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Soil, Seeds and *Sumud:* Art Initiatives and Environmental Colonialism in Palestine

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The cover image is a photo of an ancient holy tree at Sakiya*, Ein Qiniya, Palestine.* Sakiya *is a Palestinian art initiative that investigates and grafts the relation between agricultural traditions, contemporary art, and Palestine's ecology.*

Abstract

The occupation of Palestine by Israel is rarely studied from an environmental colonial perspective. Environmental issues, especially with the growing concerns over climate change, are instead discussed in the dualist framework of nature versus society, in which human civilization is separated from the environment. Consequently, the environmental landscape is frequently perceived as 'natural,' and therefore: apolitical. In addition, the blame for the effects of climate problems in ex-colonies in the MENA is often put on the mismanagement of local people. In this way, the wider socio-political, cultural, and economic structures embedded in the environment, are overlooked. This thesis argues that in the last decennia art projects in Palestine highlight these often-ignored connections. They counter Israeli environmental colonialism in the West Bank, and show that the deterioration of the Palestinian environment is not an unfortunate byproduct of settler colonialism, but a factor that influences the entire ecology and various aspects of Palestinian life. Through the revival of ecology, (agri)cultural traditions, and communities, the art projects expose Israeli colonial practices that destruct Palestinian ecology. Within a human and 'more-than-human' ecology, they revive cultural and communal ties that are constantly threatened by settler colonial erasure. The artists resist these Israeli environmental colonial practices through *sumud* ('steadfastness'), shifting away from the earlier symbolic display of landscape in Palestine, toward artistic interventions in the local ecology.

Contents

1. "To Say Goodbye, Is to Die a Little": Art, *Sumud,* and Environmental Colonialism

I hardly knew my brother-in-law's father, Anton. But right before he passed away, he looked at me and said, "To say goodbye, is to die a little." This was more than fifteen years ago, but his words never left me. I think about it every day as I maneuver in an absurd reality of life and death. To be Palestinian is to learn how to say goodbye over and over again – not just to people, but to places, trees, valleys and childhood foods.[1]

"To say goodbye, is to die a little" prompted Palestinian artist Vivien Sansour in 2014 to start *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library*. Spending her whole life bidding farewells to different aspects of Palestine, Sansour wanted to hold on to something that preserved Palestinian culture.[2] Since then, her agro-art initiative collects, preserves, and exchanges Palestinian heirloom seeds that are in danger of extinction because of Israeli colonial practices. Also referred to as 'environmental colonialism', Israel alters, confiscates, and erases Palestinian ecology through colonial practices.[3]

Sansour's library does not only agenda the impending disappearance of the material seeds, but also lost agricultural practices – such as seed sharing and communal harvesting –, distinctive local food production and the cultural heritage woven around them. "Heirloom seeds gave me the opportunity to salvage old stories", says Sansour.[4] She aims to expose Israeli environmental policies in the West Bank through the library, while also encouraging alternative art practices that are intended to protect the Palestinian ecosphere and inspire the Palestinian act of *sumud* (steadfastness or perseverance), a Palestinian cultural concept that is

[1] Vivien Sansour, "To Say Goodbye Is To Die A Little': Palestinian Farmers Struggle for Survival," *Sustainable Food Trust*, November 27, 2020, https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/news-views/palestinian-farmers-struggle-for-survival/.
[2] Sansour, "To Say Goodbye Is To Die A Little."
[3] Mary Lynn Stoll, "Environmental Colonialism," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Business Ethics and Society*, ed. Robert W. Kolb (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/sage-encyclopedia-of-business-ethics-and-society-2e/i15679.xml; Kelly Duquette, "Environmental Colonialism," *Scholarblogs,* January 2020, https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2020/01/21/environmental-colonialism/#:~:text=Environmental%20colonialism%20refers%20to%20the,able%20to%20alter%20native%20ecosystems; Robert H. Nelson, "Environmental Colonialism: "Saving" Africa from Africans," *The Independent Review* 8:1 (2003), pp. 65 – 86; Graham Huggan & Helen Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," *Interventions* 9:1 (2007), p. 1.
[4] Sansour, "To Say Goodbye Is To Die A Little."

based on the everyday nonviolent resilience of Palestinian human and more-than-human lives to Israeli occupation.[5]

One rarely considers plants, seeds, and insects as elements affected by the Israeli occupation of Palestine, let alone as components of an Israeli occupation strategy. In academic literature and political discourses, flora, fauna, and the landscape are typically thought to be unconcerned with human socio-political processes.[6] However, these 'other-than-human' lives such as water, waste, soil, and air, appear to be crucial to Israeli colonial practices in the West Bank.[7] Simultaneously, environmental issues are equally crucial to the Palestinian attempts at resistance, resiliency, and decolonization.

The term *sumud* is a Palestinian cultural concept. It is based on the everyday, nonviolent resilience of Palestinian human and more-than-human lives to Israeli occupation. "Rather than having a fixed definition, *sumud* is a continuum of goals and practices of resistance (…) It covers a wide range of cultural, ideological, and political practices and values."[8] It manifests itself in the (re)construction of homes despite the threat of demolition, planning activist initiatives, or in creating Palestinian cultural initiatives. *Sumud* is thus everyday resistance and resilience. It ranges from overt, but also unnoticed, and habit-based practices in everyday life, to open expressions of disobedience. The collective consciousness is one of struggle, both for the ability to simply exist on Palestinian territory and for the preservation of everything 'Palestinian."[9]

One of the ways in which these environmental issues are being broached and countered, is through art initiatives such as Sansour's seed library. Her objective is to protect and revive Palestinian ecology, to safeguard tangible and intangible cultural heritage ingrained in this environment, as well as to connect different forms of art and culture. This thesis analyzes two other art initiatives that invent and intervene in Palestine's ecology, creating new political and social realities: *Sakiya* by Sahar Qawasmi and Nida Sinnokrot and *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* by Khalil Rabah.

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[5] Runa Johannessen, "*Sumud:* Steadfastness as Everyday Resistance," *Interactive Encyclopedia of The Palestine Question,* Accessed September 3, 2023, https://www.palquest.org/en/highlight/33633/sumud.
[6] Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and The Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995). Jacques Pollini, "Bruno Latour and The Ontological Dissolution of Nature in the Social Sciences: A Critical Review," *Environmental Values* 22:1 (2013), p. 26.
[7] Harry Verhoeven, *Environmental Politics in the Middle East*: Local Struggles, Global Connections (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) p. 8.
[8] Runa Johannessen, "*Sumud:* Steadfastness as Everyday Resistance," *Interactive Encyclopedia of The Palestine Question,* Accessed September 3, 2023, https://www.palquest.org/en/highlight/33633/sumud.
[9] Johannessen, "*Sumud:* Steadfastness as Everyday Resistance."

Fig. 1. *Sakiya,* Ecological Farming Workshop with Om Sleiman Farm, 2022, Ein Qiniya. Photo Courtesy: *Sakiya*

This thesis argues that over the last two decennia, a new wave of ecological art has emerged in Palestine. It challenges Israeli environmental colonial practices through *sumud,* shifting away from the symbolic display of landscape, toward artistic interventions in the local ecology. It is an art form that denounces environmental colonial practices in the West Bank by developing a new epistemology, away from the reductionist nature - society binary, thus enabling us to grasp the environmental colonial practices at stake. The entanglement of human and more-than-human life is highlighted by these art initiatives, taking on an all-encompassing ecological perspective. They seek to restore human-non-human ecologies and communal ties as a form of ecological resistance and *sumud* against Israeli settler colonialism.

1.1 The MENA & Environmental Colonialism

To comprehend the context in which these art initiatives operate and to demonstrate the relevancy of this thesis, it is important to touch upon the broader concept of environmental colonialism and its intersection with settler colonialism, Indigenous Studies and the arts.

Environmental issues, especially with the growing concerns over climate change, are frequently thought of through a dualism of Nature/Society, in which human civilization is

divided from nature.[10] The environment and other-than-humans are often seen as 'natural' and therefore apolitical. However, humans have agency over nature. This is why Verhoeven stresses that it is crucial to look at the relation between nature and society not as a duplexity, but as an interaction. Environmental issues and more-than-humans are not only natural but embedded in and shaped by socio-political structures. Vice versa human society is also dependent on and embedded in the environment.[11]

In environmental literature on the MENA, this relation between the environment and larger socio-political and economic structures is often overlooked.[12] According to Verhoeven, "discussion of environmental issues still all too often tend to be framed in isolation from wider societal dialects and broader questions about authority, ideology, identity, legitimacy and power."[13] The region is often portrayed as being on the cusp of ecological collapse and as a place of vast and far-reaching degradation facing impending disaster. Local factors, such as inadequate environmental management by the local population or population growth, are frequently to blame, while global socio-politics, such as colonialism, are not factored in this representation.[14]

Consequentially, foreign colonial meddling in the past as well in the present is often justified by arguments of (ecological) 'backwardness' and futility.[15] As Rignall puts it, these 'narratives of crisis' have been used to support colonial resource expropriation and the suppression of populations whose livelihoods and ways of living pose a challenge to colonial authority.[16] These narratives continue nowadays, especially in the light of climate change and international development programs. The environment is thus not apolitical: (Neo-)colonial practices that destroy ecologies and the discursive (mis)use of 'nature' and 'development' to justify such actions, mutually reinforce each other.[17]

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[10] Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and The Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), p. 4.
[11] Verhoeven, *Environmental Politics in the Middle East*, pp. 8 – 9.
[12] Verhoeven, *Environmental Politics in the Middle East*, p. 2.
Clemens Hoffmann, "Environmental Determinism as Orientalism: The Geo-political Ecology of Crisis in The Middle East," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 31:1, p. 95.
[13] Verhoeven, *Environmental Politics in the Middle East*, p. 1.
[14] Diana K. Davis, "Imperialism, Orientalism, and the Environment in the Middle East: History, Policy, Power, and Practice," in *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Diana K. David and Edmund Burke III (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 1 – 2.
[15] Davis, "Imperialism, Orientalism, and the Environment in the Middle East," pp. 3 – 4.
[16] Karen Rignall, "Living Climate Change in the Middle East and North Africa," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51:4 (2019), p. 629.
[17] Hugan & Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," pp. 1 – 3.
Ruba Salih & Olaf Corry, "Displacing the Anthropocene: Colonisation, extinction and The Unruliness of Nature in Palestine," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5:1 (2022), p. 383.

How colonial practices have affected and altered local ecosystems is also referred to as 'Environmental Colonialism.'[18] Originally used to describe the 500-year European colonial rule that was marked by the exploitation of resources from formerly colonized countries, the term is now more frequently used to describe the environmental activities of current hegemonic powers, such as Canada and Australia in a settler-native context, but also the neoliberal interference of European countries in the Global South.

Environmental colonialism serves as an umbrella term for various appropriations that lead to environmental impacts such as diseases, the introduction of European crops and livestock, monocropping, agribusinesses, and other European agricultural practices, which harm established habitats, reduce soil fertility, or even, in countries in the MENA, result in desertification.[19] Neoliberal and capitalist processes are often the driving force behind these environmental colonial policies, in which the resources of the colonized are exploited for financial gains.[20] Simultaneously Whyte argues that "colonial-induced environmental changes altered the ecological conditions that supported Indigenous peoples' cultures, health, economies, and political self-determination."[21]

Approaching the environment as apolitical and environmental crises and climate change being driven by 'all' humans, instead of taking into account the colonial practices that have actually driven ecological changes, these colonial processes are being naturalized.[22] The tendency to approach Nature and Society as a binary results in a view of humanity as a collective and homogenous entity that has together caused environmental changes.[23] However, communities that are subjected to colonialism – and thus systematic injustices – are often held responsible for impacts of climate change on their local environments which they did not cause themselves. Simultaneously, they incur a disproportionate weight of environmental crises.

In this light, the artist Sansour poses that environmental changes in Palestine should be seen in the larger discourse of local Israeli colonialism and globalized international politics.

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[18] The difference between the 'environment' and the 'ecology' is that the environment is a singular thing – and an ecology is the system or constellation behind the environment.
Mary Lynn Stoll, "Environmental Colonialism."
Kelly Duquette, "Environmental Colonialism."
[19] Huggan & Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," p. 1.
[20] Huggan & Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," p. 1; Jason C. Young, "Environmental Colonialism, Digital Indigeneity, and The Politicization of Resilience," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4:2 (2021), p. 230.
[21] Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55:1-2 (2017), p. 154.
[22] Young, "Environmental Colonialism, Digital Indigeneity, and The Politicization of Resilience," p. 231.
[23] Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* pp. 78 – 81.

"We (Palestinians) often find ourselves lonely, if not misunderstood. How can the world that claims to care about sustainability and climate change, be so dismissive of social and political justice?"[24] Her words find an echo in the research of Huggan and Tiffin, who underline that due to environmental colonialism, the majority of the local population in Palestine is barred from their native subsistence methods, while also being excluded from the profits of their own environmental resources, producing environmental injustices.[25] Although Palestinians and Israelis share the same environment, the framework of environmental colonialism emphasizes that they have different levels of political autonomy, resource management, and capacity for climatic adaptation.

Fig. 2. Vivien Sansour, The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library Project, *Harvesting Radish*, 2022, Battir (Vivien Sansour on the left). Photo Courtesy: Vivien Sansour

1.2 The Nexus of Environmental and Settler Colonialism in the Palestinian Context

To understand Israeli environmental colonialism in its historic and current context, it is important to situate its discourse in the broader (settler) colonial context. The term 'colonial relations' is often seen as something that pertains to the hegemonic relations between the Global North and the Global South. However, Israeli environmental colonialism is intrinsically linked to these practices. As a result of Palestine being a British mandate state until 1947, the British set up the notorious Balfour Declaration (1917) in collaboration with

[24] Sansour, "To Say Goodbye Is To Die A Little."
[25] Huggan and Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," p. 2.

the European Zionist movement, which allowed the creation of a 'Jewish homeland' in Palestine.[26] This resulted in the forced expulsion and dispossession of Palestinians from 1947 until 1949 and the creation of the state Israel in 1948.[27] Sasa argues that these Zionists should be perceived as European colonialists and therefore fall under the Western colonial discourse since the Zionist movement found its roots in Europe and thus serves as an European ideology and movement.[28] Israeli environmental colonialism is intrinsically linked to European notions of colonialism, since they both approach non-Western societies as inferior, mismanage their land and resources, justifying the exploitation and dispossession of these regions by universalizing capitalism (and later neoliberalism) as an economic structure.[29]

Israeli – and thus, Zionist – environmental colonialism cannot be seen separately from the local 'settler-colonial' context.[30] Settler colonialism involves the direct occupation of land and the permanent settlement of colonialists in the occupied territories.[31] Although colonialism and settler colonialism are both "premised on an assumed entitlement to Indigenous land," Liboiron argues that settler colonialism is distinguishable by its usually *genocidal* character.[32] Sasa argues that "in staking claim to the land of the entire colony, perpetually, settler colonialism seeks to obliterate not only Indigenous cultures, socioeconomic systems, and histories, but ultimately, peoples themselves."[33] Veracini and Wolfe argue that other colonial structures attempt to exercise control over indigenous

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[26] Salman Abu Sitta, "The Denied Inheritance: Palestinian Land Ownership in Beer Sheba," in *Greenwashing Apartheid: The Jewish National Fund's Environmental Cover Up*, eds. Jesse Benjamin, M.B. Levy, S. Kershnar & M. Sahibzada (Oakland: International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network, 2021), p. 47.
[27] See for a more detailed explanation:
Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance* (London: Profile Books, 2020); Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2006).
[28] Ghada Sasa, "Oppressive Pines: Uprooting Israeli Green Colonialism and Implanting Palestinian A'wna," *Politics* (2022), p. 220.
[29] Sasa, "Oppressive Pines," p. 221; Neil Caplan, "Zionism: Attitudes and Policies," in *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, ed. Philip Mattar (New York: Facts on File), pp. 550 – 551.
[30] For a detailed explanation of settler colonialism, see:
Lorenzo Veracini, "Settler Colonialism: Career of a Concept," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41:2, pp. 313 – 333; Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and The Elimination of The Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8:4, pp. 387 – 409.
On settler colonialism in Palestine, see:
Lorenzo Veracini, "The Other Shift: Settler Colonialism, Israel, and The Occupation," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 42 (2013), pp. 26 – 42.
Nadim N. Rouhana & Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, "Settler-Colonial Citizenship: Conceptualizing the Relationship Between Israel and Its Palestinian Citizens," *Settler Colonial Studies* 5 (2015), pp. 205 – 225.
Omar Jabary Salamanca, Qato Mezna, Rabie Kareem & Samour Sobhi, "Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2:1 (2013), pp. 1 – 8.
[31] Elia Zureik, "Introduction," in *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine: Population, Territory, and Power*, eds. Elia Zureik, David Lyon & Yasmeen Abu-Laban (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 4.
[32] Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2021), p. 9.
[33] Sasa, "Oppressive Pines," p. 221.

populations while doing so from a metropolitan center, whereas settler colonialism consists of "efforts to erase indigenous peoples for the purpose of replacing them with another socio-political body."[34] In the case of Palestine, Pappé and Khalidi even go as far as to call it an 'ethnic cleansing' of Palestinians – humans, more-than-humans, cultural heritage, local knowledge and other life forms –.[35]

Based on Said's 'Traveling Theory' it should be noted that "settler colonialism is a borrowed or 'transit' metaphor from Indigenous colonization and it illuminates but also not quite captures the situation' in Palestine."[36] In recent years, other settler colonial states, such as Canada and Australia, have looked for ways to rectify injustices through recognition and reconciliation – regardless of whether they are helping or not –. Although they are fragile assurances of inclusion and sidestep questions on actual reparation, compensation, and justice, Abu-Lughod argues that it is different from the Palestinian situation where these (symbolic) gestures are entirely absent.[37]

In this light, some Palestinian scholars feel discomfort using the term and theory of 'settler colonialism' since it produces the antagonism of 'Indigenous.'[38] As Fanon argues, "it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence."[39] Calling local people 'indigenous' can be seen as an essentializing and racializing instrument. It indicates that knowledge is contained within the given community, unaffected by external factors.[40] Therefore, some scholars argue that, although the term 'indigenous' is problematic, Palestinian history should be studied from an Indigenous Studies *perspective*. "While the settler-colonial analysis is fitting for the study of Zionism as an ideology and its history, frameworks that grew out of Indigenous studies are a more fitting political and academic home for the study of Palestinian history."[41] All in all, it should be kept in mind that the

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[34] Veracini, "The Other Shift," p. 27; Zoe Todd, "Commentary: The Environmental Anthropology of Settler Colonialism, Part I," *Engagement*, April 11, 2017, https://aesengagement.wordpress.com/2017/04/11/commentary-the-environmental-anthropology-of-settler-colonialism-part-i/.
[35] Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine,* p. 9; Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, p. 3.
[36] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Imagining Palestine's Alter-Natives: Settler Colonialism and Museum Politics," *Critical* Inquiry 47 (2020), pp. 4 – 5.
[37] Abu-Lughod, "Imagining Palestine's Alter-Natives," p. 12.
Vittorio Bufacchi, "Colonialism, Injustice, and Arbitrariness," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 48:2 (2017), p. 197.
[38] Abu-Lughod, "Imagining Palestine's Alter-Natives," p. 13; Edward Said, *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 227.
[39] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 36.
[40] Lana Tatour, "The Culturalisation of Indigeneity: the Palestinian-Bedouin of the Naqab and Indigenous Rights," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 23:10, p. 1570.
[41] Rana Barakat, "Writing/Righting Palestine Studies: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty and Resisting the Ghost(s) of History," *Settler Colonial Studies* 8:3 (2018), p. 349.

Israeli settler state is what makes Palestinians indigenous, not their cultural practices or 'traditional' way of living.[42]

Approaching Israeli settler colonialism from the perspectives of the artists themselves, focusing more on environmental colonialism from an 'Indigenous' framework, this thesis moves away from the settler colonialist studies' one-sided focus on the Israeli-Zionist ideology and history. The analysis of these art initiatives also shows that the local people are not mere victims without agency, but rather counter these colonial practices in their own ways. Besides, the environmental colonial framework moves beyond the settler-native dialectic and the narrowed focus on the human aspects of settler colonialism, also incorporating more-than-human and non-human lives. Palestinian ecology is not apolitical, nor unchanged and timeless. Looking at Israeli occupation from an environmental colonial perspective shows the struggle for self-determination and to be recognized *not* as Indigenous people, but as a national authority.

1.3 The Intersection of Environmental Colonialism and the Arts

Although a rising body of literature is looking at how the Palestinian environment is involved in settler colonial practices[43], environmental colonialism within the Israeli settler context has not been researched extensively, especially not in relation to the arts. A few scholars have written about the impact of environmental colonialism on Palestine's ecology, human and more-than-human lives.[44]

Simultaneously, research on ecological art has been limited in Palestine, especially within an (environmental) colonial context.[45] Studies on Palestinian art generally focus on

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[42] Therefore, although the term 'indigenous' is sometimes used, the term 'local' is preferred in this thesis.
[43] For example by scholars such as Veracini, Wolfe, Pappe and Whyte, as referenced in the previous section.
[44] Irus Braverman, "Environmental Justice, Settler Colonialism, and More-Than-Humans in The Occupied West Bank: An Introduction," *Environment and Planning E* 4:1 (2021), pp. 3 – 27; Ghada Sasa, "Oppressive Pines: Uprooting Israeli Green Colonialism and Implanting Palestinian A'wna," *Politics* (2022), pp. 219 – 235; Stephen Gasteyer, Jad Isaac, Jane Hillal & Sean Walsh, "Water Grabbing in Colonial Perspective: Land and Water in Israel/Palestine," *Water Alternatives* 5:2 (2012), pp. 450 – 468; Michael Mason, Mark Zeitoun & Ziad Mimi, "Compounding Vulnerability: Impacts of Climate Change on Palestinians in Gaza and The West Bank," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41:3 (2012), pp. 38 – 53; Jason C. Young, "Environmental Colonialism, Digital Indigeneity, and The Politicization of Resilience," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4:2 (2021), pp. 230 – 251.
[45] There has been written on the literature, poetry, photography, colonialism and the environment by: Robert Spencer, "Ecocriticism in the Colonial Present: The Politics of Dwelling in Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks: Notes on A Vanishing Landscape,*" 13:1 (2010), pp. 33 – 54; Hella Bloom Cohen, "Poetry, Palestine, and Posthumanism," *Postcolonial Studies* 25:3 (2022), pp. 361 – 379; Philip Dickinson, "Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks* and the Concrete Ecology of Settlement," *Interventions* 20:2 (2018), pp. 294 – 307; Edna Barromi-Perlman, "Visions of Landscape Photography in Palestine and Israel," *Landscape Research* 45:5 (2020), pp. 564 – 582; Lila Abu-Lughod, "Imagining Palestine's Alter-Natives: Settler Colonialism and Museum Politics," *Critical Inquiry* 47 (2020), pp. 1 – 27.

nationalism, resistance, and graffiti.[46] Moving away from the Palestinian context, there are some articles and books that discuss the linkage between political ecology and the arts, but often in terms of climate change, or from a non-colonial perspective.[47]

By intersecting environmental colonialism and the arts, this thesis aims to surpass the human dialectic of settler-native and focuses on the multifaceted ecology of the 'everyday.' As Braverman argues, these alternatives "enable the emergence of a more nuanced, dynamic, and even hopeful ecological imaginary that focuses on dignity, recognition and *sumud*."[48] Contemporary Palestinian art can help us think about environmental challenges in a caring and constructive way. It understands nature from a socio-political and cultural perspective to critically expose and oppose Israeli environmental colonialism.

The three art initiatives analyzed in this thesis use an ecological lens to mobilize methods that expose and undermine environmental colonial practices in the West Bank. They strive to do more than just exhibiting a viewer-object encounter; they also investigate, criticize, invent, and intervene in Palestinian life. The art initiatives examined illuminate the effects, connections, and disruptions of environmental colonialism on human and more-than-human lives and actually refuse and counter them. Simultaneously, they refute and question some of the conventional axioms of Western art and art history and move away from earlier Palestinian art practices.

1.4 Methodology

The primary method of this research is the close reading of the art initiatives to understand the environmental colonial field they are interacting with, moving in and trying to undermine. This close reading is based on the visual presentation and hermeneutical aspect of these art

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[46] See for example:
Bashir Makhoul & Gordon Hon, *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); C. Larkin, "Jerusalem's Separation Wall and Global Message Board: Graffiti, Murals, and the Art of Sumud," *The Arab Studies Journal* 22:1 (2014), pp. 134 – 169; D.I. Hanauer, "The Discursive Construction of the Separation Wall at Abu Dis: Graffiti as Political Discourse," *Journal of Language and Politics* 10:3 (2011), pp. 301 – 321; Dana Hasan & Sahera Bleibleh, "The Everyday Art of Resistance: Interpreting "*Resistancescapes"* Against Urban Violence in Palestine," *Political Geography* 101 (2023), pp. 1 – 11; Chiara de Cesari, *Heritage and the Cultural Struggle for Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Chiara de Cesari, "Anticipatory Representation: Building the Palestinian Nation(-State) Through Artistic Performance," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12:1 (2012), pp. 82 – 100.

[47] See for example:
Eray Çayli, "Contemporary Art and The Geopolitics of Extractivism in Turkey's Kurdistan," *Transactions of The Institute of British Geographers* 46 (2021), pp. 929 – 943; Selina Springett, "Art-making for Political Ecology: Practice, Poetics and Activism Through Enchantment," *Continuum* 36:3 (2022), pp. 478 – 494; T.J.Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (London: Sternberg Press, 2016); Barnaby Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines*: Contemporary Art & Climate Crisis (Manchester: Gaia Project Press, 2019).

[48] Braverman, "Environmental Justice," p. 6.

projects, but even more so on their socio-political context and direct ecological surroundings. To understand these art initiatives, it is crucial to analyze their ideas and motivations in the context of the local political ecology and the overarching theme of Israeli environmental colonialism.

I analyzed three art initiatives situated in the West Bank: *Sakiya* by Sahar Qawasmi and Nida Sinnokrot*, The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library* by Vivien Sansour and *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* by Khalil Rabah. There are numerous Palestinian artists, historically and currently, that have used the 'landscape' or the environment in their art through the depiction of Palestinian natural symbols, often in a nationalistic framework. This thesis moves away from the 'symbolic' and 'nationalistic' meaning of the environment and the single axis of viewer-object display. Therefore, I refer to the framework of 'relational art,' to show how these art initiatives criticize, interact with and intervene in their direct surroundings. Rather than an artistic work set in a specific time and space, these art projects are part of Palestinian everyday life.

For the analysis, I contacted various curators and art journalists that have previously covered the Palestinian art scene to inquire what they qualified to be works of art that addressed the Palestinian ecology. Based on their suggestions and my own research, I contacted multiple artists and travelled to Palestine in March 2023 to conduct fieldwork. I did a walking-based interview with Sahar Qawasmi in which she meanwhile showed me around *Sakiya*. I also visited *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library* by Vivien Sansour in Battir. Since *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* by Khalil Rabah is a hybrid and semi-fictional museum, I was not able to 'visit' this art initiative. I consulted the museum's website, bulletins, and several online interviews with Khalil Rabah.

During my visit, I learned a lot about the special place 'the land' takes in Palestinian life. My conversations with various artists helped me comprehend the significance of Palestine's ecology to its people. By being physically present at *Sakiya* and *The Heirloom Seed Library* I understood more fully how these projects were embedded in their natural surroundings. They showed me how crucial it is for Palestinians to preserve this environment, that is not only 'landscape', but also ingrained customs, (in)tangible heritage and more-than-human lives.

After my field visit, I related the fieldwork to secondary sources of literature, using an interdisciplinary approach to examine the ecological and political context of these art initiatives and place them in the broader academic debate. Background material relevant to the three cases was selected, read, and analyzed during the research process. I also used

primary sources, such as the different art works related to the art projects, especially in the case of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*, but also interviews and articles, lectures, and talks by the artists discussed.

In my analysis of these art works I use the term 'art' in the broadest sense of the word, mostly based on what these artists themselves considered as 'art'. I am more engaged with examining its sociopolitical significance and content than debating what constitutes as 'art'. By using the definitions these Palestinian artists gave themselves to the term 'art,' I also try to undermine the Eurocentric doctrine in the art world, which will be touched upon in the first chapter.

1.5 Limitations

There are several limitations to this thesis that need to be considered. Firstly, I am not a native Palestinian, so my approach will be different from somebody native to the Palestinian West Bank. Secondly, the research on primary and secondary literature was in English, since my Arabic is not sufficient. Thirdly, I delimited my research for practical reasons to the occupied West Bank. For future research, it would be interesting to also analyze comparable projects from the Golan Heights, Gaza, and the Palestinian diaspora.

Concomitantly, the Golan Heights, Gaza, the West Bank and Palestinians in Israel all are subjected to different narratives of environmental colonialism. To nuance the research, it is studied within the locality of the West Bank. Additionally, although this thesis focuses primarily on the environmental colonial dialectic between Israel and the West Bank, the tendencies *within* Palestine, such as urban-rural, Bedouin-farmer, and gender, should not be overlooked.

Lastly, although this thesis discusses both human and more-than-human lives, it focuses primarily on trees, plants, seeds, water, soil and land. Animals, insects, bacteria, concrete, waste, desertification, pollution, and other more-than-human types are left out of the analysis or only briefly touched upon. In the case of human lives, I researched farmers and agricultural practices, but it should be remembered that Bedouins are also a significant component of Palestine's ecology, and that Israeli occupation severely restricts their practices and mobility. There are Palestinian artists that touch upon these issues, but more so in installation art or documentary.[49] Furthermore, discussing *all* forms of human and more-than-

[49] For non-human lives, see:
Basel Abbas & Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *And Yet My Mask is Powerful*, 2016, Video Installation; Yara Saqfalhait, *Subterrain Cavities*, 2017, Graphic Design Book; RIWAQ, *RIWAQ's 50 Villages*, 1994 – 2004, Architectural

human lives would go beyond the scope of this thesis. It thus not give a complete image on the Palestinian art scene, Palestine's ecology and environmental colonial practices, but attempts to analyze a part of it.

The first chapter will elaborate on the use and meaning of 'landscape' within the Palestinian art scene from the Nakba (1948) until now and will elaborate on the intersection of the artworks and the concept of 'relational art'. The second chapter analyzes how *Sakiya* aims to counter the commodification of the Palestinian rural lands, safeguard Canaanite cultural heritage embedded in Palestine's ecology and use performance art to raise public awareness of environmental injustices and resource exploitation. The third chapter explores the cultural and political meaning of the olive tree in *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* and how its founder, Khalil Rabah, mocks Western art institutions and 'green colonial' Israeli narrative of 'Making the Desert Bloom'. The last chapter discusses *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library* by Vivien Sansour, the importance of cultural heritage through food production, and the preservation of Palestinian communal agricultural practices that are threatened in the light of Israeli environmental colonialist practices.

2. From Landscape as Symbolism to Landscape as Ecology: Representation and Intervention in Palestinian Arts

2.1 Preserving, Inventing and Intervening Through 'Relational Art'

When in Palestine, I reckoned that the artists I analyzed and spoken to had a broader definition of what could be defined as art than the traditional Western art historical canon. When asking Sahar Qawasmi, the founder of *Sakiya*, about this she said that art should be understood in the broader sense of the word: Anything that is made can be considered a type of art, even food and agricultural production. Narrow traditional definitions limit artists in their work. She also noted that Palestinian artists are eschewing the term 'art' because they disagree with its definitions and consider it to be restrictive and conservative.[50]

Research Project; Inas Halabi, *We Have Always Known the Wind's Direction*, 2019 – 2020, Video Installation; Khalid Jarrar, *If I Don't Steal Your Home Someone Else Will Steal It,* 2021, Performance Artwork.
For more-than-humans, see:
Amer Shomali, *The Wanted 18,* 2011, Documentary; Jumana Manna, *Foragers*, 2022, Documentary; Nidal Abu Dyab, *Storm in the Selwan Valley,* 2010, Film; Mohammed Al Hawajri, *The Cactus Borders*, 2009, Film.

[50] Personal interview with Sahar Qawasmi at *Sakiya*, March 25, 2023.

The three art initiatives analyzed in this thesis undermine the narrowed definitions of the traditional art historical canon. Linda Tuhiwai Smith poses that during the colonial era and through imperialism European culture was being universalized and the West still views itself as the center and arbiter of what is considered 'valid' or 'real' culture. Thus, often reproduced by western cultural institutions, Western art, such as painting and sculpture, was demarcated as 'fine arts' or 'real culture' while all other forms of art often referred to as 'traditional,' 'crafts,' or 'folklore cultural production'.[51] The art initiatives in this thesis move away from this narrow definition, incorporating agricultural, food production and local cultural myths and 'folklore' practices also as artforms.

Simultaneously, these art initiatives also represent a new wave of artistic practice in Palestine. According to de Cesari, there has been a turn in the Palestinian art scene in which artists do not just want to portray the social and political situation, but also want to build new social and political arrangements.[52] Drawing back on the assumptions of art critic Hal Foster, De Cesari makes the case that it is linked to contemporary ideas of the artist as ethnographer, producing a more intersubjective research that transcends "the boundaries of representation, invention and intervention."[53] Nicolas Bourriaud has defined this as 'relational art,' in which the artist examines his art within its social contact and aims to build new social and political realities. Art, in this sense, is more so an 'activity' in which the development of social interaction, possible communities and alternative societies is central to the artwork.[54] This thesis argues that the three analyzed art initiatives do not only want to represent the Palestinian socio-political and environmental situation, but also to intervene and to invent new ways to create a state or a form of coherency in a stateless and fragmented situation. Simultaneously it claims back the Palestinian environment and ecology through invention, intervention and preservation in a continuous state of colonial occupation.

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[51] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2021), pp. 72 – 73.
Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World, Inc. On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2004), p. 175.
James Elkin, *Stories of Art* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), p. 114.
[52] Chiara De Cesari, "Anticipatory Representation: Building the Palestinian Nation(-State) Through Artistic Performance," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12:1 (2012), p. 82.
[53] Chiara De Cesari, "Anticipatory Representation," p. 84.
[54] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthethics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).

2.2 A Brief Palestinian Art History: From Symbolism to Intervention

There must be briefly drawn upon the importance of the Palestinian land and landscape in the Palestinian art, to understand the art initiatives in their historical and contemporary context.[55] For the sake of this thesis, I will discuss the depiction of land and landscape in the Palestinian art scene after the Nakba in 1948. It should be kept in mind, however, that there was already a long history of art before then, which often seems to be forgotten in the Western canon in Palestinian art, with some articles even arguing that Palestinian art 'started' after 1948.[56]

After the Nakba, Zionist settlers attempted to erase Palestinian history by fabricating an exclusive new 'Israeli' national narrative that excluded Palestinians. "The whole cultural heritage was buried in 1948 and the Palestinian narrative was silenced as its traces were renamed or deleted."[57] This also resulted in Palestinian art being destroyed and looted by the Israeli authorities, which is still continuing today.[58] Since then, it has been difficult, almost impossible, to build, maintain and archive Palestinian cultural production, especially those that are of a material kind, due to the history of eviction and expulsion.[59] Rawan Sharaf, a curator who set up the archiving project *YURA – Palestinian Visual Arts Resources*, states on his website: "Over the past 74 years, Palestinian cultural productions and heritage, whether tangible or intangible, have been exposed to very harsh acts of systematic looting, dispossession, and destruction by the Zionist machine of aggression."[60] We will see this with the art initiatives analyzed in this thesis as well: The constant threat of dispossession, confiscation and the additional loss of cultural and social ties to the land, make it an everyday challenge for these artists to preserve and survive.

Right after the Nakba, Palestinian art got assimilated with new thematic focuses such as trauma, exile, rootedness and displacement as well as idealized images of the homeland.[61]

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[55] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to give a full overview of the Palestinian art scene, see therefore:
Gannit Ankori, *Palestinian Art* (London: Reaktion Books LTD, 2006).
Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (Beirut: Saqi Books, 2009).

[56] Milicent Fullmer, "Palestinian Art: Overview of Palestinian Art & History," *Copley Library: University of San Diego*, Last Updated August 30, 2022, https://libguides.sandiego.edu/palart; Samar Kadi, "How Palestinian Art Evolved Under Siege," *The Arab Weekly,* December 5, 2019, https://thearabweekly.com/how-palestinian-art-evolved-under-siege; Aline Khoury, "Sotheby's / Palestinian Art in the Aftermath of War," *Abed Abdi*, April 18, 2019, https://abedabdi.com/reviews/palestinian-art-in-the-aftermath-of-war/.

[57] Boullata, *Palestinian Art,* p. 101.

[58] رنا عناني، "تاريخ فن بلا فن،" موءسسة الدراسات الفلسطينية (٢٠٢٢)، ١٦٥ – ١٨٤، https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/mdf-articles/165-184.pdf.; Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art,* p. 27.

[59] Nicola Gray, "Qalandiya International I and II: Cultural Resistance in a Palestinian Biennale," *Third Text* (2015), p. 170.

[60] Rawan Sharaf, "YURA – Palestinian Visual Art Resources," *This Week in Palestine*, Accessed March 10, 2023, https://thisweekinpalestine.com/yura-palestinian-visual-art-resources/.

[61] Luisa K. Gandolfo, "Representations of Conflict: Images of War, Resistance, and Identity," *Radical History Review* (201), p. 48.

The establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1960s impacted these depictions. Many well-known artists affiliated with the PLO and started to use more nationalistic and sometimes militant themes in their art that often highlighted different aspects of the 'Palestinian' land and landscape. Nationalist imagery became more prominent with the arrival of the PLO. Artists wanted to move past the depiction of trauma, exile, loss and misery which could be seen as weakness or victimization, and instead wanted more powerful images and themes, depicting Palestinians as youthful and vigorous fighters. They used different land symbols, such as olive trees, traditional agricultural practices, and the Palestinian farmer, to show the Palestinian connection to the land.[62] The rural areas of Palestine were heavily highlighted in these nationalist artistic representations, emphasizing the tangible ties that Palestinians had to their (home)land.[63]

Fig. 3. Abdel Rahman Al Muzain, *March With Determination*, 1980.

[62] Boullata, *Palestinian Art,* p. 291.
[63] Ankori, *Palestinian Art,* p. 55.

The events in 1967 intensified this nationalistic depiction of the landscape. With the Six Day War and the following occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, 'Palestine' got entirely wiped of the map. Political symbolism in the arts became increasingly important as a means of resistance and as a tool for mobilizing the masses, acting as a "source of national pride and self-reassurance."[64] Therefore, the assertation of the Palestinian national identity got even more apparent in the arts through emphasizing the collective land and past by depicting land and soil related themes, such as vegetation, landscape, local archeological sites but also more cultural elements such as Palestinian embroidery and Arab language. The landscape as national symbol became crucial in the Palestinian art.[65]

Although the nationalistic symbolism were still important in the Palestinian art scene, in the 1990s the art scene saw a noticeable shift as a result of the launching of art programs at various institutions, the rise of different (cultural) NGOs and a new vigor that entered the cultural scene as a result of the peace negotiations and following possibility of a Palestinian state after the Oslo Peace Accords (1993).[66] Consequently, artists were still engaged in the political situation of Palestine, but started to use other styles, techniques and moved away from the usual iconography and common symbols that represented Palestinian identity. They began to employ photography and (video) installations more as new subjects, mediums and techniques were explored. It also started the launch of new initiatives, residencies and biennales in Palestine.[67]

In this light, nowadays the landscape is still important in Palestinian art but this thesis argues that they move from the landscape as symbol to the landscape as ecology. There is a shift in the aesthetic representation that moves beyond the symbolic and nationalistic framework of the landscape, showing the connection to the land through the relational artistic forms of preserving, inventing, and intervening. This is twofold: On the on the one hand these artists expose different forms of Israeli environmental colonialism, showing that colonial

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[64] Boullata, *Palestinian Art,* p. 291.
For the general influence of the Israeli occupation on the Palestinian art scene, see next to Boullata and Ankori: Joseph Massad, "Permission to Paint: Palestinian Art and the Colonial Encounter," *Art Journal* 66 (2007), pp. 126 – 133; Tina Sherwell, "Reflections on the Transformation of Palestinian Art," *IEMed. QM 32: Art and Creativity: Bridges of International Diaologue*, Accessed April 20, 2023, pp. 66 -67;
رنا عناني، "تاريخ فن بلا فن،" موءسسة الدراسات الفلسطينية (٢٠٢٢)، ١٦٥ – ١٨٤، https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/mdf-articles/165-184.pdf
[65] Boullata, *Palestinian Art,* p. 291.
[66] Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 292; Sherwell, "Reflections on the Transformation of Palestinian Art," p. 64.
[67] Sherwell, "Reflections on the Transformation of Palestinian Art," p. 66.; Steve Sabella, "Reconsidering the Value of Palestinian Art and Its Journey Into The Art Market," *Reviews* (2009), p. 90, https://hanizurob.com/uploads/2019/06/Contemporary-Practices-Reconsidering-The-Value-Of-Palestinian-Art-&-Its-Journey-Into-The-Art-Market-Part-1-reviews-2010.pdf.

interventions in one's ecology also have sociopolitical and economic consequences and vice versa. On the other hand, a new light is being shed on the entanglement of Palestinian nature and people that relies not on symbolic forms of art but showing that the connection is genuine and deeply rooted in the landscape by preserving and reviving the Palestinian ecology and engaging in community-based cultural productions. This shows that the art is very relational: It is not solely about representing the Palestinian perspective, but also about invention and intervention.

3. *Sakiya*, the Commodification of Land and the Revival of Heritage

Fig. 4. *Sakiya Lower House*. 2022, Ein Qiniya. Photo Courtesy: *Sakiya*

3.1 *Sumud* in the Hills of *Sakiya*

While taking a break from the steep walk up a pathway around the lands of *Sakiya*, Sahar Qawasmi, its director, stands still at an enormous tree. The tree trunk is as thick as six people and has 12 huge branches that fan out in the air. From here we can see the village of Ein Qiniya, down in the valley. The town owes its name to its numerous natural springs, which gave rise to a wide variety of flora, birds, and animals. Natural resources abound in the area and its history may be traced back to the Roman era according to local archeological findings.

Lushed away in greenery and olive trees are the Ottoman buildings of *Sakiya*. Sahar Qawasmi and Nida Sinnokrot set up this cultural initiative, aiming to bring back the communal feeling and attachment to the land through the revival of cultural heritage and local agricultural practices that have been threatened by Israeli occupation. Rather than calling it an art installation or school, it serves a multifunctional purpose: It is an art residency, an ecological research hub and a farm where different talks, walks and performance art are hosted. They seek to reinterpret the relationship between the production of knowledge, the 'commons,' and Israeli environmental colonialism by studying local agrarian traditions and traditional methods of self-sufficiency, fusing them with contemporary art and ecological practices.

The first part of *Sakiya* was set up in 2016 during the *Qalandiya International III Biennial*, for which *Sakiya* made a community garden to foster and revive sustainable agricultural methods. In 2018, the A.M. Qattan Foundation awarded *Sakiya* funds for the establishment of *Sakiya* in the village of Ein Qiniya, 7 kilometers from Ramallah.[68] This foundation, established in 1998, financially supports numerous cultural organizations, programs, and artists in Palestine. Most of the funding comes from family endowments. Boullata argues that the foundation has had a significant impact on the Palestinian cultural landscape and encouraged a variety of art forms and genres since the 2000s, "surveying the emergence of a new generation of Palestinian artists."[69]

This chapter describes the relationship between the - natural and unnatural – environment of Sakiya, Palestinian cultural traditions and the impact of environmental colonial practices on Palestinian agriculture and resulting values attached to the land. It will further elaborate on how *Sakiya* acts as *sumud* ('steadfastness,' 'staying put'), by offering alternative and sustainable ways to co-counter these colonial tendencies.

3.2 Myths, Wells and Springs – The Cultural Value of Land Around *Sakiya*

The ancient tree where we pause during our *Sakiya* tour is one of the two holy trees on the site of *Sakiya.* It is part of the *Maqam Abu El-Ainain*, an old shrine from the Ayyubid period. Although it is mostly in ruins, one can still see its original architectural plan. It consists of two rooms: One with a cave-like design and the other in the form of an *Iwan*, a dome-shaped space with three walls and one open side. A myth concerning a woman who lived in these

[68] "Nida Sinnokrot's *Sakiya* Receives A.M. Qattan Foundation Funding," *Art Culture Technology*, accessed September 10, 2023, http://act.mit.edu/2018/06/nida-sinnokrots-sakiya-receives-a-m-qattan-foundation-funding/.
[69] Kamal Boullata, "Art Under the Siege," *Journal of Palestine* Studies 33:4 (2004), p. 73.

hills is connected to the shrine. Until recently, people from nearby villages would pay tribute to her by praying and dancing around the shrine.

Sacred spaces are common in the Palestinian landscape; most of the villages have an archaic shrine or spring with a mythical story attached to it.[70] Different villages are known for different myths and socio-cultural characteristics. The legends often revolved around a saint, a religious or mythical person. Therefore, each shrine or tomb has specific songs and stories attached to them.[71] In the past, pilgrimages were often undertaken to shrines and tombs like *Maqam Abu el-Ainain* at *Sakiya* to pay tribute to the legends and spiritual meanings attached to these lands. Most of them had a *Wali*, a patron saint, to whom the local people would turn for assistance in everyday matters. Nowadays, most of them have been deliberately demolished or have fallen into ruin. There are many factors contributing to the disappearance of these places and their traditions, but, settler colonialist practices by the occupational forces are at the root of most causes.

In describing the importance of these holy sites for Palestinian culture, it should be emphasized that the historical ethnic diversity of Palestine is very rich. The multiple and intertwined stories that are connected to these sites find their roots in different ethnicities and cultures such as Biblical, Roman, Mamluk or Abbuyid. This diverse ethnical history and the myths attached to it got gradually interwoven with Palestinian rural life.[72] This also means that Biblical places in Palestine are just as important for Jewish, Christian and Muslim Palestinians, as well as for the Palestinian in general. In recent decades, this shared culture has been systematically denied by Israel - adopting the Biblical archaeology as their own legacy and separating the Palestinians from their cultural past, portraying them as 'the other'.[73]

The interwovenness of the (built or natural) landscape with socio-cultural meanings and traditions is not only important as a shared identity but is also a major force in tying identity to land claim.[74] This connection is key for indigenous people as well as settlers; it is magnified under the conditions of settler colonialism. It is a relationship that *Sakiya* is trying to revive, as we will see in the next paragraphs. Its founders, Qawasmi and Sinnokrot, have

[70] Salim Tamari, "Lepers, Lunatics and Saints: The Nativist Ethnography of Tawfiq Canaan and his Jerusalem Circle," *Mountains Against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (2009), p. 96.
[71] Ali Qleibo, "Land of Our Ancestors," *This Week in Palestine*, Issue 295, November 2022, https://thisweekinpalestine.com/land-of-our-ancestors/.
[72] Qleibo, "Land of Our Ancestors."
[73] Qleibo, "Land of Our Ancestors."
[74] Federico Lenzerini, "Cultural Identity, Human Rights, and Repatriation of Cultural Heritage of Indigenous Peoples," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23:1 (2016), pp. 128 – 130.

restored the old spring, the *Iwan,* and the old Roman pond that holds water for the local habitat, with the help and agrarian and artisanal knowledge of the people from Ein Qiniya.

3.3 The Revival of (Agri)cultural Traditions and Knowledge at *Sakiya*

In its mission statement, *Sakyia* stresses that the loss of Palestinian territory due to Israel's occupation is not just measured in terms of lost land but also in terms of lost knowledge, culture, traditions and communal feelings.[75] Simultaneously, they want to reimagine the old mythologies attached to these lands and form them into new mythologies, inspiring people to think about their connection to the land.[76]

To achieve this, neighboring farmers were invited to established a multitude of gardens at the *Sakiya* site, all with different architectural, historical, and environmental qualities. The gardens function as 'classrooms', where learning, reading and discussion groups and communal activities such as planting and cooking are being held. Central to *Sakiya* is pedagogy: It derives its spirit from "the ancient Greek conception of a garden or olive grove as a site of knowledge gathering and sharing; a site of experimentation, renovation and cultivation that prioritizes actors otherwise often marginalized from the public cultural space."[77] *Sakiya* reframes the ancient Palestinian relationship to the land, one increasingly threatened by the twin forces of occupation and neoliberalism.

One of the art programs performed in this context is *Rewilding Pedagogy*, a symposium at *Sakiya* in 2019 by scientists and artists Omar Tesdell, Jumana Emil Abboud and Shela Sheikh. The program was focused on "the act of 're-wilding' as its point of departure – re-wilding the soil from the ravages of monoculture agriculture, and re-wilding local knowledge cultures from colonization and encroaching neoliberalism."[78] Shela Sheikh moderated a discussion on the colonial legacies of botanical classification, featuring the participation of local academics and farmers. The ecology of *Sakiya*'s site and permaculture farm was explored as an ecological conversation, based on Omar Tesdell's agro-ecological survey of the site. The program was not so much focused on innovation, as on reframing the ancient relationship to the land.

In the context of the research question of this thesis, the form and method of *Sakiya*'s program is particularly important. In *Rewilding Pedagogy,* the classrooms are inspired by the

[75] "Rewilding Pedagogy," *Sakiya,* accessed May 23, 2023, https://sakiya.org/.
[76] Nida Sinnokrot, "Rewilding (at) Sakiya," *Journal of Architectural Education* 76:2 (2022), p. 24.
[77] Shela Sheikh, "Sakiya: Art/Science/Agriculture, vol. 01," *Visible* (2019), https://www.visibleproject.org/blog/book/sakiya-art-science-agriculture-vol-01/.
[78] "Rewilding Pedagogy," *Sakiya.*

halaqa, a term that means 'circle' in Arabic. *Halaqa* originally describes the spatial configuration in which students and their teacher seat themselves for a Quranic lesson. In recent years, it has been adopted in the Middle East functioning as an 'affinity group' – a gender neutral social shape where a utopia is brought to life through performative discourses and practices.[79] By sharing, asking, and listening, the artists lead the discussion that imagines a new future for the land. Part of the program took place in the form of al-*Zajal*:
A Palestinian's genre that mixes vocal art with poetry. It is semi-sung and often carried out as a debate in which the different participants recite their opinion through singing, traditionally used by farmers in Palestine.[80]

Oral traditions and performance art are instantaneous and fleeting and therefore do not leave physical traces in the landscape. However, by picturing an alternative future and exploring various options for re-wilding the soil and local knowledge systems, the artists and participants preserve traditional agricultural practices, while also designing new forms of sustainability. In this way, the programs inspire connections to the land as a form of ecological resistance. Simultaneously, oral traditions such as *al-Zajal* singing are important ways to collectively talk about and internalize the care for the land. *Re-wilding Pedagogy* appropriates these forms to underline that the land should not be privately owned and managed, but rather that the *masha'a* commons should be revived. While the oral forms that the program uses do not lead to an archive or artefacts, in the traditional, physical form, they strengthen social cohesion and ensure that knowledge is shared and internalized.

3.4 Settler Colonialism in *Sakiya*

Walking the gardens of *Sakiya*, it is hard to miss the Hebrew graffiti sprayed all over the ruins and the ancient trees. Almost every week Israeli settlers come, often early in the morning, to vandalize the terrains. Convinced that these lands are Israeli (due to the importance of the land and the presence of Jews since Biblical times) they have demolished the shrine, *Sakiya*'s ancient Roman pond and several parts of the garden numerous times.[81]

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[79] Charlotte Al-Khalili, "Halaqas, Relational Subjects, and Revolutionary Committees in Syria," *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 91 (2021), pp. 52 – 53.
[80] "Al-Zajal, Recited or Sung Poetry," Unesco, Accessed June 4, 2023, https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/al-zajal-recited-or-sung-poetry 01000#:~:text=Al%2DZajal%20is%20a%20form,death%2C%20politics%20and%20daily%20events.
[81] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023.

Fig. 5. Wall Built into Stairs After Demolition of Settlers at Sakiya, 2023, Ein Qiniya. Photo Courtesy: *Sakiya*

To put these acts of violence in place and comprehend the environmental colonial practices *Sakiya* is facing and countering, it is necessary to describe how Israeli settler colonialism is affecting the area. Zionist settlements have systematically been integrated into the rural areas of the West Bank. Sitting beneath the huge madrone tree at *Sakiya*, which is likely more 2000 years old, there is a wide view over the mountainous area of the region. On the opposite hill is a tiny forest that, at first glance, looks like the most idyllic of all places. On a closer look, the settler structures can be seen looming through its trees.

Qawasmi explains that it is the Zionist settlement of Dolev, established there in the 1990s, which has had a significant impact on the local ecology because of settler violence and dispossession. Settlers constitute a continuous hazard to the villages in the valley and to the natural and agricultural landscape of the area. Already in 2000, the Applied Research Institute (ARIJ) in Palestine argued that the valley of Ein Qiniya was "threatened by expropriation," and that this threat has been intensified as a result of the growth of new Israeli settlements and the continued expansion of existing ones for 'security reasons.'[82]

[82] The Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem (ARIJ), "Talmon and Dolev Colonies Expand to Form A Barricade Block," *POICA: Eye on Palestine*, October 24, 2000, http://poica.org/2000/10/talmon-and-dolev-colonies-expand-to-form-a-barricade-block/.

These settlements – considered illegal by international law – are situated on Palestinian ground that is controlled by the Israeli Authorities, known as Area C.[83] After the Oslo Accords (1993) the Palestinian land got split into three non-contiguous administrative zones: A, B & C. Area A, which makes up around 18% of the West Bank, is controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and governed by Palestinian law enforcement. Area B is under combined Israeli-Palestinian control, in which the PA only acts as a civil authority. Area C accounts for 60% of the total West Bank, taking up most of the agricultural and grazing land in Palestine as well as most of the country's natural resources.[84] Area C includes *Sakiya* and the whole territory, including the agricultural lands, of Ein Qiniya.

Even though Area C contains most of the West Bank's agricultural lands, natural resources and green spaces, Palestinians are only allowed to employ one percent of it.[85] Israeli authorities, according to ARIJ, have been preventing Palestinian villagers from entering the valley since they designated it for the construction and expansion of its own settlements. The expansion of Israeli settlements is an increasing threat to Palestinian villages in the West Bank. In addition to losing valuable pasture and agricultural land and having their natural expansion being physically impeded, the vast proliferation of Israeli-Jewish settlements and their supporting infrastructures has reduced Palestinian villages to 'isolated pockets of land,' shattered over the Palestinian landscape.[86]

Ramallah can be reached from *Sakiya* by a road that leads to the east, while on the western side Israeli settlements are threatening the village. "Since Ramallah is surrounded by settlements in the north and the east, and by the wall in the south, there is nowhere else for the city to expand except towards us."[87] The agricultural lands and local ecology are thus in rapid decline due to these settlements and policies.

3.5 *Sakiya* and the Commodification of Land

On our 20-minute drive from Ramallah to Ein Qiniya many half-finished ghost dwellings doom up in the landscape, dispersed throughout the hills. According to Qawasmi, Israel is the primary cause of the commodification of the land in Palestine. The 'pockets of land' in the

[83] "Chapter 3: Israeli Settlements and International Law," *Amnesty,* Accessed June 6, 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/01/chapter-3-israeli-settlements-and-international-law/.
[84] Visualizing Palestine," Areas A, B and C," Accessed May 18, 2023, https://101.visualizingpalestine.org/resources/glossary/areas-a-b-c.
[85] Visualizing Palestine," Areas A, B and C."
[86] Fadia Panosetti & Laurence Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property in the West Bank: Dispossesion, Resistance, and Neoliberalism" *Jerusalem Quarterly* 89, p. 23; ARIJ, "Talmon and Dolev Colonies Expand to Form A Barricade Block."
[87] Sinnokrot, "Rewilding (at) Sakiya," p. 21.

rural West Bank are subjected to the entanglement of neoliberalist and settler-colonial policies, leading to the capital destruction of the environment and colonial control over land and resources.[88]

The Oslo Accords increasingly commodified land and resources and has several interlinked causes. The occupation of Area C and the increase in settlements, make the land more valuable and thus drive up the prices of Palestinian land and water. Land is expensive and scarce because Area A is the only part of Palestine that is completely under Palestinian sovereignty and where Palestinians can build without restrictions. This encourages many to sell their properties to Palestinians, as well as – illegally – to Israelis, frequently for exorbitant prices.[89] Especially Palestinian refugees who live in surrounding countries choose to sell their land to relatives, since they often do not have a Palestinian ID to return to their villages.[90]

Simultaneously, Israel classified all unregistered and uncultivated land as 'state land' in the 1980s. In the past, almost all the land in Palestine was communal land or *masha'a* (the commons), which made it hard to determine who was the 'legitimate' owner. The dispossession of land was justified because it was 'unused'. This discourse of 'unused land' is coherent with the Zionist historical narrative of the divine claim to the land that resulted in a host of dispossessory policies, key among which is the declaration of vast tracts of Palestinian land as 'state land'.[91] In order to prevent lands being confiscated by Israel, Palestinians began cultivating land that had previously been neglected or used erratically. Initially the use of land was thus a form of anti-colonial resilience, a way to hold on to the land. However, in recent years, it evolved "into a set of individualized tactics, based on the presumption that individual land property better serves the struggle against dispossession."[92]

Because these communal lands were often unregistered and collective, it made it challenging to sell. To counter this, policies have been set up by the Palestinian Authorities to re-parcel the land, disregarding the social and cultural ties to the land. Development organizations and the authorities already made several attempts to 'de-common-ize' the land to transform it into tradable commodities.[93] The PA launched a program in 2005 to enhance official land registration and stimulate the ratification of private property titles, with assistance of the

[88] Panosetti & Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property," p. 23.
[89] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023.
[90] Panosetti & Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property," pp. 23 – 24.
[91] Idem, p. 15.
[92] Idem, p. 26.
[93] Khaldun Bishara, "Rural Urbanization: The Commodification of Land in Post-Oslo Palestine," in *Reclaiming Space: The 50 Village Project in Rural Palestine*, eds. Khaldun Bishara & Suad Amiry (Ramallah: Riwaq, 2015) p. 95.

World Bank.[94] In Area A and B, numerous homes have been demolished and sold to construct more efficient flats. The distinction between Palestine's rural and urban areas become blurred because of the fast changes to the Palestinian environment and the privatization of the land.[95] Through programs like these, the PA is stimulating neoliberal ideas of entrepreneurship and free market competition, which have translated over the decades into different policies, including land reform.

Huggan and Tiffin claim that environmental colonialism is often characterized by working together with corrupt local politicians or elites.[96] According to Stock & Birkenholtz, the maintenance of neo-colonial relations is not solely the fault of corrupt individuals: Authoritarian regimes are also particularly prone to it.[97] Although the situation is much more nuanced in Palestine and its elite or the authorities cannot be blamed as a whole for contributing to settler colonialist practices, they are (in)directly tapping into the colonial narrative.

Since the Palestinian population has nearly doubled in recent years, the agricultural land in Area A and B is exhausted. Even though some of the remaining properties in these areas are better suited for agriculture, due to the housing crisis and urbanization, significant portions of these areas have been set aside for construction. Israeli restrictions on development in Area C limits and endangers development there, as well as in Area A and B.[98] Rural areas have changed from being at the core of production and reproduction to being a commodity devoid of social significance.[99]

Social inequalities will also be aggravated because of the limited access to land, increased prices of land and the housing crisis, destabilizing the Palestinian economy.[100] As mentioned, by turning the land into private property and consumerist commodities the

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[94] The program is called:
"West Bank and Gaza – Land Administration Project," *World Bank*, December 13, 2004, https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/658451468136491455/west-bank-and-gaza-land-administration-project.
Also see:
"West Bank and Gaza: The Economic Effects of Restricted Access to Land in the West Bank," *World Bank*, accessed May 28, 2023, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/654801468176641469/pdf/473230WP0GZ0Re101PUBLIC10Box334128B.pdf.
[95] Bishara, "Rural Urbanization," p. 95.
[96] Huggan & Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," p. 2.
[97] Ryan Stock & Trevor Birkenholtz, "The Sun and The Scythe: Energy Dispossessions and The Agrarian Question of Labor in Solar Parks," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48:5, p. 987.
[98] "Planning Policy in the West Bank," *Btselem*, November 11, 2017, https://www.btselem.org/planning_and_building.
[99] Bishara, "Rural Urbanization," p. 95.
[100] Ibid.

traditional communal and cultural values deteriorate. In this way, Palestinians are alienated from their land. The privatization of land is often described in a depoliticized manner, while it is rooted in colonialist discourses and upholds the existing colonial hegemony.[101]

With *Sakiya*, Qawasmi and Sinnokrot want to resist these developments by keeping the culture of *masha'a*, the commons, alive. The common lands are no longer seen as something positive because of investors, the PA and Israel. They are valued and re-established in the *Sakiya* project because they regard social ties to the land crucial to the Palestinian narrative. Qawasmi emphasizes that the land must be seen as 'social capital' – an environment charged with social life and history. The Palestinian environment binds people together, creating a bulwark against Israel. *Sakiya* is working to restore this sense of community and connection with the land by working with neighboring farmers, local artists as well as with people from the cities and other parts of Palestine. By becoming self-sufficient and relying on the local Palestinian land and the resources that are accessible through traditional and sustainable techniques, *Sakiya* strives to completely break away from the neoliberal practices imposed by Israel.

Fig. 6. Al-Wah'at Collective, *Fieldwork at Sakiya*, 2023, Ein Qiniya. Experiments with the Material Possibilities of the Cactus - in Building, Weaving, and Cooking. Photo: Yasmine Omari, courtesy of Sakiya

[101] Oded Haas, "De-colonising the Right to Housing, One New City At a Time: Seeing Housing Development From Palestine/Israel," *Urban Studies* 59:8 (2022), pp. 1678 – 1679.

3.6 The Marketization of Agriculture in Palestine

Settler laws and capital that result in land privatization not only disrupt existing social and economic norms of local property, but also of indigenous agricultural practices and land use. Through the privation of land and resources, the dependency on Israel increases. This results in loss of social and cultural ties to the land, which *Sakiya* aims to preserve and revive. Environmental colonialist narratives rely heavily on the privatization and liberalization of the local economy.[102] "Zionist colonization entailed the transformation of an essentially Arab agricultural economy to an industrial economy dominated by Jewish capital."[103] This transition to a capitalist economy would eventually result in the depopulation of the countryside and the abolition of subsistence farming, transforming the remaining farms into low-profit ventures depending on cheap labor and export markets.[104]

Additionally, because of the many import restrictions imposed by Israel, it is harder and more expensive to gain access to many agricultural essentials, such as fertilizers. In the meantime, Palestinians are forced to compete with Israeli mass monocropping and agribusinesses, which are marketed for considerably lower costs since they are government-subsidized and not subjected to high import prices. Additionally, large quantities of Israeli commodities are supplied to the Palestinian market and Israel is exerting their control over the West Bank's water supply. The Israeli government is thus trying to undermine the Palestinian agricultural sector.

Through the alienation of Palestinians from their land and a push for privatization, Israel is simultaneously extracting natural resources from the area, resulting in unequal access to resources and exploitation of the local environment.[105] According to Huggan & Tiffin this 'Climate Capitalism' is typical for environmental colonialist practices: Just as colonies formerly produced raw materials for European countries, Israel nowadays exploits the Palestinian economy, uses its natural resources and takes over the land, sometimes even in the name of fighting climate change.[106]

The majority of rural households lose their main source of income as a result of the restrictions on movement, not being able to access their lands, or are in its entirety being

[102] Huggan & Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," p. 6.
[103] Matan Kaminer, "The Agricultural Settlement of the Arabah and the Political Ecology of Zionism," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 54:1 (2021), p. 41.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Peter Newell & Matthew Paterson, *Climate Capitalism: Global Warming and the Transformation of the Global Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1 – 2.
[106] Huggan & Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," p. 2.

pushed off their land. Consequently, the dependency on Israeli capital for employment and consumption grows.[107] It increasingly forces Palestinians to do workday labor in Israel, in Israeli settlements or Palestinian cities.[108] Dispossessing people from their lands is one of the primary legacies of colonialism, which in the case of Palestine is accomplished by subjecting them to cheap labor.

Coupled with the PA's largely indifferent attitude towards agricultural practices and land use in Palestine, as well as its encouragement of a free market economy, it ensures much of the natural landscape being lost.[109] This leads to increased urbanization since many individuals in Palestine lose their land or are compelled by neo-liberal processes to look for alternative sources of income, since they cannot compete on the global market and thus can no longer sustain their families with agricultural production. This again aggravates the housing crisis and the commodification of land.[110] The different elements and policies that play a part here produce a never-ending cycle, a Gordian knot that is hard to counteract.

3.7 *Sakiya*'s Preservation of the Ancestral Land

The ruined condition of holy sites throughout the Palestinian landscape can be seen as a visual representation of the devaluation of not only the land's cultural significance, but also the environmental one. In former days, these places safeguarded the Palestinian nature and vegetation: The environment was an integral component of cultural traditions.[111] Local folktales often had animistic elements, meaning that souls do not only exist in humans or animals, but also in plants and natural phenomena such as water, stones, and mountains. These myths ensured that the surrounding ecology was treated with care and intensity, almost serving as a kind of cultural land 'laws'. Qawasmi therefore argues that the concept of a 'state' is not necessary in Palestine since the myths attached to holy shrines 'manage' the land and the environment. Contrarily to colonial and neoliberal policies, which turn land into profit and places of economic growth, myths and shrines inspire people to work holistically. One of the reasons Qawasmi and Sinnokrot established *Sakiya* is to find and promote communal relations with the land again since Israeli colonialist and neoliberal practices alienated the people from their ancestral territories.[112]By restoring the old Ottoman buildings, the local

[107] Paul Kohlbry, "Owning the Homeland," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47:4 (2018), p. 33.
[108] Bishara, "Rural Urbanization," p. 95.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023; Qleibo, "Land of Our Ancestors."
[112] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023.

shrine, and the land, Qawasmi and Sinnokrot are reclaiming their heritage and safeguard the different meanings of the ancestral land.[113]

Qawasmi and Sinnokrot are reviving these traditional methods and farming 'by hand'. This draws a lot of farmers, as well as young people to the site. Firstly, because in area C, where *Sakiya* is located, the Israeli occupation does not allow for heavy machinery. These restrictions by Israel are designed to diminish Palestinians in their power, but through finding other ways which are more embedded in the lands, its knowledge, and the cultural traditions, they undermine this occupation. Besides, through *Sakiya*, they oppose the idea that sustainability can be achieved with an never-ending faith in technology.

By reconnecting with the land and fostering socio-economic and cultural ties again with the rural areas, colonial practices can be addressed and countered.[114] This must be accomplished through both tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible heritage is the actual archeological structures such as shrines, and intangible heritage is the products that arrive from these lands such as food, literature, and art works. Through the restoration of tangible heritage and taking care of its surrounding lands, *Sakiya* does not only restore intangible heritage like its mythical stories, dance, and literature, but also create new forms of intangible heritage such as art installations and performance art that work with the soil and ground.

3.8 *Sakiya* as an 'Enclave'

When driving into the valley of Ein Qiniya, Qawasmi explains that the environment of *Sakiya* is very important for the local ecology. Since there are seven springs in the area, all the water gathers here after rainfall, leading to a remarkably diversified ecology and its designation as an 'Important Bird Area'. However, with the rapid urbanization and uncontrolled expansion of the city of Ramallah, the municipality dumps a lot of rubbish and sewage in the valley.[115] This aggravates the already dire waste situation in the area, as native communities frequently serve as disposal sites for colonizer garbage. As a result, "the occupied West Bank is a dumpsite for Israeli waste," such as sewage, medical waste, oils, electronical waste, but also nuclear waste.[116] This leads to the decay of the soil and poses a threat to human and more-than-human health in the area.

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[113] Sinnokrot, "Palestine Is Not a Garden."
[114] Bishara, "Rural Urbanization," p. 95.
[115] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023.
[116] To learn more about the infrastructures of waste in the occupied West Bank, see:
Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins, *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2019). Here: p. 5.

Not only the ecology crumbles, the architecture in the region is also severely affected. Historically, the fertile terrain and diverse ecosystem resulted in many different traditional (farm) houses in the area. Like the two historic homes that are part of *Sakiya*, one of which dates to the late Ottoman era and the other to the era of the British Mandate (c. 1932). Both buildings are unique because there are not many of them left. The Zalatimo family bought the land and its houses in 1937. They were forced out in 1967 by the Israeli Occupation Forces and were only permitted occasional daytime visits. Since these two houses are abandoned, they suffer from severe physical deterioration that, if left unrepaired, will be unrecoverable and a loss of what previously served as the hub of a vibrant agricultural community.[117]

In 2016, Sinnokrot and Qawasmi asked the Zalatimo family if they could use the property as an art initiative. In return they offered to renovate the houses and protect the natural habitat by reclaiming, preserving and researching it. They see it as a project to reconnect with Palestinian heritage and nature, and by doing so, indirectly resisting Israeli environmental colonialism. Nowadays the hillside of *Sakiya* is home to olive orchards, agricultural terraces, and herb gardens again, producing various fruits and vegetables.

The stone terraces, constructed as agricultural infrastructure and essential for farming in Palestine's mountainous areas, are restored. The rich topsoil and the land's capacity to absorb water are lost due to erosion, which is prevented by these stone terraces. This is also known as desertification, which is accelerated by Israeli settlements and bypass roads that guarantee the loss of thousands of trees as well as vast swaths of land. Often, these stone terraces have been vandalized by Israeli settlers or are maintained poorly because Palestinians are not permitted to access their lands and modern agricultural processes have taken over.[118] Many aspects of the Palestinian culture and its traditions, including the needs and bodies of knowledge that date back many centuries, are exemplified by these terraces. They are emblematic for the Palestinian landscape and architecture, representing the earliest ways of inhabiting, appreciating, and utilizing the nature.[119]

Bishara argues that "rural Palestine is not only a space but is also a potential. Like olives are not only olive oil but also a myriad of unrealized potentialities (such as pickled olives, soap, gifts, dowry money, medicine-bill payment, university tuition, etc.), rural areas also have multiple possibilities that can confront long-lasting colonial conditions and

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[117] "Site History," *Sakiya*, Accessed May 20, 2023, https://sakiya.org/.
[118] USAID, "Palestine: Reviving Stone Terracing in Rural Nablus," *Reliefweb*, December 31, 2002, https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/palestine-reviving-stone-terracing-rural-nablus.
[119] Shadi Sami Ghadban, "Palestinian Dry Stone Structures – An Endogenous Expression of Cultural Landscape," *Sustainable Development, Culture, Traditions* 1b (2015), pp. 34 – 35.

subsequent marginalization."[120] This is what *Sakiya* is trying to establish. The historical building and the surrounding gardens have a specific historical, aesthetic, scientific and environmental value. *Sakiya* acts as a means 'to enclave' instead of 'being enclaved' by colonial spatial order and create new opportunities.[121]

3.9 Artistic and Agricultural Practices Combined into *Sumud*

Both the agricultural and cultural practices, such as stone terraces and art performances at the site, are threatened and marginalized in Palestine. Qawasmi explains that cultural production is often commodified and diminished to the 'soft sphere.' Agricultural practices are still seen as important but, as previously explained, are jeopardized by Israel and the push to a free market economy. Therefore, Qawasmi and Sinnokrot wanted to combine these two practices in an art project that counters their marginalization and can function as an antidote to the neo liberalization of the cultural scene, as well as to neo liberalization of the land.[122]

Qawasmi believes that there is a gap between artistic and agricultural practices, even though both are forms of creation. Therefore, she is of opinion that art should be approached and understood in the broadest sense of the word. The study on local soil and vegetation should be mixed with agricultural techniques, actual art residencies and art installations, since working on the land and working with food is as much of an artistic practice as any other forms of art. "Art does not necessarily have to be something elitist but can very much serve as a communal and binding force" to investigate Israeli environmental practices but also to archive and restore local practices and to protect the local vegetation and soil from Israeli encroachment.[123] According to Qawasmi, everything that is being made, even agricultural crafts and products, must be seen as art.

Qawasmi emphasizes that this is important to maintain unity and hold ground. "Palestine feels like a dream or an idea; the word has more symbolic meaning than actual meaning. Palestinians no longer feel a sense of attachment to their land."[124] They became estranged from their physical surroundings, as well as their cultural values and myths, as a result of neoliberalization.

She hopes that through initiatives like *Sakiya*, a renewed or fresh perspective on the environment and nature's beauty, as well as the restoration of social ties that were once

[120] Bishara, "Rural Urbanization," p. 102.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023.
[123] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023.
[124] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023.

crucial to the Palestinian culture and the natural landscape, will be accomplished. Palestinians need to look out for and assist one another and by working together and emphasize the importance of the lands by stimulating communal work and artistic practices, intertwining the tangible and intangible heritage. “We have to stick together in order to liberate ourselves and be free.”[125]

Fig. 7. Yara Dueni Planting Chrysanthemums to Protect Crops at Sakiya, 2022, Ein Qiniya. Photo Courtesy: *Sakiya*

Sakiya thus serves as a *sumud*-centered ecological, communal imaginary, sustaining the link between agriculture and culture, keeping alive the local myths and storytelling. *Sumud* has taken on different meanings and forms of application in Palestinian society; rather than having a single definition, it refers to a “continuum of goals and practices of resistance.”[126] *Sakiya* invests in concrete efforts of *sumud*, such as the organization of cultural events and reviving traditional agricultural methods to become more self-reliant. Qawasmi and Sinnokrot also engage in *sumud muqawim*, which translates to a “dynamic resistance to the occupation by connecting different social groups.”[127] They establish this by collaborating with farmers to repurpose land and agriculture as a site for collective anti-colonial resistance, together with artists and people from the urban areas.

[125] Sahar Qawasmi, March 25, 2023.
[126] Johannessen, “*Sumud*,” https://www.palquest.org/en/highlight/33633/sumud.
[127] Ibrahim Dakkak, “Development from Within: A Strategy for Survival,” in *The Palestinian Economy: Studies in Development Under Prolonged Occupation*, ed. George T. Abed (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 288.

3.10 *Sakiya*: A World Without Conflict

One of the 'artistic walks' that serve as a communal imaginary is called *Water Diviners*, performed by Jumana Emil Abboud. Through this performance, Emil Abboud is reclaiming the land's water resources by dwelling on the connection between water, land and its people. The workshop focused on seven natural and endangered springs around the lands of *Sakiya* which accumulated in a live performance. For this artwork, Emil Abboud resided at *Sakiya* for a longer period, to investigate our relationship with water and natural springs from a position of "rediscovery and entitlement."[128] Emil Abboud wants to rediscover personal stories as well as local folk tales in connection to water and springs. In this way, she aims to re-establish the – Palestinian – entitlement to these natural resources, endangered by Israeli occupation.

The focus on water does not come out of the blue. Water is one of the most important natural resources, which Israel has utilized to exert control over Palestinian people and land, deteriorating environmental injustice. Environmental injustice is closely interlinked with environmental colonialism. It involves the inequitable sharing of environmental benefits and burdens and questions how patterns of distribution, inequality and injustice are understood within an environmental frame.[129] Environmental injustice comprises the unequal distribution of environmental risks, to which some groups are disproportionally exposed.[130] According to Young, this has not only to do with distributive injustice, but also with the failure to acknowledge different cultures and the lack of socio-political participation of certain groups.[131]

Although climate change also plays a part in the deterioration of water resources, it is the Israeli occupation that ensures that Palestinians have limited access to water.[132] The Israeli government controls all the water resources in Palestine and determines the water consumption limits for Palestinians. Israel frequently destroys water infrastructures and often prohibit the construction of new wells, while withdrawing circa 80% of the West Bank's Mountain aquifer annually. According to research conducted by Visualizing Palestine, each

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[128] Jumana Emil Abboud, *The Water Keepers*, video documentation of *The Water Diviners* (2022), https://documenta-fifteen.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Jumana_Emil_Abboud_The-Water-Keepers_subtitles-for-handouts.pdf.
[129] Braverman, "Environmental justice, Settler Colonialism, and More-Than-Humans in the Occupied West Bank," pp. 8 – 9.
[130] David Schlosberg, "Reconceiving Environmental Justice: Global Movements and Political Theories," *Environmental Politics* 13:3 (2004), pp. 518 – 519.
[131] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 37.
[132] "Not Enough Water in the West Bank?" *Visualizing Palestine*, In Partnership with EWASH, March 2013, Accessed May 4, 2023, https://visualizingpalestine.org/visuals/west-bank-water.

Israeli has access to 300 liters of water daily, compared to the 70 liters that Palestinians get (which is 30 liters less than the minimum amount advised by the World Health Organization). All the while, Ramallah receives more rain than London, making it one of the wettest cities in the world.[133]

This 'grabbing' of resources, also known as 'Green Grabbing,' is not only a form of environmental injustice that enhances climate vulnerability but can also be seen as 'new' colonialism: Environmental colonialism driven by the "perceived scarcity of resources, food and sustainable energy" and justified by narratives of climate change and mismanagement of resources. This persistent imbalance and inequality in the management of and the access to water in Palestine/Israel, the disproportionate impact of escalating water shortages on Palestinians and the denial of access to technical solutions to address these issues of (relative) deprivation, are examples of grabbing.[134]

Emil Abboud's performance piece at *Sakiya* draws attention to the threatened springs and reestablishes a connection with its fabled tales. Due to its hidden springs, *Sakiya* is one of the few spots in Palestine where water still flows abundantly. By hosting a performance walk along these springs, narrating folk tales in which the connection to nature and water resources are explained, Emil Abboud underlines that water scarcity is not 'natural' nor apolitical. Through the stories, she highlights that springs like these were commonplace and abundant before Israeli occupation. She makes the performance participatory by collective reading and writing on the participants' personal connection to sites of water, as well as conducting discussions on the broader question of the entanglement of humans and nature.

The first part of the performance consists of a walk from Ein Qiniya to *Sakiya*, in which Emil Abboud 'performs' a poem through communal *Zajal* singing. In this poem, Emil Abboud is vocalizing the personal connection to water, narrating visualities and feelings one usually encounters when visiting these springs.

sweet taste, flow, mass gathering, mysterious, refuge, network, fear, three, revival, piece of cloth, fleas, myths, women, sacrifice, renewal, history, a dripping hose,

groups and gatherings, concealed paths, layers, sunset, milestones, departure and return,

burbling water that hypnotizes humans, floating items, scattered spots,
herd of goats, buried, greenery, disguised, small stones and big rocks,

[133] "Not Enough Water in the West Bank?" *Visualizing Palestine*.
[134] Stephen Gasteyer, Jad Isaac, Jane Hillal & Sean Walsh, "Water Grabbing in Colonial Perspective: Land and Water in Israel/Palestine," *Water Alternatives* 5:2 (2012, pp. 450.

leveled, blocked layers, protrusions, domicile, a ray of light,

figs, almonds, and olives.[135]

By this collective singing Emil Abboud lets the participants think about their personal connections and memories to water and how they are connected to the communal importance of access to water and nature.
After the walk, Emil Abboud performs a storytelling at the restored amphitheater-like area at the house. By collectively creating and sharing new stories based on old local folk tales, she wants to emphasize the springs' present-day environment and observe it in a different light.[136] Emil Abboud describes *Sakiya* as:

the land of affliction, the meeting point, the arena of steadfastness (…)

a place without conflict

we meet here and we abandon the past

we each take off our shoes and jump into the flowing water

leading you to safety, to a world without conflict.[137]

In the words of Emil Abboud, *Sakiya* serves as a place where people can reconnect with the earth and return to its origins 'without conflict'. To see the real value and the importance of the land, they must go back to its roots: A place where you can briefly forget about the violence and occupation and romanticize the Palestinian land as it once was. With this storytelling, Emil Abboud creates an imaginary landscape. She reconnects listeners with the land and highlights the beauty and the importance of its springs, wells, and water.

By frequently addressing the different species and animals in the performance art – donkeys, gazelles, bees, chirping, goats, fleas – Emil Abboud also emphasizes the importance of the land to more-than-human life. The settler-colonial occupation is often approached from the affliction of human lives in the West Bank, whereas more-than-humans are seen as

[135] Emil Abboud, *The Water Keepers*.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.

secondary or less important. By emphasizing the entanglement of all forms of life and non-life at *Sakiya*, Emil Abboud shows the interconnectedness of Palestine's ecology and how the alteration of Palestine's ecology has consequences for all forms of life. If bees, fleas, and water diminish or disappear, it will as much influence human life in the West Bank as its environment.

Israeli environmental colonial practices are embedded in the surroundings of *Sakiya*, with the art initiative facing settler threats and violence every day. *Sakiya* shows that environmental colonialism manifests itself in Palestine in a variety of ways: The commodification and dispossession of land leads to a loss of attachment to the environment, the extinction of traditional farming practices, and the omission of cultural values that are ingrained in these areas. The appropriation of natural resources leads to environmental injustice and climate vulnerability. By means of a recursive system of *sumud* practices such as the preservation of agricultural traditions and knowledge and reimagining the land through various art projects such as *Re-Wilding Pedagogy* and *Water Diviners*, *Sakiya* resists Israeli environmental colonialism and restores the cultural and communal ties to the land.

4. *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*: The Displacement and Rootedness of the Olive Tree

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the environmental colonial destruction of Palestine's ecology appears in a variety of ways. Environmental colonialism, however, is not only about natural resources and land, but also involves 'more-than-human' lives. This includes animals, but also vegetation such as seeds, plants, and trees. Each of the aforementioned items is part of the same ecological cycle and thus has an impact on various aspects of this cycle.

The art works *Grafting* (1995) and *Grounding* (2022), part of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* by Khalil Rabah, tap into this entanglement between human and more-than-human lives and draws on narratives of rootedness and displacement in the Palestinian landscape. By emphasizing the interplay of all elements of Palestinian life, giving them *value* through their mummification or objectification in the environment of a museum, Rabah preserves and 'protects' Palestinian life, opposing Israeli environmental colonial practices that aim to destruct the Palestinian environment.

Different from *Sakiya*, who uses art to intervene in the local ecology, Rabah falls back on the landscape as symbol. As explained in the first chapter, this symbolism has been significant in the development of the Palestinian identity. However, Rabah steers clear of the nationalistic propaganda imagery: His museum should not be seen as a form of nation building but rather as a 'state' institution. The olive tree thus not represents the nation, but rather symbolizes exile, displacement, the rootedness of Palestinian 'life' in the land and the entanglement between humans and more-than-humans in Palestine. By focusing on exile and displacement, this chapter moves away from the more locally oriented work of *Sakiya* to an artist who also situates Palestine in the diaspora, since the Palestinian cause is par excellence an international issue.

Fig. 8. Khalil Rabah, *Act I: Carving,* 2022, Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Danko Stjepanovic

4.1 *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*

In most of his works, the Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah challenges the observer to critically consider art and its institutions, frequently in conjunction with how they operate amid ongoing displacement, crises, and memory. Defining it in a broader context, he looks at the relationship between humans and their surroundings. He regularly uses ecological aspects in his art, exploring the interaction and relationship between people, the environment, and

sociopolitical narratives of power, memory and belonging. Through his art Rabah poses the question: "What is considered to be 'Palestinian' in terms of ecology, vegetation and land?"

Rabah's critique on cultural institutions and his notions of nationalism in a Palestinian setting, are frequently touched upon by curators, art critics and scholars.[138] However, Rabah's works also involve natural elements of Palestine's immediate environment, which are often overlooked. One of his projects is his *Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*, a fictional museum with real-life artworks and ongoing projects that are all involved with Palestine's ecology and 'natural history.'[139] It is a critique on the imposition of Western notions of museology and ethnography and questions the power of institutions in the writing and displaying of art. In his museum, Rabah mocks Western art institutions by twisting their methods of display. However, it can also be viewed as a project that elaborates on the relationship of humans to their immediate surroundings, which includes the natural world and other-than-human life. The museum tells two separate stories of oppression and violence through the discussion of anthropological and natural artifacts.

The museum's artworks are made up of elements that are native to the Palestinian area. By placing them within their natural history and underlining their entanglement with human social and political processes, Rabah exposes the Israeli colonial discourse: The rule of man over man, but also the control men have over nature. Rabah questions the idea that the environment is apolitical and wants the audience to reevaluate their belief systems and the way in which these both play out in the socio-political sphere. He turns the Palestinian natural landscape into something of value by transforming them into artworks.

4.2 'Mummifying' Palestinian ecology

In order to comprehend the artworks of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* it is crucial to discuss the origins of this museum as well as the colonial and sociopolitical setting this museum is maneuvering in.

Anthropologist De Cesari argues that although Palestine is a stateless nation, Rabah is claiming its rights as a state through the creation of a 'Palestinian' museum.[140] In Palestine,

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[138] See for example:
Chiara de Cesari, "Anticipatory Representation."; Naima Morelli, "The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind: Interview with Artist Khalil Rabah," *Middle East Monitor*, December 20, 2016, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161220-the-palestinian-museum-of-natural-history-and-humankind-interview-with-artist-khalil-rabah/.

[139] Khalil Rabah, "The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind," Accessed July 26, 2023, http://www.thepalestinianmuseumofnaturalhistoryandhumankind.org/.

[140] Chiara de Cesari, "Anticipatory Representation," pp. 88 90.

campaigns to work along national lines in terms of ecological, economic and social challenges have frequently been thwarted, mainly because the PA wants to implement neoliberal policies.[141] This reinforces the fact that Palestinians cannot rely on the Palestinian Authority, that is often seen as a dysfunctional corrupt government. Although I agree with De Cesari on the aspects of nationalism that the museum evokes and questions, I argue that besides the creation of a state in a stateless situation, Rabah's museum is also a way to preserve Palestinian nature and culture, underlining the entanglement of human and more-than-human life in the West Bank.

Toukan refers to the paradoxical situation in Palestine – where citizens reside in a state without sovereignty – as a 'postcolonial colony.'[142] She argues that normally postcolonial museums in the Middle East "are not commissioned as a part of a larger national strategic plan," but that there are smaller museums that "unstable yet dynamic memory-making institution in flux, as much a living archive of violence as an affective encounter with the weight of the land and history."[143] Indeed, by being a semi-fictional museum, Rabah opposes Israeli colonial practices such as cultural exclusion and the limited mobility of objects and peoples that are essential to a museum's functioning. At the same time, the museum is also maneuvering around colonial violence by being constantly dynamic and in flux. The Palestinian ecology is integrated into all the art works and exhibitions of the museum, but the real-life art works are often exhibited in other countries, being manifested or 'integrated' into their ecologies. It is a museum that is simultaneously 'mummifying' and archiving Palestinian more-than-human lives, its entanglement with humans and their shared experiences of Israeli colonial violence.

Rabah, however, not only aims to create something 'institutionalized' 'Palestinian' in a stateless situation, but by appropriating the museum, he also critiques the Western discourse on 'national' cultural institutions. The museum questions the western-centric yet universalizing notion of European institutions, which originally collected, preserved and exhibited aesthetic items as a means of building nation-states, serving as displays of the 'modern' European self.[144]

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[141] Emily McKee, "Environmental Framing and Its Limits: Campaigns in Palestine and Israel," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 50 (2018), p. 449.
[142] Hanan Toukan, "The Palestinian Museum," *Radical Philosophy* 203, December 2018, https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-palestinian-museum.
[143] Hanan Toukan, "The Palestinian Museum."
[144] Hanan Toukan, "The Palestinian Museum."

The 'European' museum also turns the object into something 'dead'; a vast institution with white-walled rooms where things (read: living beings) are turned into objects and are displayed in a 'deadly' way. Glass showcases ensure that the viewer cannot feel, touch or experience the art, but only look at it. By giving it a frozen status, the museum creates a distance between the art and the spectator. However, in the case of Rabah's museum, turning Palestinian artefacts and objects into something dead can be seen as positive and beneficial. It gives Palestine a place and time in history. Paradoxically, Rabah's museum is not only a dead place with an imaginative collection, it thus also carries out real-life projects, revolving around vegetation, concrete and land that has been turned into art.

One could argue that the 'Palestinian' ecology is more an outcome of the *longue durée* of geological time than it is inherently 'Palestinian.' Zionists also argue that these territories have always been 'Jewish,' and the past 75 years Israel claims these lands are 'Israeli'.[145] However, as argued in the next paragraph, Israel has deliberately been trying to eradicate 'Palestinian' ecology, such as olive trees, which have a significant economic, cultural, and symbolic value for Palestinians, in order to replace it with European agricultural methods and vegetation. Second, Rabah aims to mummify not just Palestinians' immediate surroundings but by calling it a museum of 'natural history and humankind' also the socio-political and present-day realities of Israeli occupation. The purpose of the museum is to archive and restore Palestine's ecological materiality and attached memories and socio-cultural ties in the face of erasure.

By building a museum, by preserving and conserving 'Palestinian' ecological artifacts, mummifying and exposing them, Rabah transforms Palestine into a place – De Cesari even describes it as a 'state' –. As Rabah states himself: 'It is a way of redefining Palestine for me, or making a place from a non-place'.[146] This 'non-place' does not refer to the sterility of the museum, but rather reflects the continual erasure of Palestine through settler colonialism. Rabah's effort to mummify Palestine's ecology and make the viewer aware of its associated socio-political relations tries to give Palestine a time and a place within natural history and as such counters Israel's structural violence targeting Palestine's human and more-than-human lives.

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[145] For a more detailed writing on this topic, see:
Ghattas J. Sayej, "Cultural Heritage of Palestine: Ethnicity and Ethics," in *A New Critical Approach to the History of Palestine*, eds. Ingrid Hjelm, Hamdan Taha, Ilan Pappe, Thomas L. Thompson (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 175 – 185.
[146] Mai Abu Eldahab, "A Conversation with Khalil Rabah," *Bidoun* (Fall, 2006), https://www.bidoun.org/articles/khalil-rabah-and-mai-abu-eldahab.

The museum places the Palestinian environment and culture in the historical, present and future setting of Palestine while in tandem attempting to address broader problems regarding global infrastructures of visual art production and 'value.' Rabah's art is real, but at the same time it emphasizes that it 'pretends' to be art. This fits within a larger trend: Artists are defying conventions set forth by the (often Western-centric) artworld for production and presentation, in favor of approaches that foster new connections with the audience as well as their surroundings.[147] The museum revolves around negotiation and cooperation and offers an alternative to the 'dead collection' museum.

> In appropriating and strategically deploying institutional devices, specifically their material and immaterial ecologies of *value*, it underscores how discursive power resides in their often occluded ability to replicate structures that anticipate value (in ecological, political and cultural terms), while simultaneously excluding other forms of value and authority.[148]

Similarly, among discourses of settler violence, *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* elevates Palestinian natural history and cultural legacy and turns its environment into something of *value*. Simultaneously, Rabah excludes both Israeli modes of colonial authority over the Palestinian landscape and the Western concepts of what is determined as value. It reinforces the agency of human and more-than-human lives as well as other perspectives on what is seen as culture and art. An olive tree is regarded as natural (i.e., apolitical) but when it is incorporated or transformed into an artwork, it becomes an object of *value*. By giving value to Palestinian ecological elements and emphasizing the entanglement of Palestinian natural and human history, Rabah is countering the erasure of Palestine and positioning human and more-than-human lives in the framework of contemporary and future Palestinian history.

The *Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* thus gives value to and 'mummifies' Palestine's ecology amidst Israeli environmental colonialist practices that deteriorates and destruct the Palestinian environment. Simultaneously, Israel erases the violence that Palestinians have been subjected to (i.e. the planting of European pine forests

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[147] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), p. 113.
[148] Eliza Jordan, "Khalil Rabah is Examining the Human Condition Through Art and Community," *Whitewall,* July 28, 2022, https://whitewall.art/art/khalil-rabah-is-examining-the-human-condition-through-art-and-community.

over Palestinian villages that have been bulldozed during the ongoing Nakba). Thus, by mummifying it, by giving it a place and a time in human and natural history, these colonial stories will not be washed away.

4.3 The Importance of the Palestinian Olive Tree

The olive tree is an important element in various artworks and exhibitions of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind.* Two of these artworks are discussed here: *Grafting* (1995) and *Grounding* (2022). It shows the olive tree as an intrinsic part of Palestine's ecology and the rootedness of both Palestinian more-than-humans and Palestinian people in Palestine. However, in contrast to their rootedness, in both artworks the olive trees were uprooted from their natural Palestinian habitat and placed in an alien environment, showcasing the displacement and exile of Palestinian people.

This also begs the question of why the olive tree is being uprooted and why it is being used as a metaphor. This draws back on the loaded social and political history of the olive tree within the Palestinian context. To understand the artworks, the relation between the olive tree, environmental colonial practices, and the broader socio-political landscape have to be explained briefly. With these two projects Rabah shows the entanglement of human and more-than-human lives, and how they are not apolitical but should be seen in the broader socio-political context of Israeli settler and environmental colonialism.

The olive tree has been a significant symbol and aspect of Palestinian art throughout the years, as discussed in the first chapter on Palestinian art history. This importance is rooted in its wide-ranging environmental, economic, social and cultural value in Palestine. Some of the olive trees in Palestine date back more than 4,000 years ago and are thus a vast natural component of the landscape. These trees can thrive in dry environments and flourish in places with limited soil conditions. It is therefore said that the olive tree depicts the Palestinian situation: The tree's gradual growth and tenacity represents the Palestinian narrative of resiliency and resistance.[149] The uprooting and destruction of Palestinian olive trees has been a defining feature of the Israeli occupation. Numerous news headlines each week show the continuous threat to olive trees and therefore also their attached economic, social and cultural value.[150]

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[149] Nasser Abufarha, "Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange and Olive Trees in Palestine," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 15 (2008), pp. 353 – 356.
[150] "Fact Sheet: Olive Trees – More Than Just a Tree in Palestine," *Miftah*, November 21, 2012, http://www.miftah.org/Doc/Factsheets/Miftah/English/factsheet-OliveTrees.pdf.

Israel asserts that these trees must be destroyed for security reasons. According to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), Palestinians use olive orchards as a defensive cover when they attack Jewish settlements.[151] Simultaneously, Israelis plant non-native European pine trees as a fortification mechanism around their settler villages to protect them from potential Palestinian attacks.[152] These practices show that the olive tree is 'loaded' with environmental colonial narratives and has a significant impact on the larger settler colonial context. As we will see in the next paragraphs, Rabah tries to bring this across in his artworks: The relation between vegetation and humans is not only symbolic – the roots of the tree stands for the roots of the people – but also metonymic – the Palestinians need the tree for oil, soap, olives, shade and oxygen and income, and the tree needs the human to sow, plant and care. The tree and the people are both parts of a whole: The removal of olive trees has significant sociopolitical and economic repercussions for Palestinians, sharing the same lived experiences.

However, it should be noted that there can also be a danger in perceiving the olive tree as an embodiment of Palestinian rootedness in the land. Palestinians are frequently considered as a component of the land, which "turns the land into a symbol rather than focusing on its materiality."[153] This romanticization manifests itself in the belief that the connection to the land is organic and natural. The Palestinian curator Lara Khaldi argues that "what actually connects Palestinians to the earth and makes them indigenous is their shared condition of being stateless in a world full of nation states. Earth is not only soil or land but can also be a surface, medium and envelope of objects as well as secrets and stories."[154]

Rabah's museum addresses this statelessness and uses ecological elements to emphasize the interconnectedness of socio-political processes, human and more-than-human life. The uprooting of olive trees serves as a metonym for environmental colonialism and invites the viewer to explore its deeper implications. In this setting, Rabah exposes the rootedness in the land through the materiality of the land: Its production, colonization, and degradation, and thus, as a result, its materiality. His work goes beyond this romantic notion by researching his personal and the Palestinian people's connection to the land and how Israeli environmental and settler colonialism affects them. As Khaldi points out, it must be

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[151] Rami Sarafa, "Roots of Conflict: Felling Palestine's Olive Trees," *Harvard International Review* (2004), p. 13.
[152] Irus Braverman, "The Tree Is the Enemy Soldier": A Sociolegal Making of War Landscapes in the Occupied West Bank," *Law & Society Review* 42:3 (2008), p. 462.
[153] Mai Elwakil, "In Conversation: Lara Khaldi on Earth, Artists' Books and Sharjah Biennial 13," August 11, 2017, https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/08/11/feature/culture/in-conversation-lara-khaldi-on-earth-artists-books-and-sharjah-biennial-13/.
[154] Lara Khaldi, "Shifting Ground: Off-site Project of Sharjah Biennial 13 in Ramallah," *Universes in Universe,* July 10, 2017, https://universes.art/en/sharjah-biennial/2017/shifting-ground.

remembered that these relationships are not organic but are *perceived* as organic.[155] To assume that the Palestinians and the land are one, without considering these constructs, can be seen as a romantization of the land.

Fig. 9. Khalil Rabah, Grafting, 1995, Installation View, Ariana Park, Geneva, Switzerland. Photo Courtesy: Khalil Rabah

4.4 *Grafting* (1995)

For his artwork *Grafting,* Rabah uprooted Palestinian olive trees from Ramallah and sent them to Switzerland, where he planted them in the Geneva's Ariana Park. By using patches of Palestinian soil around the planted trees, Rabah emphasizes their non-native status (and consequent continuous exile) in these Swiss settings. The art project represents the displacement of Palestinian people, as well as "the effects of war and land confiscation for their economy and identity."[156] The meaning behind the olive tree is thus twofold. It is a metaphor for displacement, but it also raises the question about their native status: Why were

[155] Elwakil, "In Conversation: Lara Khaldi on Earth, Artists' Books and Sharjah Biennial 13."

[156] Khalil Rabah, "Botanical Department News," *Newsletter The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*, Autumn/Winter 2008, http://www.thepalestinianmuseumofnaturalhistoryandhumankind.org/newsletter-archives/autumn-winter-2008/.

they being uprooted and what do olive trees specifically have to do with Palestine and the Palestinian identity?

The title of the work, *Grafting*, implies a duality, alluding to both natural and human circumstances: It lends the olive tree an anthropomorphic quality because it can relate to both inserting a shoot into a larger plant as well as transplanting living tissue. In this regard, the olive tree's existence as a sentient being is similar to that of the Palestinian people. The tree looks apolitical, but is also occupied and politicized by Israeli colonial practices, uprooted and displaced. This fits in the bigger cultural meaning of the olive tree that has affected the Palestinian art world already for quite some decennia. Anthropologist Abufarha argues that the olive tree is "symbol of our identity as a people. This is the home of the olive tree, it is indigenous to the land, and so are we."[157]

Already since the beginning of the Zionist project, the Palestinian narration of nationhood is about the relationship of the community and the people to the land. As seen with *Grafting,* it is also "a narration of the place and its formation and reformation in the Palestinian cultural imaginary in the face of the Jewish nationalist project in Palestine."[158] While Israel redefines Palestine as a Jewish national homeland, Palestinians therefore rely on the reconstruction of Palestine in the Palestinian cultural imaginary through ecological representations to preserve their connection to the land and a sense of belonging. The olive tree is the link between relocation, belonging and land or landscape, acting as a metaphor for all three.

By positioning the olive tree in a (fictional) museum and converting it into a sculpture it makes them more than just ordinary trees. Rabah suggests that the natural world and our environment are also works of art, just like *Sakiya* pointed out in the previous chapter. By mummifying the olive tree, he transforms it into something of *value*, into something important. As a result, these trees convey a paradoxical meaning: On the one hand they are alive and show the interconnectedness of Palestinian human and more-than-human lives. On the other hand, by addressing them as art, they are transformed into objects or 'dead' sculptures.

[157] Abufarha, "Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange, and Olive Trees in Palestine,", p. 344.
[158] Ibid.

Fig. 10. Khalil Rabah, *Grafting*, 1995, Video Still, Ramallah, Palestine.

Grafting represents the fundamental contradiction in the message Rabah wants to convey with *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*: By mummifying the olive tree into an art work, he emphasizes the ecological and cultural ties between human and more-than-human lives and how their histories are intertwined in Palestine. He eternalizes something inherently Palestinian in a stateless situation, giving it meaning, value and a place in Palestinian history. It represents the uprootedness (and the accompanying displacement and exile), but at the same time offers narratives of rootedness that try to counter the Israeli erasure of Palestinian nature. In his work we see the general observation of this thesis: The intervening in nature – by uprooting the trees from an Palestinian environment – and the emphasis on cultural and ecological ties between human and more-than-human lives, threatened by Israel settler colonial erasure. He does not necessarily expose Israeli environmental colonial practices, but rather emphasizes the meaning of the direct environment for Palestinian people, their entanglement, and gives it value in a state of constant destruction. This also means that the socio-political and colonial influences on this nature also influences the Palestinian people, and vice versa.

4.5 *Grounding* (2022)

In 2022, the 'Botanical Department' of The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind created and displayed *Grounding*, another artwork by Khalil Rabah that features olive trees. Like *Grafting*, Rabah uprooted Palestinian olive trees, but this time planted them in the Saudi-Arabian desert. Although *Grounding* similarly touches upon narratives of exile and displacement, it also mocks the green colonial narrative of 'making the desert bloom.'

The artwork depicts the Palestinian olive tree in a 'barren' desert landscape, an environment to which these trees are not indigenous. 'Making the desert bloom' served and still serves as a justification for the uprooting and bulldozing of Palestinian nature – and the subsequent displacement of Palestinian people – to confiscate the land for environmental purposes to make these barren lands thrive again, such as agribusinesses and European pine forests. To depict the olive tree in a 'barren' and alien desert landscape appropriates this Israeli environmental colonial narrative of placing alien pine trees in the pretended 'empty' Palestinian desert.

Fig. 11. Khalil Rabah, *Grounding*, 2022, Installation View, Alula. Photo: Lance Gerber. Courtesy: Khalil Rabah

Just as in the work *Grafting*, there are also soil patches of various hues placed around the olive trees signifying that they are displaced and in exile. It therefore touches upon the same message *Grafting* is conveying: The entanglement of human and more-than-human lives in Palestine and their rootedness in the Palestinian landscape, while being displaced.

The huddle of trees looks like an olive grove field but are simultaneously placed in a perfect round circle, something that does not occur often in nature as well as in traditional agricultural fields. This suggests that they were planted, rather than growing there naturally. The circle is to emphasize their alien status, they look unnatural and out of place in this 'empty' desert. All these elements evoke feelings of exile and displacement; while some displaced life forms may thrive, others will wither under taxing conditions.

These components refer to several things. First, the steadfastness, or *sumud*. As argued, the olive tree symbolizes the Palestinian ecology and people's tenacity and resistance to the Israeli occupation. Khalil Rabah conveys that the olive tree – and thus the Palestinian people – can survive anywhere, even if they are uprooted from Palestine and planted in an alien environment, even in a barren desert.

In the desert, which is often referred to as being empty and dead, Rabah's small but densely populated circle of trees symbolizes a form of life. This symbolism touches on the environmental orientalist imaginaries of the Middle Eastern desert being barren and uninhabited, where scarcity is the norm rather than the exception. Originating in European colonization, myths have been used for environmental descriptions and scientific research on Arab countries and served as justification for (environmental) colonial interventions.[159] Western countries had to come, 'save,' and develop these lands to its potential: The region was deteriorated and turned into a desert by mismanagement of the local Arab people, but Western nations will restore the lush, verdant, and prosperous environment of biblical times. It allowed European powers to intervene and use the local territory for their own economic benefits.[160]

Nowadays, neoliberal and capitalist projects, frequently with a green colonialist twist to it, are reinforcing these colonial linkages.[161] A subcategory of environmental colonialism, 'Green Colonialism' is the continuation of these neoliberal practices but then under the disguise of 'green' growth.[162] In the name of sustainability, environmental conservation and climate change mitigation, nature is being commodified and exploited. As Klein argues, "'Green' emphasizes the weaponization of environmentalism in the process of colonial

[159] D.K. Davis, "Imperialism, Orientalism and The Environment in The Middle East: History, Policy, Power, and Practice," in *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East*, eds. D.K. Davis and E.Burke (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 1 & 4.
[160] Idem, pp. 2 – 3; Corey Ross, "Cultivating the Colonies: Agriculture, Development, and Environment," in *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World,* ed. Ross Corey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 307.
[161] Huggan and Tiffin, "Green Postcolonialism," pp. 2 – 3; Sasa, "Oppressive Pines," p. 1.
[162] Sasa, "Oppressive Pines," *Politics* (2022), p. 1.

violence."[163] Similar to 'green grabbing,' resources are extracted and land expropriated for environmental 'green' purposes.[164]

Similar, Zionists produced representations of Palestine as empty, waiting for its 'chosen people' to return: 'The land without a people for a people without a land'. Palestinians had deteriorated the 'Jewish Holy Land' for hundreds of years and European Jews had to take control and 'make the desert bloom' again. The Zionist movement claimed that Palestinian 'traditional' agricultural practices were not only unsustainable environmentally but also economically. It was necessary to implement 'modern' European agricultural techniques, build forests through intensive irrigation, and plant trees, in order to stop land degradation and desertification.[165] For this cause, native olive trees were being uprooted to make place for European pine forests.

The main drive behind the planting of these national forests and the stimulation of agriculture is The Jewish National Fund (JNF). It was founded in 1901 to aid the initial wave of Jewish immigrants who were settling in Palestine, successfully raising huge sums of money to buy and develop land from absent landowners and expelled local Palestinian farmers, helping in what would eventually become known as The State of Israel.[166] Since then, the JNF has described itself as an charitable international environmental organization and promoted "a Jewish conception of the environment – which is European, afforested, recreational, and universalized."[167]

Nowadays, the JNF has already planted over 250 million – alien – trees, stating that "once a desert-nation, today Israel has blossomed into a garden oasis."[168] The JNF claims that by the planting of these forests, they counteracted desertification, deforestation and increased soil preservation.[169] They present these forests as green efforts to protect the 'local' (read: Israeli) ecosystem and fight climate change.[170] The JNF and Israel position themselves as the predecessors in addressing climate change, portraying themselves as a green democracy and

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[163] Naomi Klein, "Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering In a Warming World," *London Review of Books* 38:11, June 2, 2016, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n11/naomi-klein/let-them-drown.
[164] James Fairhead, Melissa Leach & Ian Scoones, "Green Grabbing: A New Appropriation of Nature?" *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39:2 (2012), p. 237.
[165] Paul Kohlbry, "To Cover the Land in Green: Rain-fed Agriculture and Anti-Colonial Land Reclamation in Palestine," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2022), p. 5.
[166] Corey Balsam, "Tree Planting as Pedagogy," *JNF eBook Volume 4* (2011), http://stopthejnf.org/documents/JNFeBookVol4.pdf, p. 93.
[167] Eurig Scandrett, "Open Letter To The Environmental Movement," *JNF eBook Volume 4* (2011), http://stopthejnf.org/documents/JNFeBookVol4.pdf, p. 17.
[168] "Forestry & Green Innovations," *Jewish National Fund,* Accessed July 19th, 2023, https://www.jnf.org/our-work/forestry-green-innovations.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.

eco-friendly innovators in environmental preservation, water management and desert ecology.[171]

The ecological projects of making the desert bloom indeed sound like a 'green oasis,' but are actually a form of 'green colonialism'. Also known as 'green grabbing,' the JNF grabs resources and land for a 'green' purpose, in this case to fight climate change and counter desertification and soil erosion.[172] In reality, the JNF is buying and keeping lands for Jewish-only use and ownership.[173] It has worked alongside the state of Israel to destroy villages, bulldoze Palestinian agricultural land and uproot olive trees to coercively replacing it with a 'Jewish' environment and take over the land and resources.[174] The JNF uprooted the local vegetation to plant vast swaths of European pine trees. These pines create a European 'natural' environment that is familiar to (mostly) European Zionist settlers while simultaneously serving as a 'green' promise to conserve the environment and to promise carbon off-setting in the context of rising emission levels.[175]

However, these trees contrarily deteriorate the local soil and increase desertification and water scarcity.[176] They are not native and therefore not adapted to the arid circumstances, requiring vast amounts of water. Since they absorb most of the water that is available in the ground, they damage the soil rather than ensuring its maintenance. This makes them more susceptible to germs, diseases, and wildfires. Thus, to maintain these pine forests, Israel confiscates Palestinian water resources. Simultaneously, chemicals found in pine needles that fall to the ground obliterate the neighboring smaller plants that Palestinian Bedouins and shepherds depend on for their cattle.[177]

In actuality, this 'green' colonialism is thus 'the extension of colonial relations to the environment, with the accompanying displacement of people and socio-environmental costs to peripheral places and bodies.'[178] This taps into the dual meaning of Rabah's *Grounding*: On the one hand these olive trees are a metonym for Palestinian human lives and their status of exile, on the other hand the narrative of making the desert bloom is part of the cause why

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[171] Alon Tal, "To Make a Desert Bloom: The Israeli Agricultural Adventure and the Quest for Sustainability," *Agricultural History* 81:2 (2007), p. 229.
[172] ""Forestry & Green Innovations," *Jewish National Fund.*
[173] Judith Deutsch, "JNF Greenwash," *JNF eBook Volume 4* (2011), p. 6.
[174] Scandrett, "Open Letter To The Environmental Movement," p. 17.
[175] Ben Lorber, Israel's Environmental Colonialism and Ecoapartheid," *The Bullet*, June 15, 2018, https://socialistproject.ca/2018/06/israels-environmental-colonialism-and-ecoapartheid/.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid.
[178] S. Kasmi and H. Hamouchene, "The Transition of Renewable Energies in Algeria: Systematic Delays, Economic Opportunities, and The Risks of Green Colonialism," *Jadaliyya* (2022), https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44245.

these olive trees were uprooted and the people displaced. It interlinks the symbolically represented human and more-than-human rootedness in the land, the uprooting of the Palestinian olive tree in a settler colonial setting and the consequential displacement and exile. Rabah established an olive tree 'national park' in the Saudi Arabian desert as a component of the 'national' Palestinian museum as a method to ridicule to ongoing devastation of the Palestinian ecosphere. While highlighting the *sumud* of Palestinian life, the artist also mocks Zionist pine trees by demonstrating how these alien olive trees can survive in parched conditions without the aid of large irrigation systems or the disruption and displacement of local people's lives.

4.6 Rabah's Imaginative Museum

With an imaginative museum, which translates into a real museum through its different projects like *Grafting* and *Grounding*, Rabah emphasizes three aspects. Firstly, it mocks (Western) cultural institutions. By putting objects in white-walled frames, these institutions contribute to a specific 'objective' and 'factual' narrative on history. By naming his art project a museum, he presents an alternative 'factual' history: that of the Palestinian humans and nature.

Simultaneously, it mimics these institutions in 'mummifying' Palestinian nature. It can serve as an act of nationalism: Creating a sense of rootedness and a feeling of belonging through a 'national' museum in a land without a nation. At the same time, it turns Palestinian nature into 'dead' objects of art. In a situation where Palestinian nature and people are devaluated by violence and occupation, this mummification makes the Palestinian ecology something of *value* that needs to be preserved and that has the right to belong in a stateless situation.

However, Rabah conveys that the olive tree is not just an 'object' or a materiality, but that it is part of larger socio-political and economic systems. His artworks therefore move beyond the symbolic romanticization of the Palestinian land but actually intervene in the ecology, maneuvering around occupation by planting them in an alien environment.
It underlines the general point that is being made in this thesis: Although Rabah does not expose Israeli environmental colonial practices in the literal sense of the word, he does signify that the Palestinian landscape is far from apolitical but interwoven with other forms of life and history in the West Bank, presenting a collective 'Palestinian' identity. The Palestinian people are embedded within Palestinian nature and by giving both agency and *value*, Rabah

counters Israeli environmental and settler colonial practices of destruction and erasure of Palestinian nature and culture.

The olive tree is a symbol of rootedness in the Palestinian life, identity, and landscape but is simultaneously being uprooted and displaced by Israeli environmental colonial practices. Although the olive tree is indigenous to the environment and simultaneously counters the idea that this desert is 'barren,' they are being uprooted to make place for Israeli-Zionists vegetation and Israeli economic and socio-political interventions in the Palestinian landscape. The Palestinian olive tree is metonymic: What counts for the Palestinian olive tree, also counts for Palestinian life. Not only in projects like *Grafting* and *Grounding*, but also in the mere concept of the museum, with its different expositions of natural elements from Palestine, ecological materials embody Palestinian life and culture and how it is charged with violent histories of environmental colonialism, echoing the material realities of occupation.

5. Preserving 'Political' Seeds at *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library*

The entanglement of human and more-than-human lives in the Palestinian context is not only touched upon by Khalil Rabah's *Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* but also by *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library* of Vivien Sansour. The library collects, preserves, and distributes heirloom seeds and their attached cultural and agricultural legacy. The library discloses narratives of environmental colonialism through the socio-political aspect of seeds, plants and food. Through the library, Sansour demonstrates the viability of Palestinian agriculture in the face of both local and global industrial farming. Just as the other two art initiatives, Sansour's work demonstrates how Palestinian ecology is intertwined with the arts and how, as a result, the arts cannot be understood in isolation from Palestine's natural world and its social and cultural interactions. By this, she highlights and reaffirms that Palestinians have a history, a culture, and a memory that are worth of passing down, instilling cultural pride. Sansour invigorates the Palestinian way of life which is *sumud* in the face of colonial erasure of the local culture and nature. This chapter begins by explaining what *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library* is. Then it discusses the context of Israeli environmental colonialism and global neoliberal agriculture, as well as how seed diversification and food autonomy counter that. Lastly, the *culture* in agriculture is explained through the different practices of the seed library.

5.1 *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library*

Humans have relied on preserving seeds for millennia to sow crops the next year. Global firms, however, significantly dominated the seed market in the 20th century as they sought to select cultivars best suited for mechanized harvest and lengthy shelf lives. These genetically modified seeds are referred to as hybrid seeds. Used in industrial agriculture, these seeds need to be purchased again every year and are highly dependent on synthetic pesticides, fertilizers and intensive irrigation systems.[179]

Hybrid seeds and new techniques were also introduced in Palestine after 1948 as part of an intensive Zionist campaign to 'modernize' Palestinian farmers. Born out of the same environmental orientalist discourse of 'making the desert bloom' discussed with Rabah, it reduced Palestinian independence and prioritized food quantity over quality.[180] Next to the 'reforestation' of Palestine, 'making the desert bloom' was presented as an agricultural revolution. Jewish immigrants started industrial agribusinesses to revive the agricultural lands of their ancient homeland.[181] Throughout the years, these capitalist – and later neoliberal - policies have forced Palestinian farmers to give up their heirloom seeds, posing a continuous threat to Palestinian biodiversity.

The past decennia, Israel has increased Palestinian dependency through the neoliberalization of the agricultural market and the monopoly of Israeli industrialized agribusinesses, leaving most Palestinian farmers up to waged day-labor. With support of foreign donors and the PA, the promotion of monocrop cultures has made Palestinian farmers more susceptible to intermediaries who set the prices and dictate the crop types, while the crops themselves are more subject to pests and diseases and thus more reliant on fertilizers and chemicals, leading to soil degradation, shortages, and scarcity. These farmers have lost control over their lands, designated as Area C in 1967, while Israel regulates the import and export of Palestinian agricultural goods, which they must sell for extremely low prices on the free market, since they cannot compete with Israeli agribusinesses that receive significant government subsidies and benefit from Palestinian cheap labor. Through the introduction of hybrid seeds and the neoliberalization of Palestinian agriculture, Israel weakens the agricultural sector and jeopardizes Palestinian lives and culture.[182]

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[179] A Gwynn Henderson, "Preface," in *Kentucky Heirloom Seeds: Growing, Eating, Saving,* eds. Bill Best & Dobree Adams (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), p. xxviii.
[180] Vivien Sansour & Alaa Tartir, "Palestinian Farmers Lose Land for Failed Economic Zones," *AlJazeera*, August 17, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/8/17/palestinian-farmers-lose-land-for-failed-economic-zones.
[181] Tal, "To Make a Desert Bloom," pp. 228 – 229.
[182] Sansour & Tartir, "Palestinian Farmers Lose Land for Failed Economic Zones."

The Palestinian artist Vivien Sansour exposes and counters these environmental colonial practices through her *Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library*, situated in the Palestinian village Battir. By scouring markets for *baladi* seeds (literally: country seeds, freely translated as 'native') being grown in Palestine, she collects, preserves, and distributes seeds among Palestinian farmers and people, fostering a communal connectedness and upholding the Palestinian cultural values attached to these heirloom seeds. Sansour shares Rabah's desire to preserve Palestinian more-than-human lives and the associated cultural legacy, not by 'mummifying' its ecology, but by emphasizing its vitality and vigor.

Fig. 12. Vivien Sansour, *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library Project*, 2023, Seeds

The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library is not only a way to expose these developments, but also to counter them. Sansour states: "Heirlooms, which have been carefully selected by our ancestors throughout thousands of years of research and imagination, form one of the last strongholds of resistance to the privatization of our life source: seed."[183] The conservation of these seeds are a form of survival and resistance against the violent colonial background they have to grow in. "Farmers who can produce their own food and make their own seeds represent a threat to any hegemonic power that wants to control a population. If we are autonomous, we really have a lot more space to create our own systems, to be more

[183] "Palestine Heirloom Seed Library," *VivienSansour,* accessed July 17, 2023, https://viviensansour.com/Palestine-Heirloom.

subversive."[184] In the next paragraph, we will see how Israeli hegemonic power manifests itself in the Palestinian environment and how this is countered by the revival of *baladi* seeds.

Fig. 13. Vivien Sansour, *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library Project*, 2018, Installation Dar Jacir Landscape Project, Bethlehem. Photo Courtesy: Vivien Sansour

5.2 Neoliberalization and Environmental Colonialization of Palestine's Agriculture

The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library promotes local sustainable food and an autonomous agricultural economy which is less reliant on Israeli industrialized agriculture, Israeli capital and food commodities and hybrid seeds. To understand the neoliberal and colonial agricultural and food system Sansour is fighting against, this system first needs to be explained in the Palestinian-Israeli context.

Environmental colonization is attained by acquiring control of a nation's food production system and agricultural practices, compelling the cultivation of food and fiber crops to remain

[184] Vivien Sansour, "Seeds of Resistance: The Woman Fighting Occupation with Agriculture," interview by Joshua Leifer, *972Mag*, March 8, 2018, https://www.972mag.com/seeds-of-resistance-the-woman-fighting-occupation-through-agriculture/.

the cornerstone of the colonized domestic economy.[185] As argued before, it increased the dependency of the colonized and uses 'development' as a pretext for interference. New systems of resource governance and the rapid expansion of commodity production are also involved.[186] In a neocolonial sense, these policies are extrapolated to a neoliberal context: This includes both the production of food and the accumulation of capital through neoliberal policies.[187]

Israeli agricultural neoliberal policies and neoliberalization significantly altered and affected the Palestinian ecosystem and agriculture. With the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, Israel forcibly merged the Palestinian economy into its own. Israel encouraged agricultural 'modernization' with the goal of tying Palestinian farmers to the agri-technical infrastructure of Israel. "The occupation has convinced a lot of people that we really need hybrid seeds and agricultural technologies to 'modernize' our farming practices, to 'develop.'"[188] It changed Palestinian agriculture from an independent, sustainable and egalitarian system to one that is heavily reliant on Israeli chemical imports and hybrid seeds, forced to reform to industrial and monoculture cropping.

Just as the commodification of land results in land degradation, as seen with *Sakiya*, Sansour's seed library exposes that the acceleration of agricultural production under the guise of environmental protection is also part of these neoliberal policies. These neoliberal forms' effects on agriculture and the local environment comprises "land degradation in the form of deforestation, soil exhaustion, salinization and erosion."[189] These policies are also known as 'accumulation by dispossession,' which comprises depriving local people from their land and resources to protect the environment. It is based on Marx's theory of 'primitive accumulation,' which entails the seizure of property and the eviction of local residents to expose the land to privatized capital accumulation. To define the contemporary neoliberal practices that are founded on this primitive accumulation, Harvey introduced the term 'accumulation by dispossession,' contending that it is a continuous process.[190]

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[185] Moushumi Biswas, "Seeds of Neocolonialism in Development Discourse: A Study of Neoliberal "Megarhetorics" of Global Development and Ecofeminist Resistance," *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing* (2017), p. 2; Ross, "Cultivating the Colonies," p. 307.
[186] Ross, "Cultivating the Colonies: Agriculture, Development, and Environment," p. 307.
[187] Biswas, "Seed of Neocolonialism in Development Discourse," pp. 2 – 3.
[188] Sansour, "Seeds of Resistance," interview by Joshua Leifer.
[189] Diana K. Davis, "Neoliberalism, Environmentalism, and Agricultural Restructuring in Morocco," *The Geographical Journal* 172:2 (2006), p. 89.
[190] David Harvey, "Accumulation by Dispossession," *The New Imperialism*, ed. David Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 137- 182.

Neoliberal policies also intensify Israeli hegemonic power over Palestine.[191] The Israeli domination of Palestinian import and export and the additional imposed heavy taxes result in rising costs of production for small-scale and diversified Palestinian farmers. Palestinian agriculture is becoming increasingly unprofitable as a result of Palestinian farmers having to compete with heavily subsidized and cheap Israeli food production and the additional increased prices for Palestinians themselves due to hefty import and export tariffs.[192] Direct forms of Israeli violence, such as uprooted trees, destroyed crops, denial of harvest and other forms of indirect violence such as chemical waste polluting Palestine's ecosystem, or the control and degradation of natural resources and soil, worsens the situation.[193] In the meanwhile, Israeli farmers are subsidized by the state, meaning that they can sell their products for lower costs. It decreases Palestine's economic self-sufficiency which pushes Palestinian farmers to give up their lands and frequently forces them to work in the Israeli day labor market.[194]

The colonial purpose of taking control of Palestine's geography as well as its economy is perpetrated through 'accumulation by dispossession.'[195] The occupation and reorganization of land in 1967 prepared the ground for Israeli agribusiness to expand and furthered the marginalization of Palestinian rural communities reliant on farming.[196] The Israeli annexation of Palestinian land was normalized in Area C and the PA further deteriorated this situation by adopting a neoliberal market policy for Palestinian agriculture, called the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (2008). This was under pressure of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and different foreign NGOs, in order to receive its monetary loans from them.[197] In recent years also under pressure of international donors and Israel, the

[191] Panosetti & Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property in the West Bank," 25.
[192] O. Tesdell, "Shadow Spaces: Territory, Sovereignty, and The Question of Palestinian Cultivation," *Ph.D Dissertation, University of Minnesota* (2013), p. 86; Panosetti & Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property in the West Bank," p. 16.
[193] Panosetti & Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property in the West Bank," p. 25.
[194] Kohlbry, "To Cover The Land in Green," p. 7.
[195] Biswas, "Seeds of Neocolonialism in Development Discourse," p. 2.
[196] Courtney Fullilove & Abdallah Alamari, "Baladi Seeds in the oPt: Populations as Objects of Preservations and Units of Analysis," in *Towards Responsible Plant Data Linkage: Data Challenges for Agricultural Research and Development*, eds. Hugh F. Williamson & Sabina Leonelli (Cham: Springer, 2022), p. 72.
[197] Lately, some scholars refer to this as the 'NGO'ization of Palestine,' which entails that the international development aid, the WTO and IMF have been used to further a colonial agenda, bringing Palestine in a greater subordinate position. This international aid forces Palestine to cooperate with Israel and hegemonic donors, negatively impacting Palestinian culture, agricultural output and civil society.
See for example:
Lama Arda & Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, "Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood: The NGOization of Palestine," *Business & Society* 60:7 (2021), pp. 1675 – 1707; Panosetti & Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property in the West Bank," pp. 10 – 31; Fullilove & Alamari, "Baladi Seeds in the oPt," pp. 65 - 84; P. Salzmann, "A Food Regime's Perspective on Palestine: Neoliberalism and The Question of Land and Food Sovereignty Within The Context of Occupation," *Journal für Entwicklunspolitik* 34:1 (2018), pp. 14 – 34.

PA is purchasing land belonging to small-scale farmers, to create so-called export-oriented 'industrial zones.'[198]

The neoliberal deals made between Israel and the PA, drawing back on the common story with environmental colonial rhetoric of working together with the local elite, further corrodes the people's faith in the PA.[199] By opening the agriculture to a free market, the PA does not safeguard its own farmers. However, people, such as Sansour, do see opportunities in protecting the natural environment and interacting, and occasionally even merging, with life that is not human.[200]

Sansour emphasizes that the neoliberalization and subordinating of the Palestinian agricultural market should not only be allocated to Israel. Israeli environmental colonial policies do not exist in isolation from global neo-colonial trends.[201] This is evident with the history of wheat seeds. Fullilove & Alimari argue that international wheat breeding programs helped transform Palestine into colonization targets. "While Israeli occupation took on distinctive forms, it shares features with the neoliberal, globalized food system derived from European imperial geopolitics: Specifically (…) land grabbing, or accumulation by dispossession within the corporate food regime."[202] It is thus not only Israel, but also the global neoliberal market, and Western institutions such as the WTO and IMF that pushes Palestine into this market.

These neoliberal policies also result in the intensification of monocrop farming in the West Bank to compete on the Israeli-dominated agricultural market.[203] Therefore, throughout the years most of the Palestinian farmers converted to Israeli imported and heavily taxed hybrid seeds. Monocropping ensures that Palestinian farmers can cultivate more of the same vegetables for cheaper prices, but the additional costs for the equipment, the precariousness of crops and prices, lower quality of products, soil erosion (and therefore desertification) and cultural detachment proved to make it less sustainable.[204]

Philip McMichael, "A Food Regime Analysis of The 'World Food Crisis'," *Agriculture and Human Values* 26:4 (2009), pp. 281 – 295.

[198] Alaa Tartir, "PA Industrial Zones: Cementing Statehood or Occupation?" *AlShabaka*, February 7, 2013, https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/pa-industrial-zones-cementing-statehood-or-occupation/.

[199] Anne Meneley, "Hope in the Ruins: Seeds, Plants, and Possibilities of Regeneration," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4:1 (2021), p. 162.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Sansour, "Seeds of Resistance," interview by Joshua Leifer.

[202] Fullilove & Alamari, "Baladi Seeds in the oPt," p. 72.

[203] Biswas, "Seeds of Neocolonialism in Development Discourse," p. 2.

[204] Ibid.

Fig. 14. Vivien Sansour, *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library Project*, 2018, Dar Jacir Landscape Project, Bethlehem. Photo Courtesy: Vivien Sansour

Sansour's seed library shows that the Palestinians are not only dispossessed of their land but also of their autonomy, livelihoods, and culture to top-down neoliberal impositions in service of Israeli agribusinesses and multinational corporations, often in collaboration with the PA. It is not only the endangerment and loss of more-than-human lives but also the economic, political and social de-development attached to it. Israel reshapes the Palestinian landscape and natural habitats for their own capital accumulation.[205] "Through its ceaseless expansion, agriculture progressively eats into indigenous territory, a primitive accumulation that turns native flora and fauna into a dwindling resource."[206] Local food production and seed preservation is being eradicated to decrease Palestine's self-sufficiency, resulting in monocropping and food insecurity.

Sansour 'intervenes' in these neoliberal processes by saving heirloom seeds and keeping the Palestinian cultural heritage alive, or as Sansour herself calls it, serving as an act of 'agri-resistance.'[207] Finding, saving, and distributing these heirloom seed varieties – seeds

[205] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and The Elimination of the Native," p. 395.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Vivien Sansour & Juman Simaan, "Tales of Agri-Resistance," *Resilience*, January 4, 2017, https://www.resilience.org/stories/2017-01-04/tales-of-agri-resistance/.

that are open pollinated and non-genetically modified – are a sustainable alternative to the Israeli corporate seed monopoly. Reviving local biodiversity and agricultural methods are a way to push back against environmental colonial tendencies and climate change. Contrarily to hybrid seeds that are reliant on chemical fertilizers and produced in labs – and thus not adjusted to Palestine's ecology – Palestine's ecology hosts plants and crop varieties that are adapted to drought, salinity, and high temperatures, partly because of human domestication and natural modification, that began around 12,000 years ago.[208] Heirloom seeds do not require fertilizers, pesticides and intensive irrigation systems, since they are rain-fed.[209] Short-term, these seeds and traditional crop-growing serve as an insurance against water and electricity shortages produced by Israel. Long-term, they increase soil fertility, counter desertification and are more prone to resist climate changes.

Through the seed library, Sansour stimulates sustainable and diversified agriculture. This biodiversity also increases soil fertility and counters desertification. Monocropping and hybrid seeds are primarily focused on business and profit, which weakens the farmer and accelerates soil erosion. Sansour explains that if a monoculture farm contracts a disease, all crops get polluted and perish. Biodiversity ensures that only a small part will be contaminated and die. In a diverse farm the different types of plants cooperate. Also, rotating crops will maintain the soil alive and diverse: While tomatoes usurp a vast amount of nitrogen, *ful* (fava beans) are a nitrogen fixer.[210]

Seeds are dispersed, fed, and pollinated by more-than-humans: the soil, bacteria's, birds, insects, rain, and other natural forces. Johnston argues that "seeds germinate, grow, die and evolve within ongoing networks of co-constitution, then heirloom seed saving is an act of 'relational justice' in which human and plant world are co-evolutional."[211] These various heirloom seeds are thus a source of power and assembles the community – a community that not only consists of humans, but also of pollinators, bees, animals, plants.

Sumud is therefore an important element of *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library:* The idea of dynamic resistance and steadfastness to the occupation that involves different social groups, such as artists and farmers, but also different types of local lives. This

[208] Fullilove & Alamari, "Baladi Seeds in the oPt," p. 71.
[209] Vivien Sansour, "Palestine & The Politics of Seed Preservation," interview by Mikey Muhanna, *Afrika*, 12 July, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2R6CXYWe8U.
[210] Vivien Sansour, "Palestine & The Politics of Seed Preservation," interview by Mikey Muhanna.
[211] Jessica Johnston, "We Are All Seeds: Heirloom Seed Saving, Multispecies Justice, and Resisting Colonial Erasures in the Occupied Palestinian Territories," *Environmental History Now*, April 18, 2023, https://envhistnow.com/2023/04/18/we-are-all-seeds-heirloom-seed-saving-multispecies-justice-and-resisting-colonial-erasures-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territories/#_ftn14.

community-based agricultural strategy is to transform cultivation into a site of collective anti-Israel and thus anti-colonial contestation.[212]

5.3 Why Battir?

It is no coincidence that the seed library is situated in the village of Battir, an agricultural village in the rural outskirts of Jerusalem. The village used to be known for the abundance of water in the area with over twenty natural springs and was also called 'the basket of vegetables.' Nowadays, the village is famous for its unique ways of farming: An ancient egalitarian distribution system of water, supported by ancient stone terraces and an rain-fed irrigation system that goes back to Roman times.[213] Battir is one of the last farming villages that still uses this irrigation system, securing the village a place on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014.[214]

The heirloom seeds thrive best in an environment that is dry and arid and depends on rain-fed irrigation systems. Many heirloom seeds are referred to as *ba'al* seeds, wich are seeds that do not require irrigation but dependent on rain. If they are winter *ba'al,* they live off of the rain. If they are summer *ba'al,* they live off both the moisture that is retained in the soil from the rainy season, as well as dew.'[215] Since Battir is one of the last places left with rain-fed water systems, Sansour situated the library here to revive the *baladi* seeds to its full potential.[216]

In Battir, the ancient irrigation system is community-based. It serves as an egalitarian distribution system that delivers water to the terraces, based on a time-managed rotation scheme.[217] This means that the families in the village are jointly responsible for water management. Every family gets allocated the water for one day a week. Since there are eight families living in the village, a week consist of eight days instead of seven.[218] This type of

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[212] Panosetti & Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property in the West Bank," p. 20.
[213] Anne Meneley, "Hope in the Ruins," p. 162; "Battir: A Palestinian Village," *Bethlehem*, March 2, 2020, https://www.bethlehem.edu/2020/03/02/battir-a-palestinian-village/.
[214] "Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir," *UNESCO*, accessed July 27, 2023, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1492/.
[215] Sansour, "Seeds of Resistance," interview by Joshua Leifer.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Gary Arndt, "Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir," *Everything Everywhere*, Accessed July 27th, 2023, https://everything-everywhere.com/palestine-land-of-olives-jerusalem-battir/.
[218] Lina Isma'il & Dr. Muna Dajani, "Farmers of Battir," *Heirich Böll Stiftung: Palestine and Jordan*, June 5, 2021, https://ps.boell.org/en/2021/06/05/farmers-battir.

water tenure is native to Palestine, where water has been governed by 'common property regimes' for hundreds of years, so that all farmers benefit in equal rights.[219]

The village, its springs, stone terraces and egalitarian irrigation system are however continuously threatened by Israeli occupation, also endangering the survival of heirloom seeds.[220] Battir is situated in the 'seam zone,' a pocked of territory sandwiched between the physical Israeli Separation Wall and the international acknowledged armistice Green Line. This 'ghettoization' of the area and the reliance on neoliberal Israeli agribusiness results in vast areas of land being abandoned, putting them in danger of Israeli annexation. That is also one of the reasons why Palestinian farmers give in with monoculture cropping and Israeli agribusiness; it is a tactic to resist and an effort to stay on their own lands.[221] Additionally, infused with the same neoliberal rationality, the fast reduction in available land ensures that villagers and farmers adopt more capital-intensive forms of agriculture. They must enhance their productivity and output, if they want to earn the same amount of money from their remaining lands.[222]

Next to commodification, Battir's agricultural stone terraces and water system are endangered by the expansion of settlements and Israel's 'Green Lungs,' resulting in Battir being enclosed by two Israeli national parks, namely Refaim River Park and the Begin Park. The planning of a new Israeli settlement on a nearby hilltop might deteriorate the already overtaxed water sources in the neighborhood.[223] Water scarcity will this become an increased problem for Palestinian farmers.

5.4 Edible Plants, Knowledge Production and 'Making the Desert Bloom'

The environmental colonialist tendencies in agriculture and food production mentioned above originate from the same green colonial narrative of Israel's 'preservation' of nature in the light of climate change, as explained in the context of Rabah's museum. Part of 'making the

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[219] David B. Brooks, Julie Trottier & Giulia Giordano, "Supporting Palestinian Agriculture," in *Transboundary Water Issues in Israel, Palestine, and The Jordan River Basin*, eds. David B. Brooks, Julie Trottier & Giulia Giordano (Singapore: Springer, 2019), p. 65.
Similar, land tenure is frequently maintained by crop sharing: The farmer or sharecropper gives a portion of their crops to the land owner, meaning that they both run the risk of having a bad crop or a drop in market prices. Nowadays, with agribusiness, often these sharecroppers are replaced with seasonal or wage workers.
[220] Panosetti & Roudart, "Evolving Regimes of Land Use and Property in the West Bank," p. 20.
[221] Idem, p. 24.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ilan Ben Zion, "In the West Bank, UNESCO Site Battir Could Face A Water Shortage From A Planned Israeli Settlement," *AP News,* June 21, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/west-bank-israel-palestinians-settlements-environment-water-7b03b43c007b9fb84f6dee42a6edf7f1.

desert bloom' was an agricultural revolution, in which Jewish settlers would pursue the romantic Zionist dream of a fertile and productive rural homeland.[224] Sansour argues that:

> we have been so trained to think we cannot produce anything, that we are not good enough. I am talking about us as Palestinians, but it is something I notice with most colonized populations. In the revival (…) of agroecological traditions a lot of people are finding pride in their ancestry, which before they were told was 'primitive.'[225]

Israel's environmental colonial discourse still subtly makes use of this argument of primitivism, Israel argues that "they have a stronger claim to sovereignty over the country because they have exploited its agricultural potential more efficiently than the Palestinians ever could have done."[226] The seed library challenges this colonial rhetoric since it exposes and counters the industrialized agribusiness and its degradation of soil fertility and natural resources.

As briefly touched upon in the chapter on Rabah, these colonial orientalist images are rooted in hegemonic forms of knowledge production, which result in unequal power relations.[227] Scientific knowledge is instrumentalized to advance maximalization of productivity, efficiency and profit at the costs of diversity and adaptability to climate change. Science legitimizes political intervention by claiming apolitical and impartial objectivity. Foucault refers to this as 'governmentality,' in which the knowledge discourse of the hegemonic power is usually accepted as 'the truth.'[228] However, Foucault also argues that knowledge production is a form of power and is thus always subjective, promoting a certain hegemonic and environmental imperialist power relation.[229]

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[224] Alon Tal, "To Make a Desert Bloom," pp. 228 – 229.
[225] Gawan Mac Greigair, "Palestine's Seed Library Finds Fertile Ground to Pioneer Sustainable Farming," *The New Arab*, February 8, 2018, https://www.newarab.com/analysis/palestines-seed-library-finds-fertile-ground-forgotten-fruit.
[226] Alan George, ""Making The Desert Bloom" A Myth Examined," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8:2 (1979), pp. 88 – 89.
[227] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), https://monoskop.org/images/5/5d/Foucault_Michel_Power_Knowledge_Selected_Interviews_and_Other_Writings_1972-1977.pdf.
This is part of the Foucault's theory on Biopower, which is an interesting aspect but beyond the scope of this thesis to mention here.
[228] Nikolas Rose, Pat O'Malley & Mariana Valverde, "Governmentality," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 2:1 (2006), pp. 86 – 87.
[229] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*."

In the meantime, local knowledge is marginalized and approached as non-scientific: The native agricultural knowledge is deemed useless and erased in favor of Israeli neoliberal and green colonial policies.[230] This makes heirloom seeds and its socio-cultural ties go extinct. Sansour reclaims autonomy and legitimacy by promoting local knowledge. She finds solutions to environmental crises in collaboration with the local farming community who's knowledge and experience is based on the direct interaction with nature.[231] This can be an effective resource for and adaptive capacity in response to climate change and to resist the deterioration of Palestine's ecology due to environmental colonial practices.

Hegemonic knowledge production that leads to environmental injustice also plays a part in Sansour's seed library. Sansour collects seeds of different edible plants such as '*akkoub* and *za'atar*. These wild plants are native to Palestine's ecology and the foraging of these plants have been an ancient practice and an important part of Palestinian cuisine.[232] However, in recent years, Israel carried out different 'nature preservation' laws under the green colonialist narrative of 'protecting' nature. This resulted in land not only being converted into forests, but also areas being transformed into 'nature reserves.' It means that these landscapes must be left unaltered and Palestinians are no longer allowed to continue their traditions of foraging edible plants.[233] This resulted in most of the edible plants being classified by Israel as endangered.[234]

Although increased demand and overharvesting are contributors to endangerment, they are not the primary cause. "No one talks about the fact that we, the Jewish Israelis destroy much more *za'atar* than the Arabs pick. Do you know how many *za'atar* populations were uprooted by bulldozers? (…) But the Arab? He picks five kilograms and gets fined."[235]

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[230] Rosemary Hill et al., "Knowledge Co-Production for Indigenous Adaptation Pathways: Transform Post-colonial Articulation Complexes to Empower Local Decision-Making," *Global Environmental Change* 65 (2020), p. 2.
[231] O. Esber, "Iraq and the Arab World on the Edge of the Abyss: A Conversation with Kurdish Iraqi Journalist and Environmental Affairs Researcher, Khalid Suleiman," *Jadaliyya,* June 22, 2022, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/41324.
[232] Anne Meneley, "Hope In The Ruins: Seeds, Plants, and Possibilities of Regeneration," *Nature and Space* 4:1 (2021), pp. 158 – 172.
[233] T.J.W. Mitchell, "Landscape and Idolatry," *Landscape Perspectives on Palestine* (Birzeit University, 5th International Conference, 1998), p. 13; T.J.W. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power,* ed. T.J.W. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 15.
[234] T.J.W. Mitchell, "Landscape and Idolatry," p. 13.
[235] Interview with professor Nativ Dudaii, a botanist who has research za'atar.
Anne Meneley, "Eating Wild: Hosting the Food Heritage of Palestine," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 44:2 (2021), p. 210.

Nowadays, hundreds of Palestinians are fined or trialed, caught collecting these plants. In some cases, people and children also have been shot dead while collecting edible plants, with the accusation that they formed a threat to Israeli security.[236]

According to Palestinian artist Jumana Manna, who made a documentary about foraging under Israeli occupation, the Israeli nature preservation laws are an 'ecological veil' to further alienate Palestinians from their own lands.[237] All the while, Israeli state representatives insist on their scientific expertise and duty to protect. This insinuates that Palestinians are not capable of managing and maintaining their own surroundings. These Israeli laws are a form of green colonialism and greenwashing. Sansour's project stresses that edible plants, just as seeds, have been turned into an instrument of oppression. To counter their endangerment and the loss of cultural food legacies, Sansour grows *'akkoub* and *za'atar* in her agricultural fields and preserves and distributes them among fellow farmers.

5.5 The *Culture* in Palestinian Agriculture

The preservation of heirloom seeds is not only about preserving Palestinian food and sustainable agricultural practices, but also about safeguarding the cultural aspects attached to the seeds. The library's website has the slogan: 'Farmers Are Artists,' which encapsulates Sansour's interest in the relationship between art and agriculture. Sansour reasons that agriculture is actually comprised of 'agri,' local agricultural methods, and 'culture,' the customs and cultural legacy connected to the lands, vital for the community's identity.[238] In this context *baladi* does not only refer to being adapted to the local soil and being immune to diseases, corrosion and drought, but also to overlapping oral histories, literature and agrarian knowledge.[239] Just as Qawasmi from *Sakiya*, Sansour underlines: "You see art everywhere. Our nature is as much art as the things that you see in the museum. Art is about imagination, combining different art worlds and new ways to build stories."[240] Similar to *Sakiya* and *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*, Sansour indicates that art should not be perceived in the white-walled Western perspective on art. It is embedded in nature and life.

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[236] Michael Schaeffer Omer-Man, "IDF Kills Palestinian Suspected of Vandalism," *972Mag,* March 19, 2019, https://www.972mag.com/idf-kills-palestinian-suspected-of-vandalism/.
[237] Jumana Manna, *Foragers*, 2022, Documentary.
[238] Vivien Sansour, "The Palestine Heirloom Seed Library and El Beir, Arts and Seeds," *Oxford Real Farming Conference* (January 14, 2019), https://www.resilience.org/stories/2019-01-14/the-palestine-heirloom-seed-library-and-el-beir-arts-and-seeds/.
[239] Fullilove & Alimari, "Baladi Seeds in the oPt," pp. 70 – 71.
[240] Vivien Sansour, "Palestine & The Politics of Seed Preservation," interview by Mikey Muhanna.

In Palestine, there has been a growing interest in heirloom seeds. According to Sansour, this is due to the seed library's ability to find and share the stories and memories attached to these seed varieties.[241] "Building the library has revealed just how integral heirloom varieties are to Palestinian culture, and how they open the floodgates to individual, familial and communal memory."[242] "The idea is to keep a culture alive. Seeds and plants, bred in harmony with Palestinian micro-climates, and the stories about them, become material vehicles for the maintenance and transmission of Palestinian culture."[243] Therefore, the power of the seeds' stories should be recognized.

Where Sakiya talks about intangible heritage in the Palestinian landscape in terms of shrines, songs, dance, and folklore stories, Sansour draws on this cultural history by giving seminars on the preservation of seeds and its relation to Canaanite gods and beliefs. Before monotheism made its way into the area, there were already a lot of folk beliefs and stories in Palestine that were rooted in animism. They influenced agricultural and religious traditions and permeated later monotheistic beliefs.[244] Passed down for millennia, they influenced cultic practices, social norms, architectural designs and aesthetics, and are still practiced today.[245] Arabic sayings proclaim that farmers are not using nature, but *serving* it. It is a relation based on reciprocity rather than (ab)using the soil.[246] By presenting the farmer as artist or designer, Sansour highlights the dynamism and aesthetics of Palestinian agricultural life.[247]

As an addition to the library, Sansour started the projects *El Beir Arts And Seeds* and *The Travelling Kitchen*. The art studio functions as a shop with seeds and crafts but also as a way to work together with different Palestinian artists. For example, she assisted Larissa Sansour with the making of her film *Heirloom*, which documents the 'eco-apocalypse' occurring in modern-day Palestine by fusing local myths, sci-fi, documentary, and historical material.[248] The film, alternating between fact and fiction, preserves the cultural mythological heritage of the local lands and visualizes the seed library's overall vision: Sansour warns for and aims to counter neoliberal agribusinesses and monocropping, which will eventually

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[241] "The Seed Queen of Palestine," *Aljazeera,* YouTube, December 10, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoexxUOeZak.
[242] Gawan Mac Greigair, "Palestine's Seed Library Finds Fertile Ground to Pioneer Sustainable Farming."
[243] Anne Menely, "Hope in the Ruins," p. 164.
[244] Ali Qleibo, "Canaanites, Christians, and the Palestinian Agricultural Calendar," *Kyoto Bulleting of Islamic Area Studies* 3:1 (2009), pp. 10 – 11.
[245] Sansour, "Seeds of Resistance," interview by Joshua Leifer.
[246] "The Seed Queen of Palestine," *Aljazeera,* YouTube; Qleibo, "Canaanites, Christians, and the Palestinian Agricultural Calendar," pp. 10 – 11.
[247] Vivien Sansour, "Palestine & The Politics of Seed Preservation," interview by Mikey Muhanna.
[248] Nat Muller, "Heirloom – Larissa Sansour," *Visible*, accessed September 3, 2023, https://www.visibleproject.org/blog/project/heirloom-bethlehem-palestine/.

deteriorate the ecology and soil into an apocalyptic world. The latter is a mobile kitchen that travels throughout Palestine, where she prepares traditional Palestinian cuisine using her harvest from *baladi* seeds to engage Palestinians with the project.

5.6 Dynamism of Seeds

Sansour calls her heirloom seed project a 'library' – and not an archive or museum – because, as with Rabah's museum, an archive suggests that these seeds are mummified and dead. Sansour wants to emphasize the constant sharing and using of heirloom seeds, which is crucial for its preservation. It is not about saving the seeds, but about reviving them. They should be kept alive, shared with the community and planted each year. Therefore, she collaborates with many local farmers and the library acts as a hub for the constant exchange of seeds, techniques and tools. We have seen this 'community farming' with Sakiya as well: A more nature-driven, egalitarian and social form of farming that results in local sustainable food production. In this way, the library helps Palestinian farmers to resist buying cheap Israeli seeds but rather plant long-forgotten native seeds.

Palestine's ecology, seeds and 'traditional' farming methods are not static or simples, but rather have been developed over centuries. Considering Israeli environmental colonial practices, Sansour wants to highlight the persistence, dynamism and evolution of Palestinian agriculture over the centuries. These *baladi* seeds have evolved through centuries of farming and have grown adapted to their specific habitat. Now, these seeds can only grow in arid environments with agricultural terraces that are rainfed, an irrigation system traditional to the region.[249]

Sansour celebrates ancient and traditional agricultural customs and traditions that go back centuries, but at the same time her dynamic approach prevents the romanticization of the 'indigenous' and 'traditional' farmer. As described in the paragraph on Rabah's *Grafting*, there is a danger in romanticizing Palestinian nature and the local 'rootedness' in the soil. Similar to this, by arguing that Palestine should revert to an 'unspoiled,' 'ancient' and sustainable past, free from pesticides and heavy machinery in order to combat climate change, leads to the romanticization of Palestinian farmers and local agricultural practices. It indicates that the Palestinian landscape and its attached socio-cultural practices are never changing, which draws back to an orientalist discourse of primitivism.[250]

[249] Sansour, "Seeds of Resistance," interview by Joshua Leifer.
[250] Anne Meneley, "Hope in the Ruins," p. 162.

Tesdell argues that this agro-ecological romanticization often happens in regions that are currently under occupation.[251] The farmer, the occupied environment, and the way of working the land are seen as unchanged for millennia. For example, UNESCO suggests that the 'traditional' and 'native' rainfed irrigation systems in Battir must be preserved because it has "hardly changed in time."[252] This contributes to the idea of the Palestinian farmer being 'primitive' and timeless, having a set of practices that have remained untouched for hundreds of years, which is in essence an orientalist thought.[253] There is a thin line between emphasizing one's cultural and agricultural heritage, and stepping into the pitfall of orientalism.

Sansour thus opposes the 'reclaiming' of Palestine through an unchanged past, by emphasizing the dynamism and persistence of Palestinian heirloom seeds and approaching the farmer as artist and designer. Not only the art initiatives discussed in this thesis are forms of *sumud*, Palestinian nature itself as well. *Baladi* seeds have demonstrated a 'long-term persistence' against Israeli occupation the past 75 years.[254] The Palestinian environment is constantly changing and adapting to Israeli environmental colonialism. For example, the influx of refugees in the West Bank after the Nakba, coming from the coastal areas in the 48-lands, resulted in the adaption of different agricultural practices and new seeds. The same goes for *ba'ali* seeds: Since there is an increase in drought and water scarcity, these seeds are getting more adapted to these circumstances.[255]

5.7 Seeds Encountering Environmental Colonialism

With 50 percent of Palestinian households suffering from food insecurity, continuous threats to the agricultural sector by (colonial) neoliberal policies and settlements, it is increasingly important to protect traditional farming and keep heirloom seeds alive. *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library* shows how seeds, which are often perceived as non-being or dead, are actually 'living beings,' that "carry in their genes the stories and the spirits of our Palestinian ancestors and that travel across checkpoints to defy the violence of the landscape while reclaiming life and presence."[256] These seeds contain life, history and culture and are interwoven with every aspect of life. "Given that our human lives would not be possible

[251] Omar Tesdell, Yusra Othman & Saher Alkhoury, "Rainfed Agroecosystem Resilience in the Palestinian West Bank (1918 – 2017)," *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 43:1 (2019) , p. 25.
[252] "Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines," Unesco.
[253] Omar Tesdell et al., "Rainfed Agroecosystem Resilience in the Palestinian West Bank," p. 25.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Ibid.
[256] Johnston, "We Are All Seeds."

without the flow of non-humans through our bodies, it only seems right that we pay greater attention to the intersection of human social worlds and the life worlds of multispecies justice."[257] These seeds and their life circles are employed as weapons in the battle against ecological devastation brought on by Israeli occupation. The library reinforces community farming and seed sharing by reclaiming distinctive plants, seeds, and knowledge. Simultaneously it tells narratives of environmental colonialism, exposing the Palestinian lived reality of humans and more-than-humans under occupation. Just like Sakiya, Sansour believes that Palestinian artists and farmers form a steady frontier against Israeli colonialism and pave the way for an "alternative model based on a culture and economy of resistance and steadfastness."[258]

6. Soil, Seeds and Sumud: Conclusion

This thesis argues that in the last thirty years a new wave of ecological art emerged in Palestine. It is the work of artists that move away from the purely symbolic display of the landscape. They focus on a more 'relational' approach of artistic interventions in local ecology. Two of the projects, *Sakiya* and *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library*, actively intervene in the Palestinian landscape. Although the projects of the third artist discussed, Khalil Rabah, sometimes use Palestine's nature in an emblematic way, social and communal aspects of relational art are prevailing in the museum he founded, *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*. To counter the statelessness of Palestine, the museum is intended to bind 'Palestine' together. Unlike previous symbolic depictions of the landscape, the three projects in this thesis revive ecology, cultural traditions, and social bonds in a more 'relational' way, eager to counter the devastating effects of environmental colonialism.

The art initiatives analyzed expose the practices that alter Palestine's ecology. They show that the deterioration of the Palestinian environment should not be seen as an unfortunate byproduct of settler colonialism, but as a factor that influences the entire ecology and various aspects of Palestinian life. They raise the issue that water, land, seeds, and trees, are not apolitical; both the direct and indirect assaults on Palestinian nature represent a further manifestation of Israeli settler colonialism. This said, it would be just as interesting to explore

[257] Johnston, "We Are All Seeds."
[258] Sansour & Tartir, "Palestinian Farmers Lose Land for Failed Economic Zones."; Alaa Tartir, Sam Bahour & Samer Abdelnour, "Defeating Dependency, Creating a Resistance Economy," *AlShabaka*, February 13, 2012, https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/defeating-dependency-creating-resistance-economy/.

the role of Western influences on these environmental colonial practices, such as those of NGOs and Western institutions.

In addition to criticizing environmental colonial practices, the art projects discussed resist them through practices of *sumud*. Rabah preserves the Palestinian environment by mummifying its natural elements into 'dead' objects of value. Simultaneously, *sumud* is evident in the emphasis on exile and displacement in his work. By visualizing, using, and exporting the symbolic 'Palestinian' olive tree, he refers to the rootedness of Palestinian humans and more-than-humans in the Palestinian land, even when they are exiled or displaced.

The projects of Sansour and *Sakiya* are more locally oriented. They underline the revival of Palestinian nature, instead of its 'mummification'. The projects that they initiate manifest themselves in the landscape of Palestine. They focus on sustainable agriculture, communal traditions, social cohesion and cultural values associated with the land. Their *sumud* is not formed by *displacing* Palestinian natural elements, but by *reviving* them in their original environment; from olive trees to *baladi* seeds, and from archeological sites to communal agricultural practices, such as stone terraces and irrigation systems. More optimistic than the critical stance of Rabah, Sansour and *Sakiya* emphasize the hope for a sustainable, ecologically 'harmonious' future in which humans and more-than-humans alike pave the way to self-determination and oppose Israeli environmental colonial practices.

A significant portion of the *sumud* of Rabah, Sansour and *Sakiya* is stemming from an ecologically holistic approach. They work *with* the land and rely on an intimate understanding of the environment and the connected more-than-human lives. By underlining the entanglement of different forms of natural life and culture – such as trees, humans, or the culture of agriculture – they also question the way in which art, in its broadest sense, is often isolated from our wider natural and cultural ecology. *Sakiya* links contemporary artists to ecological practices and revives cultural heritage. Sansour designs new ways of agriculture and retraces the stories that are embedded in seeds and food production. Rabah underlines the interconnectedness of human and natural history.

This holistic *sumud* is also manifested in the emphasis on self-determination and collectivity of these projects. *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*, as well as the community projects of *Sakiya* and *The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library* stress the independence of their own initiatives and the self-sufficiency of local communities. This functions as a critique and an act of resistance against the fractured society that they are

forced to live in - one that has shifted to materialistic capitalist and neo-liberal practices, imposed by the Israeli occupation and the PA.

Concluding, the common ground between these art projects in Palestine is their ecologically holistic approach, one that rejects a reductionist nature - society duality. They all use this approach to denounce and resist the environmental colonial activities in Palestine. *Sakiya, The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library* and *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* preserve Palestine's ecology under the continuous threat of erasure. They emphasize the entanglement of human and more-than-human life, seeking to restore Palestinian collective identity, cultural heritage, and human-non-human ecologies. Furthermore, they approach 'the arts' in a broader perspective, by fusing cultural and ecological practices, deviating from the conventional art canon and from the symbolic display of Palestinian landscape in the arts. Through ecological resistance and *sumud*, they claim back their ecology from Israeli environmental colonialism. Therefore, art initiatives like these clear the way for a more hopeful and promising future, salvaging the things that Palestinians were forced to say goodbye to and, in the words of Vivien Sansour: "give them new contemporary twists, subsequently reviving them for the sake of the future."

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