many Sikhs, this is a point of pride.

Being called “backward” residents of said nation in the same breath complicates this arithmetic.

Expropriation (verb)

ex·pro·pri·a·tion / (,)ek-sprō-prē-'ā-shən

: the act of expropriating or the state of being expropriated

specifically : the action of the state in taking or modifying the property rights of an individual in the exercise of its sovereignty

Examples of expropriation in a Sentence: the development of the colony involved expropriation of large tracts of fertile farmland from the natives

Afforestation (noun)

af·for·es·ta·tion / (,)a-,fōr-ə-'stā-shən

: the act or process of establishing a forest especially on land not previously forested

Examples of afforestation in a Sentence: To this end, there are global efforts to map potential areas for afforestation initiatives, but these efforts often identify grassland ecosystems as good candidates for afforestation, threatening more than one million square kilometers of grasslands in Africa, for example. - Sutirtha Labiri, Scientific American, 3 Mar. 2023

- In Merriam-Webster English Dictionary, 2024

A few weeks ago, I went to a screening of the documentary *On Our Land* at Pilsen Community Books (it’s my new favorite place—you would love it). A community member’s friend saved a box of Palestinian films from the dumpster at a Tkaronto library, and together, they’ve been sending the reels from city to city for the collective’s benefit. Directed by Antonia Caccia in 1981, *On Our Land*:

...Center[s] on Umm el-Fahm, the largest Arab village in Israel [and] tells the story of an ill treated segment of Israel's population which has largely been ignored... After the creation of Israel in 1948, Palestinians who chose to remain on their land were banded into farming communities. But most of this land has since been lost to Israeli kibbutz and moshav settlements. The Palestinians, who number one in six Israeli citizens, now must commute to work in Israeli cities, or farm land that is no longer theirs. They also must contend with discriminatory practices in housing, employment, and education, even though they are Israeli citizens.

From the minute the reel clicked to life on the projector, it was clear just how draconian the ongoing Zionist project was always meant to be, from the Balfour Declaration to today.

Midway through the film, we meet a father and his three children as they walk through a stand of trees. A place name—Lajun—flashes across the screen as the narrator tells us that this land now belongs to a kibbutz. The father points to areas overgrown by grasses, showing his children first where his uncle's home, then a dear friend's, and finally, their own family's house, used to stand: "We left our land in 1948 when the Jews took it. I owned 17 acres here in Lajun; each of us did. Our family owned 70 acres in all. Now we have less than 1 acre. If we had some land, we could build on it. It's not only our tragedy, but that of all Palestinians."

When his eldest child asks what happened to the other people in the village, he opens his palms helplessly: "Every family in the town fled. Everyone, including us."

He reaches down to hold the hand of his youngest, who can't be more than 2 years old, "[When] they forced us out in 1948... We lived under some trees. We stayed there for a year or more under those trees hoping any day we'd return, but we weren't able to."

Over a decade prior to Partition, many Sikhs advocated for the Punjab to be recognized as their homeland and made into a sovereign state: Khalistan. Instead, the Punjab was arbitrarily split between Pakistan and India, leading to, conservatively, over a million deaths as the transfer took place. People of all faiths and from every bit of the subcontinent lost their lives in what became a brutal exchange across the new border.

I don't think a single Sikh family made it through 1947 intact.

Punjab is often referred to as India's breadbasket because of how rich the soil is and how abundantly things grow there. During the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 70s (the term itself was coined by the United States Agency for International Development), many farmers seized on the promise offered by high-yield, genetically modified wheat and other seed varieties and began monocropping. In 1976, India passed the Urban Land Ceiling Act, which drastically limited how much land a given family could own and thus cultivate—a family of 5 members could own a maximum of 10 to 27 acres of irrigated land and 35 to 54 acres of dry land. What wasn't owned by farmers was declared surplus and taken away by the central government, which forced farmers to make what land they were left with as productive as possible.

This pushed many to adopt pesticides in addition to monocropping. Over time, the region's soil was stripped of its essential nutrients, resulting in worse yields over time. This, finally, was complicated by the fact that the central government sent much of Punjab's water for irrigation in neighboring states, leaving local farmers to pump well water for commercial growing.

This period also initiated the now-endemic crisis of poverty- and debt-induced farmer suicides across the region.

Breann Nicole, a collaborator and loved one of Yousef Abu Rabee, worked with him to address the food apartheid produced by the zionist entity as a weapon of ethnic cleansing over the last 13 months.

The day following his murder, she wrote an Instagram tribute under the handle @innerlightessences. It was raw with love and grief. In it, she emphasized:

...You were highly risked and stood boldly and steadfast as a symbol of RETURN, reclamation, self-sufficiency, sustenance, and life—the light of Beit Labia. Assassinated for the work to nourish and feed people and remain outside the grip of oppression. A field dream. In our lifetime. I carry your dreams in my heart.

...There is no aid, only the farmer. Please honor him...

Of course growing food is liberatory under years of blockade—to do it under conditions of starvation, with a complete lack of potable water, and under 24/7 bombardment for a year is a practice in sustaining not just Palestinian lives, but their humanity.

Rabee himself told a reporter working on a story about him just before his death: “I don’t expect to live long because I do the things that drive the occupier crazy the most. I return to what they want to prevent us from doing...I decided to help everyone plant everything they have, whether it’s on roofs, in destroyed houses, or anywhere else.”

To grow food as “a symbol of RETURN” in a place few can leave and just as few can return to is alchemical. Is to, in land and body, “remain outside the grip of oppression.”

A farmer who feeds his people is a gift.

A farmer-born-refugee knows the land isn’t his—he belongs to the land.

A farmer-born-refugee who makes the next generation more possible is a world unto himself.

The Khalistan movement was reinvigorated alongside this massive shift in how Sikhs were meant to engage with the land and the lack of access to water. One of its leaders, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, advocated for self-determination and sovereignty, including over the state’s irrigation canals. His revival of the movement was eventually headquartered in the Harmandir Sahib, or the Golden Temple, our holiest site and the main cultural archive of the Sikhs.

Then-Prime Minister Indra Gandhi designated Khalistanis as terrorists, and, when they tried to get their demands met by intervening in the exchange of grain from the Punjab to the central government, she sent the army into our most holy place to “root out” the bad elements. On June 1, 1984, the Indian army laid waste to Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar, Punjab. During the military siege, Bhindranwale and many others were murdered (state numbers claim the army killed hundreds; Sikh officials put it in the thousands). Their bodies were riddled with bullets, evidence of brutal, excessive, and systematic slaughter. Some families never found the loved ones they lost in those days.

The purpose of the violence was not simply to intervene in a political movement, however. It was designed to harm and silence us as a people—in the state capital of Chandigarh, in Punjab, in India, in South Asia, and across the entire diaspora—not for days, but generations. Not only did they desecrate every inch of our holiest site, but they set the entire library, which was filled with the Gurus' original texts and our entire written history, ablaze.

On October 31, 1984, Satwant Singh and Beant Singh, Indira Gandhi's two Sikh bodyguards, assassinated her in retribution. That night, leaders of Gandhi's Congress Party went into the streets of the capital, encouraging non-Sikhs to kill anyone visibly Sikh on sight and to loot any shop or home belonging to us. For 4 nights and 3 days across Delhi and the Punjab, Sikhs were assaulted and killed with impunity, aided by politicians, the army, and local police units.

As evidenced by Nijjar's murder in so-called Canada and the 20+ farmers who take their lives in India each day, the violence never went away.

Over time, my dadaji cleared 200 acres of farmland in Uttarakhand. On it, he, and then my uncle, cultivated Basmati, sugarcane, wheat, mustard, rubber, guava, and mangoes. My father and his four siblings grew up in those groves and fields, learning how to drive tractors and caring for cows and doing what children do when they are safe.

My dadaji was careful to make sure the farm contributed to local communities—then and today, what isn't harvested for sale is given to workers and residents of the surrounding villages.

In the wake of the 1960's Green Revolution, Monsanto representatives showed up one day demanding that my dadaji plant the company's new GM crops¹. He met them at the gate with his sword sheathed. Calmly, according to all accounts, dadaji said that no one would ever tell him, a farmer for more generations than we remember, how to tend the land. When they refused to listen, he drew his sword. They left immediately, but came back several times over the years. Today, ours is the only farm in the area that has never used pesticides.

A farmer who saves and breeds his seeds is indistinct from the land.

When he told the story during my childhood, dadaji would get annoyed, saying: "I would never do that to the water—what are the animals supposed to drink? Why would we poison our own well?" As a child, I thought he was such a badass for having a sword; as an adult, I cannot believe the courage it must have taken to run off what amounted to government contractors hell-bent on monocropping the whole world.

A farmer-made-refugee knows the value of food better than anyone on Earth.

¹ Which, incidentally, cannot be saved and planted in the future, requiring that they be purchased anew every season. What's more, these seeds required using their brand-name herbicides, which as we well know, are toxic in the best of cases.

A farmer-made-refugee will never stop growing and feeding.

Watching Palestinians today, I recognize now that it isn't courage, exactly, that makes a people capable of refusing subjugation; it's purpose.

If there is no separation between the people and the water because we are *of the land*, then defending its wellbeing isn't a choice. It is "self-preservation" and thus, as Audre Lorde teaches us, an "act of political warfare."²

The doctrine of discovery refers to a principle in public international law under which, when a nation "discovers" land, it directly acquires rights on that land. This doctrine arose when the European nations discovered non-European lands, and therefore acquired special rights, such as property and sovereignty rights, on those lands. This principle disregards the fact that the land oftentimes is already inhabited by another nation. In fact, this doctrine was used in order to legitimize the colonization of lands outside of Europe. More broadly, the doctrine of discovery can be described as an international law doctrine giving authorization to explorers to claim terra nullius – i.e. said inhabited land – in the name of their sovereign when the land was not populated by Christians... Today, the doctrine of discovery is still mentioned in American Imperialism and in regards to the treatment of indigenous people.

- Wex Definitions Team, "doctrine of discovery," *Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School*, last updated April 2022, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/occupation> (emphasis mine)

For over 390 days and 76 years (and 532 years on Turtle Island, 555 + thousands in the Punjab, and so on the world over), we have seen example after example of what has always been common wisdom for ethnic minorities and Indigenous people: those who are of the land care for it; those who wish to possess the land only know how to take, eventually leaving it in ruins.

As we also know, settlers who wish to possess the land often attempt to reshape it in their image. As Shourideh C. Molavi highlights in *Environmental Warfare in Gaza* (quoted at the very beginning of this letter), this is most easily accomplished by the settler through their own 'nativization.' One of the easiest ways to dominate a place and people is by dragging flora and fauna³ from the imperial core (or another colonized place) to the colony. Once in the colony, said plants are often named for peoples or places in/of "the Orient" (the Himalayan Blackberry as an agent of Luther Burbank's

² Audre Lorde In *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Firebrand Press, 1988).

³ I use the taxonomic names for more-than-human beings here to highlight the acute differences between Indigenous and global majority ways of engaging the relationship between humans and more-than-human kin and Western, Eurocentric views of "nature" that reduce all other beings into a system where humans are dominant and have full say over how all other beings live, die, become extinct, or "settle."

eugenicist project, for example)—both alien and evidence of the sheer geographic reach of the occupier's domination (though, as we well know, this is accomplished with almost no imagination).

Colonizers love a naming scheme and a taxonomy. It's best to have rules when you do eugenics-as-culture. This is the beauty of naming a thing: call it "law" and it is immediately "just;" call it "vacant land" and it is so. The future is the occupier's to write.

But the people fight back say "this is my home—here, see this deed—look, I still have the key;" say, "this is stolen, I only wish it returned;" say, "stop killing us, we only want to live;" say, "it has been generations."

Call a child "terrorist" instead of "two-year-old" and wipe the land clean (see: terra nullius).

Terrorist—Sikhs' and Palestinians' name in the global imagination from the moment we refused to die so they could misappropriate what was beneath our feet. Terrorists can't own land—savages do not *value* the land like the colonizer does and thus, should cede whatever their claim might be: even before naming it, the claim is invalidated.

The colonizer synonym for "resistance" is "terrorism."

As "terrorized" people, the Zionist entity can do a bait-and-switch: claim indigeneity and "green the desert." True friends of the Zionist entity plant a pine in honor of a loved one or to celebrate a child in Brooklyn or Berlin transitioning to adulthood.

Aleppo Pine transforms into Jerusalem Pine—is invasive, fast growing, and a wildfire hazard.

Italian Cypress transforms into Mediterranean Cypress to soften its Western European roots.

Eucalyptus—imported from Australia in the 19th century to dry out swamps, some of the most heterogeneously abundant ecosystems on Earth—becomes endemic.

Unruly sovereign Palestine transforms into a terrorist stronghold—settled into subordination.

"Invasive" transforms into "native" in one easy move.

Alienation from the land can only breed violence, but violence is the only tool they have for such untidy exorcisms. Whiteness is such a slippery substance, made almost entirely of what it is not: not brown not Muslim or Sikh. When your people are always scourge and never person, it's easy to call them an invasion. I suppose if it wasn't effective, they would have found another way to do it by now (we all know there shouldn't be peacocks on *ləkʷəŋən* land).

(Olive trees grow best in peaty bogs, but can grow anywhere they are needed. I have watched a video of settlers lighting them on fire almost every day for the last two weeks.)

Back in *On Our Land's* Lajun, the father's middle child asks what he did for work before the Zionist entity forced their family out: "None. There was no work for us. There was military rule and we were prevented from moving around. That's what life was like for us then."

Nodding, expression distant, she asks her father one more question: "Why did they expel you?"

Voice breaking, he runs his hands along the folded edges of the land deed he's held throughout the clip: "Why? Because they want our land for themselves. They don't want Palestinians here. They just want our land." He lights a cigarette and exhales.

The camera follows the family as they make their way through a stand of pines, stumbling over chunks of rubble that have been overgrown and hidden by grasses. What sounds like a war plane or rocket fire is audible in the distance.

The narrator's voice returns: "The trees, which cover the village of Lajun, have been donated by friends of Israel from all over the world."

*...The olive tree is the color of peace, if peace needed
A color. No one says to the olive tree: How beautiful you are!
But: How noble and how splendid! And she,
She who teaches soldiers to lay down their rifles
And re-educates them in tenderness and humility: Go home
And light your lamps with my oil! But
These soldiers, these modern soldiers
Besiege her with bulldozers and uproot her from her lineage
Of earth. They vanquished our grandmother who foundered,
Her branches on the ground, her roots in the sky.
She did not weep or cry out. But one of her grandsons
Who witnessed the execution threw a stone
At a soldier, and he was martyred with her.
After the victorious soldiers
Had gone on their way, we buried him there, in that deep
Pit – the grandmother's cradle. And that is why we were
Sure that he would become, in a little while, an olive
Tree – a thorny olive tree – and green!*

- Mahmoud Darwish, "The Second Olive Tree," Marilyn Hacker,
trans., in *Arab Lit*, March 30, 2022

One of the most striking scenes from *On Our Land* is a slow-pan across the side of a pristine white van. In both English and Hebrew, big block letters “AMERICAN RED MAGEN DAVID for ISRAEL” in red paint. Stenciled on the passenger door in the same bright red are the words:

Presented to the people of ISRAEL
By
FRIENDS and MEMBERS OF THE BETH DAVID CONGREGATION
In Honor of
MEI AMI
D.N. MANASHE, ISRAEL

Miami, Florida, U.S.A.

The film’s narrator then explains that the Mei’ Ami settlement—so-called because the Beth David Congregation and others like it in Miami, Florida provided much of the funding for its construction and maintenance—was expropriated from a small number of Palestinian farmers, a family of whom the film team interview outside of their temporary home on the outskirts of Mei’ Ami.

As her husband unfolds their deed to the already-occupied land on which they stand, a mother of one farming family tells the camera: “Our children go hungry, we can’t afford clothes or school books for them, but we refuse to leave. We’ll eat onions and salt, anything, to stay on our land.”

Her husband picks up where she left off: “The same day Sadat came to talk peace with the Israelis they came to dig up our crops.” He exchanged words with them: “I said ‘What about peace and what about justice? You’ve brought a bulldozer and tractor, get out.’ They said ‘The land is ours’ I said ‘Show me your deeds. With one hand you offer peace and in the other, a dagger. Get out, get out!’” He ends the story, saying: “We had barley, wheat, melons growing, [they took] our whole livelihood.”

After some discussion about the geopolitics of the 1978 Camp David Accords, a young man from the family asks: “Why can a Pole or South African come to live at Mei’ Ami while we, who are from here, are denied everything?” The interviewer turns back to the older farmer, asking if his father was born there.

Flinging his arms wide to take in the land he is of, the farmer emphasizes in an affect equal parts sad and livid: “Not just my father, but his father and his father’s father and and his father’s father’s father and so on and so on.”

When I was young, I sensed that my dadiji (grandmother) had expected to move back to her homeland someday. She arrived from Chandigarh, Punjab over a year after her intended, with a set of silver and little else. Never having left home, she saw the farm for the first time on the day she was married.

We were lucky that many of our family's places remained in India. While she visited, she never returned. Instead, she went to gurdwara as often as possible. There and in her kitchen garden are where I saw her smile the most.

A farmer-made-refugee has no choice but to carry five rivers, fecund earth, bhangra and ghazal, with her.

My dadiji had a massive heart attack one afternoon while she was drinking cha in her bedroom. I was 12 at the time and wasn't allowed to fly back for the funeral. I think often about how many ways her heart was broken over her lifetime—how few opportunities it might have gotten to mend as she raised 5 kids a country's width away from her people.

She is so easy for me to conjure: sitting on a stool next to her outdoor cooking stove, she holds forth, telling my auntie a story, pulling the dupatta up over her brown, and chopping onions all at once, hands and words flying. I see her face in every Palestinian auntie and elder. I hear her laugh in their zaghrouta; recognize their morning wails in marrow-deep memories she could never speak.

A farmer-made-refugee knows she is kin to many who don't share her language.
A farmer-made-refugee understands that her kin aren't human alone—

this, most profoundly, is the root of her humanity.

In late September 2020, Sikhs reprised our role as state-identified “terrorists” for wanting to tend to the land and grow food. With barely any discussion or debate three farm bills were passed that promised to make it even more difficult for the country's already-struggling farmers to make a living. The farm bills would do this by eliminating the assurance of a fixed base price for crops and, thus, any guaranteed income for already struggling farmers.

What options are left to a people who have peacefully asked for their humanity to be recognized for generations and are, in the best of cases, told to just shut up and die already?

Within hours of the bills being signed into law, Sikh and other Punjabi farm leaders, as well as labor and caste organizers of all faiths, called for a nation-wide protest. Organized under the hashtag of #FarmersProtest and told to #DelhiChalo (Go to Delhi!), farmers of all faiths descended on the capital with the tractors and tractor trailers, shutting down three critical highway entrances into the city. Many slept on the streets or in trucks for the first few days of the Morcha (public rally / people's cause). As the months dragged on, my kin set down roots, transitioning into well maintained tents and other structures housing libraries, classrooms, and places for exercise.

The winter was incredibly tough—a handful of elders passed from exposure and health conditions, including COVID. While politicians gave speeches about the dangerous Sikh terrorists blocking commerce, uncles were feeding all of the local children. After lathi-charging them and using water cannons wasn't effective, Delhi police laid spikes down so elders would be forced to puncture their tractors' tires to reach home. While cousins raised slogans to remind the state who it was up against, their siblings pounded the spikes down, built raised beds, and planted flowers.

We grow everywhere, they said.
We grow in spite of you.

The Farmer's Protest ended on December 11, 2021 after Modi's government agreed to rescind the farm bills. It was renewed in February of 2024 when it became clear that Modi would not follow through on key promises they made in the wake of 2021, specifically ensuring guaranteed minimum prices for crops. In a truncated reprise of how they had been treated a few years prior, farmers were beat back with lathis, shot with water cannons and rubber bullets, and tear-gassed.

The protest is ongoing in spirit, if not in physical fact.

Call us terrorists, and we still feed you.
Call us terrorists, and we still care for the land.
Call us terrorists, and we still dance.

Call us terrorists, and we love us even more fiercely.
Call us terrorists; it won't stop us from resisting.

Breann Nicole's memorial to Yousef Abu Rabee closed in a way that both shattered and filled my heart:

*And the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:
If a man has a seed and he is about to plant it and the Day of Judgement comes, then he should still plant it*

...Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un.

I couldn't help but hear the proverb we all know so well but are never sure about the attribution:
They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds.

My dadaji died on his farm.

Sikhs, who are of Punjab (literally the "land of five rivers"), cremate our dead and send their bones on in running water. After we did dadaji's rights at home, my father gave his father's remains to the stream that runs beneath the family gurdwara.

Together, we watched as he was returned to the world itself.

He is in every grain of rice, every branch heavy with fruit, every kitten's mew and calf's birth—every moment of life—I encounter.

A farmer who is of the land—made or born refugee—and loves it might be the sharpest object against occupation.

A farmer who is returned to the land will bloom forever.

Olive trees are not just agricultural assets; they carry the memory of Palestinian ancestors who planted and tended to them for generations...standing tall as a testament to the enduring relationship between the land and its true heirs—from the ancient terraces in Battir to the olive groves of Nablus and Al-Quds—the olive trees symbolize the Palestinian people’s unbreakable connection to their homeland.

- @itsmadeinpalestine on Instagram, October 30, 2024

Near the end of *On Our Land*, a young Palestinian man gestures to a field strewn with the rubble of another Palestinian’s home. His family had grown olives on a nearby farm—now occupied by a settler kibbutz—for generations until they were forced off their land during the Nakba. He narrates how settlers stole the fruit groves for themselves, leaving the people with hard-to-till, less nutritious soil nearby. Even as they work the unhealthy soil, he and every Palestinian is constantly reminded that they are only there by the grace of the settler—the gift of freedom⁴, barest life⁵.

Displaced through erasure; landless as the land still lives beneath his feet, eaten away by root systems borne from a world away.

And yet. Smiling toward the camera, he leans down, wraps his hand around the base of an olive tree not even a foot tall, and says “this is more precious to me than my own children.” For an olive tree to take hold and reach a foot tall was only possible because of his hands, tireless care, and damningly, a clear understanding that to grow food, he must be willing to risk his life.

An olive tree is at once parent, child, and ancestor—of and outside of time, simultaneously caring for this and every generation to come.

A farmer-made-refugee knows that every seed is a prospective future.
A farmer-made-refugee is a seed unto themselves.

⁴ In *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), Mimi Thi Nguyen meticulously documents the ways in which the United States demands fealty of refugees whom it produced by waging war in Việt Nam and throughout Southeast Asia. She explains that the U.S. understands itself as a savior of the Vietnamese people, who, in turn for the so-called gift of their freedom, are told they owe an irreparable debt to the settler state for “saving” them from its own violence. This debt is persistent and generational. While the gift of freedom is significantly different from apartheid occupation, it echoes in the notion that Palestinians should be grateful for what humanity is allowed them under “everyday” occupation and, even more horrifyingly, over a year into genocide.

⁵ This is in reference to Giorgio Agamben’s framework forwarded in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), where the state gives more value to simply maintaining the fact of life than making the quality of that life good—it is a critique of modern politics and the biopolitical project.

The editors of *Inara: Light of Utopia* write that we all live in a utopia—it's just that the utopia of this world is that of colonizers, capitalists, and rabid fascist xenophobes (see a bit of the text earlier). The people of the global majority have so many more ways of knowing to make utopia from than we are told we are allowed (...infinitely more than the West...). Significantly, these knowledges are not just the result of occupation; we viscerally know and have known other ways of being prior to, from within, and in the persistent wake of occupation and oppression.

I was maybe 15 when my dad gave me my first keffiyeh. He would always bring me a gift back when he traveled for work; on a trip to India, he went to the market and picked out a white keffiyeh embroidered with a deep blue that has since faded to lavender. By then, he had told me many times that Sikhs should always support Palestinians because we shared many experiences of oppression, yes, but far more importantly, an ethic of community care and resistance that refuses the primacy of said oppression.

Like Palestinians, Sikhs see ourselves as both participants in and stewards of the land; growing food is a privilege done in collaboration with rather than through the exploitation of the earth and its kin. Like Palestinians, Sikhs refuse to abandon who we are or our ways of knowing in favor of being legible to the state. And like Palestinians, Sikhs have always stood up to tyranny, no matter the odds against them or the tools available to them (21 swords against 20,000; a prayer; a marker).

This is in part because, as socialist labor organizer Eugene V. Debs told the court during his trial for alleged sedition: "...years ago, I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on the earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."⁶

Put differently and to recall the inimitable James Baldwin during the U.S. war in Viêt Nam: "Every bombed village is my hometown."⁷

However, Sikhs are not living a networked and richly funded genocide in real time, and many—though not nearly all—can return to our ancestral land. We are not entrapped and starved, denied potable water, housing, or education, let alone shelter or the promise of the next moment. We can be relatively sure we will not be deliberately disabled by a bullet or a rocket or a tank tomorrow, and our family names are safe for now.

The Guru Granth Sahib Ji opens with Guru Nanak Dev Ji's teachings. The first line of the text, the Mool Mantar (root verse), distills the essential elements of Sikhi:

ੴ ਸਤਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਅਜੂਨੀ ਸੈਭੰ ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ॥

⁶ Eugene V. Debs, "Statement to the Court: Upon Being Convicted of Violating the Sedition Act," transcribed the court stenographer in September 18, 1918; in the E.V. Debs Internet Archive, 2001.

⁷ In James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (Knopf Doubleday, New York, 2010:85).

Ik oa(n)kaar sath naam karathaa purakh nirabho niravair akaal moorath ajoonee
saibha(n) gur prasaadh ||

One Universal Creator God. The Name Is Truth. Creative Being Personified. No
Fear. No Hatred. Image Of The Undying, Beyond Birth, Self-Existent. By Guru's
Grace.⁸

I cannot read Gurmukhi (the original script used in the Grath) and know the Anglicized (and thus Christianized) translation is woefully thin for such rich ideas like Oneness and what it means for us to exist beyond life and death. Off the page and in the gurdwara, it does something to my nervous system—standing together and facing the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the sanghat (assembly of Sikhs) recites the Mool Mantar together, hands palm to palm, before bowing and prostrating.

My favorite bit of the Mool Mantar is “nirabho niravair,” which according to my dad, translates more closely to “[act] without fear, [act] without hate.” I wear those words on a necklace every day to remind me that, first, I am a part of the cycle of the world—the oneness of everything—as is everyone else, from seashore to riverbank.

Second, these words—act without fear, act without hate—ground me in a personal ethic of care for all people and things. Like my dadaji and dadiji before me, I will do everything in my capacity to intervene in oppression in any way possible, with all of the tools available to me.

We close every prayer saying: “Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa Waheguru Ji Ke Fateh.” A basic English translation is “The Khalsa belongs to the Lord God! so the victory belongs to God!” but a deeper reading is essentially that we will only achieve victory by being pure of intent and deed—once we follow a good path, we can achieve “victory:” wellbeing and safety for all.

“Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa Waheguru Ji Ke Fateh” was first uttered by Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1699 when, upon becoming the Guru following his father’s martyrdom, he initiated the Khalsa. He meant it to be the greeting we use upon meeting another Sikh: we belong to each other and everything, victory is ours because we move in a good way to be one with everything.

This has gone on much longer than I anticipated, in part because I keep failing to find a natural end for a conversation we could be having for the rest of our lives.

In the spirit of closing, and with a great deal of love:

Free free Palestine, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.
Victory to the people, no matter the odds.
Victory to the people, with every tool at their disposal.
May the land know her wholeness again—may she know her people’s return.

⁸ Text and translation from Sikhiwiki.com, “Mool Mantar,” accessed November 2, 2024, https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Mool_Mantar

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Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal.

All of my love (accompanied by the screams we hold onto for special occasions),

Simi