Gay Rights with a Side of Apartheid

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> April 22, 1889, dawned bright and clear upon the hordes, an estimated fifty thousand strong, that surrounded the Unassigned Lands. As noon approached, horsemen and wagons crowded forth to positions on the line, among them a few hardy women [...]. April 22, 1889, was a day of chaos, excitement, and utter confusion. Men and women rushed to claim homesteads or to purchase lots in one of the many new towns that sprang into existence overnight. An estimated eleven thousand agricultural homesteads were claimed.

Stan Hoig, *The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889*.

> Everybody has to move, run and grab as many hilltops as they can to enlarge the settlements, because everything we take now will stay ours. Everything we don't grab will go to them.

Ariel Sharon (1998).

Colonialism and dishonesty have always gone hand in hand. Nineteenth and twentieth century colonial powers sought to justify their imperial designs through a myopic denunciation of the circumstances of women in the colonised societies. These imperial countries pretended to 'save

brown women from brown men' by dispossessing and disenfranchising entire peoples. Twenty-first century colonialism has evolved to justify occupation and apartheid as a new and improved 'civilising mission', one that distinguishes itself as gay-friendly, while the downtrodden societies are represented as homophobic. On the other hand, Palestinian queer activism, and the non-violent Palestinian strategy of BDS, which seek equality for all people regardless of their ethnicity, sexuality, or religion, present the model for a queer state, which allows individual citizens to define themselves as they wish, without losing power, entitlement, or safety.

I intentionally preface this essay, which will address current Israeli strategies to obfuscate both its past and present, with a set of quotes that reveal the parallels between the histories of the United States of America and Israel as settler colonial states founded on the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of indigenous populations. I do so because the official Zionist narrative negates Israel's identity as a colonial state founded on the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population. Instead it presents the newly-minted country as a morally redemptive democracy, ever needing to defend itself from hordes of violent Arabs who belong elsewhere, in Jordan, Lebanon, or Syria, yet act like they don't know it. The parallels between Israel and the USA – a country that embraces its settler colonial origins – thus shed a necessary light on Israel's own closeted beginnings.

The democratising of media, and the gushing flow of information coming from Palestine, have dealt a serious blow to Israel's image as a thriving democracy, prompting that country to adopt new strategies to distract from its practices. As a result, in 2005, Israel officially adopted the 'Brand Israel' campaign, created by US-based public relations experts concerned with fixing Israel's image. 'Brand Israel' promotes the country's technological accomplishments and its cosmopolitan culture, projecting it as a land of innovation and First World luxury under the blissfully warm Mediterranean sun, and distracting from its problematic image as a battleground for justice and equal rights for all citizens. One particular aspect of this rebranding campaign is pinkwashing, Israel's attempt to present itself as a gay haven, an oasis of gay freedom in an otherwise violently homophobic backwards region. Pinkwashing, then, is the twenty-first century manifestation of the Zionist colonialist narrative of bringing civilisation to an otherwise backwards land – a narrative that sanitises the violence of occupation while erasing indigenous experience, struggle, and resistance. And

just as the Zionist myth of 'making the desert bloom' completely distorted the reality of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, by failing to mention that native olive trees were uprooted so that imported pine trees could be planted, so pinkwashing distorts the reality of Israel's violence against all Palestinians, regardless of their sexuality.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A discussion of Israel as a settler colonial state is important before I elaborate on pinkwashing as the latest morphing of colonialist discourse, and on the Palestinian resistance to pinkwashing as a logical move towards queer sovereignty. As Patrick Wolfe convincingly argues, settler colonialism hinges on the elimination of the native people and Israel has indeed sought to completely obliterate our presence as the indigenous people of the land which Zionists started to settle at the turn of the nineteenth century.[1] Israel's semantic erasure of the Palestinian people of the land it occupies – Israel refers to its Palestinian citizens as 'Arabs', denying them their national identity – was for a long time accompanied by official denial of our existence. Thus, for example, then-Prime Minister Gold Meir, speaking to a British reporter in 1969, 'explained':

> There were no such thing as Palestinians. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.

Prodded to explain who these people now clamouring for their rights were, she elucidated: 'Southern Syrians'.[2]

Oklahoma earned its nickname, the Sooner State, from the unbridled enthusiasm of the latter-day settlers, some of whom were so eager to grab the best plots of land that they rushed into the 'Unassigned Lands' 'sooner' than the official starting time of 12 noon on April 22, 1889. A similar enthusiasm for 'grabbing' the hilltops was expressed and encouraged almost a century later by Ariel

Sharon, Israel's former prime minister, nicknamed 'the bulldozer', and known as his country's 'settlement czar'. In the broader context of Israel's colonisation of Palestine, then, the land grab that Ariel Sharon called for in the closing years of the twentieth century, just as the land runs that led to Oklahoma statehood, represent a later stage of settler colonisation: in both cases, the indigenous people have already been disenfranchised, and the colonising power seeks to dispossess them of their land. Should it be officially sanctioned, the absorption into Israel of the illegal settlements built within the territory designated as a future and much amputated Palestinian state would mirror the later stages of Euro-American annexation of Native land in North America.

Despite the seemingly spontaneous nature of the 'hilltop grab', the Zionist colonisation of Palestine was at all stages a carefully planned settler colonial endeavour that, at least in the early years, did not shy away from naming itself as such. The early Zionist leaders consciously modelled their own conquest of Palestine upon the European settlers' conquest of North America. Writing in 1923 about the European Jewish colonisation of Palestine, Vladimir Jabotinsky, founder of 'revisionist Zionism', the precursor to the right-wing Zionism represented today by Benjamin Netanyahu, reveals his full understanding of the violence associated with the dispossession of indigenous people:

> Every reader has some idea of the early history of other countries which have been settled. I suggest that he recall all known instances. If he should attempt to seek but one instance of a country settled with the consent of those born there he will not succeed. The inhabitants (no matter whether they are civilized or savages) have always put up a stubborn fight [...]. It is of no importance whether we quote Herzl or Herbert Samuel to justify our activities, colonization itself has its own explanation, integral and inescapable, and understood by every Arab and every Jew with his wits about him. Colonization can only have one goal. For the Palestinian Arabs this goal is inadmissible [...]. Zionist colonization, even the most restricted, must either be terminated or

> carried out in defiance of the will of the native population.[3]

More recently, Israeli historian Benny Morris also compared his country's colonisation of Palestine to the European conquest and ethnic cleansing of North America, noting that '[e]ven the great American democracy could not have been created without the annihilation of the Indians. There are cases in which the overall, final good justifies harsh and cruel acts that are committed in the course of history'.[4]

Yet just as the Native American peoples of North America were decimated, but not 'annihilated', as Benny Morris would have it, so Palestinians are still alive today. And they are speaking truth to power in novel ways. After decades of mostly failed attempts at disrupting the dominant discourse which would deny our very existence, Palestinians today – as indeed most disenfranchised communities around the globe – have found alternative channels to convey our stories. In the 1960s, the emergence of 'identity politics' and 'ethnic studies' on North American campuses allowed for the voices of the socially and politically marginalised to challenge the dominant discourse. The late Professor Edward Said's *oeuvre* made it impossible to claim expertise in the history of the Middle East without addressing 'The Question of Palestine'. More recently, new media have opened up venues of information once unattainable to most, enabling the Palestinian narrative to pierce through and challenge the dominance of the Zionist discourse outside the confines of academia, amongst non-scholars, grassroots activists, media makers, organisers, cultural workers, and others.

From calling us 'Southern Syrians' to referring to us as 'present absentees', the contortions of the Zionist master-narrative are impressive indeed, as they seek to erase our existence.[5] Yet there is power in simple language. The United Nations definition of ethnic cleansing is clear: 'rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove from a given area persons of another ethnic or religious group'. Turning Palestine into Israel necessitated such a protracted act of ethnic cleansing, the removal of Palestinians from approximately 450 villages, and the consequent erasure of these villages, between 1947 and 1949. This ethnic

cleansing, which we refer to as *Al Nakba*, the Catastrophe, is ongoing, as Palestinians are daily losing more homes to Jewish settlements. And those Zionists who ask why the Palestinian refugees can't be absorbed into one of the neighbouring Arab countries are basically still advocating ethnic cleansing, since they are denying us the Right of Return as they call for other countries to take us in, away from our ancestral homes.

Apartheid is no less hideous of a crime, and it, too, is defined quite simply by the United Nations: 'inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them'. Israel privileges its Jewish citizens over non-Jews, and has officially created two different designations for the two groups: *le'um* (nationals), which only Jews qualify for, and *ezrahut* (citizens), a larger category, which includes Jews and non-Jews. The distinction is not merely semantic: 'nationals' have greater rights and benefits. British writer Ben White has produced a detailed and itemised analysis of the separate and unequal rights of the two 'citizen' communities in Israel, and numerous South Africans who had lived under apartheid and then visited Palestine have declared Israel's system an even worse form of this crime against humanity.[6] Thus former South African President Nelson Mandela, speaking in Pretoria in 1997 on the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinians, noted: 'The UN took a strong stand against apartheid; and over the years, an international consensus was built, which helped to bring an end to this iniquitous system. But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians'.[7]

The dual nature of present-day Israel, namely its identity as a settler colonial and apartheid state, is important for our analysis, because it provides both the foundation for a strategy for liberation, as well as a novel vision for indigenous sovereignty that could be replicated in other settler colonial states around the world. The strategy, a global campaign of support in the form of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) on Israel until it abides by international law, is modelled upon the successful South African struggle to end apartheid in that country. The vision of indigenous sovereignty in a settled postcolonial state will necessitate a creative

redefinition of sovereignty that rises above nationhood and its always-already exclusionary trappings. That vision is articulated by director of Al-Qaws (Arabic for Rainbow) in Jerusalem Haneen Maikey:

> Motivated by a vision of a non-hierarchical society that recognizes – and values – the diversity of sexual and gender identities, Al-Qaws, aspires to play a pioneering role in helping to build a just Palestinian society based on tolerance, equality, and openness. [...] [O]ur move towards independence is an exciting change, and we believe that it will open new opportunities for LGBTQ Palestinians – and also, if less directly, for all Israelis and Palestinians – to imagine, and create, a future based on equality and respect for our differences.[8]

Israel cannot be at once the 'Jewish homeland' and a democracy, when Palestinians are finally allowed to enjoy their inalienable human right – the right to return to the towns and villages they were expelled from. Yet just as we are confronting and challenging a violent system with non-violent means, so we must also replace apartheid with multiplicity. The two state 'solution', if it must be called that, would be replacing one apartheid state with two such states, by transferring communities from one area to another, depending on their religion and perceived ethnicity.[9] The non-violent Palestinian strategy of BDS, which does not propose a specific outcome with regards to the outward characteristics of the final state(s), seeking only equality for all people regardless of their ethnicity or religion, would thus present the model for a queer state, which allows individual citizens to define themselves as they wish, without losing power, entitlement, or safety.

CULTURE AS A BEAUTIFUL MASK

Israel has long been considered a democracy in the West because the West has not questioned the Zionist narrative, while the Zionist apparatus was careful not to allow for a Palestinian counterdiscourse. Today, as information becomes rapidly more

democratic and much of social media evades Zionist and corporate censorship, news of Israel's egregious violations of human rights and international law have seriously tarnished Israel's image. Consequently, Israel is working on a number of non-military (cultural) fronts to 'fix its image' by projecting itself as a vibrant society characterised by artistic and technological accomplishments, rather than by ongoing conflict.

Academic and cultural accomplishments are Israel's glamorous, 'non-military' face, a mask it uses to distract from its reality of institutionalised discrimination. It is the façade Israel is consciously fashioning and promoting through the government-sponsored re-branding effort, commonly referred to as the 'Brand Israel' campaign. 'Brand Israel' is the brainchild of a conglomerate of American marketing firms which specialise in image making and is funded by Israel's three most powerful ministries: the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's Office, and the Finance Ministry.[10] 'Brand Israel' was officially adopted in October 2005, only a few months after the Palestinian call for BDS was issued, when the directors of these three ministries examined research conducted by American marketing executives over the previous three years. The driving concept behind this re-branding is that Israel will win supporters only if it is seen as relevant and modern rather than as a place of fighting and religion. The target audiences, therefore, come from among the more 'liberal' and secular social groups rather than religious fundamentalists, since the latter, whether ultra-Orthodox Jews or Christian, are already solidly in the Zionist camp.[11] One of the main campus organisations engaged in presenting Israel as a land of innovation rather than occupation is Hillel, the international campus Jewish organisation.[12] Speaking in 2005, when he was executive vice president of Hillel, Wayne Firestone explained that the campaign aimed to portray Israel as a place 'where there are cool, hip people'.[13] Firestone is currently the president of Hillel International; the 2010 Hillel annual report reveals the implementation of his vision.[14]

Another organisation closely associated with 'Brand Israel' is AIPAC, the American Israel Public Action Committee, which, along with the public relations organisation 'Israel21c', is generating collaborative content for academic and cultural events. According to

its website, Israel21c is a 'non-profit educational foundation with a mission to focus media and public attention on the 21st century Israel that exists beyond the conflict'. The company explains that it was created by philanthropists in 2001 to fill a need: 'If Israel wants to improve its image around the world, it must be seen through the lenses of its humanness, its diversity and all that it contributes through medical advances, technological innovation, art, culture and acts of human kindness'.[15] It bears emphasising that there is no discussion whatsoever of changing the practices that have tarnished Israel's image. Instead, the 'Brand Israel' campaign is one that seeks to merely distract from those practices, by shining a bright light on Israel's supposed diversity (with no discussion of discrimination), its humanness (with no mention of the dehumanising treatment of Palestinians), and its academic and cultural accomplishments (with no mention of the fact that most are inaccessible to non-Jewish citizens).

'Brand Israel' has been over eight years in the making, as it started gelling in 2002. In 2009, in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead, Israel's full-scale military assault on the besieged Gaza Strip which killed 2300 civilians, Israel made a further push at improving its image, and increased its funding of the Brand Israel campaign. Speaking shortly after the Gaza massacres, Arye Mekel, the Israeli Foreign Ministry's deputy director general for cultural affairs, explained: 'We will send well-known novelists and writers overseas, theatre companies, exhibits. This way you show Israel's prettier face, so we are not thought of purely in the context of war'.[16]

THE GAY MARKET

It is within the context of 'Rebranding Israel' that pinkwashing must be understood as an official strategy to distract from Israel's apartheid policies. The following case studies will hopefully illustrate this strategy and help prevent the exploitation of queer allies' best intentions. The essentially racist colonialist impulse behind Israel's pinkwashing campaign is aptly articulated by Jasbir Puar:

> Israeli pinkwashing is a potent method through which the terms of Israeli occupation of Palestine are reiterated – Israel is civilised, Palestinians are barbaric, homophobic, uncivilized, suicide-bombing fanatics. It produces Israel as the only gay-friendly country in an otherwise hostile region. This has manifold effects: it denies Israel's homophobic oppression of its own gays and lesbians, of which there is plenty, and it recruits, often unwittingly, gays and lesbians of other countries into a collusion with Israeli violence towards Palestine.
>
> In reproducing orientalist tropes of Palestinian sexual backwardness, it also denies the impact of colonial occupation on the degradation and containment of Palestinian cultural norms and values. Pinkwashing harnesses global gays as a new source of affiliation, recruiting liberal gays into a dirty bargaining of their own safety against the continued oppression of Palestinians, now perforce rebranded as 'gay unfriendly'. The strategy then also works to elide the presence of numerous Palestinian gay and lesbian organisations, for example Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions. [17]

Indeed, there are numerous Arab LGBT organisations that have long negotiated the personal and political spheres of sexual identity under occupation and apartheid. Israel may be gay-friendly for its tourists, because it needs them, financially, and for its 'branding'. However, by denying Palestinians their basic inalienable human rights, it remains above all the greatest purveyor of institutionalised violence and oppression for all Palestinians, regardless of their sexuality.

Queer Palestinians thus engage in a struggle against homophobia within their own culture, as indeed queers of all nationalities do, but also against Israel's colonisation, occupation, and apartheid. The 1948 Nakba did not spare queer Palestinians, whose basic rights and civil liberties are suppressed just like those of all Palestinians. Israel discriminates against all Palestinians, regardless of sexuality, within 'Israel proper', where they have been second-class citizens for 63 years, within the West Bank, where they

have lived under a brutal military occupation for 44 years, within the Gaza Strip, where they have been subjected to a genocidal siege after decades of occupation, and in the global diaspora, where they are denied their UN-recognised Right of Return. And pinkwashing, which distracts from Israel's violence against queer Palestinians, reproduces an essential aspect of settler colonialist discourse: the erasure of the native experience of displacement, dispossession and disenfranchisement, by the so-called 'gay haven'.

It is hard to pinpoint exactly the first instance of pinkwashing, but activists involved in queer politics noticed a growing trend over the past few years, beginning in the late-2000s – on the heels of the official launch of the 'Brand Israel' campaign – of Zionist infiltration of queer cultural events. One of the early documented instances is the Toronto Pride parade in 2010, when the organisers banned the group Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA) from marching, after sponsors threatened to pull funding from the parade if the term 'apartheid' appeared on banners. At about the same time, our mailboxes started receiving a steady trickle of commercials advertising Tel Aviv as a world-class gay tourism destination, and Israel as a haven for gays and queers in the Middle East. As I write this, pinkwashing has snowballed to surprising dimensions, with Joel Lion, Israel's consul for media affairs in New York City, acknowledging in 2010 that 'gays are actually one of our target markets'.[18] It is therefore important to look at a few examples of pinkwashing, the challenges it presents, and the responses to it. The examples below are neither an exhaustive list, nor even fully representative of Israel's manipulations, as pinkwashing is happening world-wide, and in projects ranging from personal interactions to infiltration on the national level. Nevertheless, these examples illustrate the way Israel strategically uses gay rights as a tool of propaganda to justify its apartheid policies.

NO PRIDE IN APARTHEID

An active front in the pinkwashing tug-of-war has been the annual Pride Toronto Pride parade, where the term 'apartheid' has been banned on and off, thus initially preventing QuAIA from participating and marching under their banner in 2010, when QuAIA's

participation was challenged by B'nai Brith and the Canadian Jewish Congress, two groups who have never been supportive of gay rights, yet felt entitled to interfere with a gay march because some of its members opposed Israel's policies. Indeed, one of the particularly egregious aspects of pinkwashing is that it is not a gay-friendly movement. Instead it uses the sad reality of homophobia in Palestinian society to promote hatred of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims generally. For example, many of the sponsors of pinkwashing globally are closely affiliated with conservative Christian homophobic leaders, such as John Hagee and Charles McVety. Pinkwashing, then, contrasts the experiences of Palestinians with those of more 'liberated' Jewish Israelis, as if there were no Israeli homophobia, and no Palestinian agency and activism. Pinkwashing makes no mention of the homophobic attack on the Tel Aviv branch of the Israeli GLBT Association, on August 1, 2009, in which two gay youths were killed, and 15 injured, four critically. It is silent about the strong opposition to the annual Jerusalem gay parade by orthodox Jews who consider homosexuality an abomination and a violation of the religious character of the city. In 2005, for example, an orthodox Jewish anti-gay protester stabbed three parade marchers. The overall climate of fear of these Jewish protesters is such that marchers in the subdued 2010 parade noted how 'opposition [against them] has forced [the] Jerusalem [gay] community underground in most parts of the city'.[19] Pinkwashing, instead, focuses on the plight of queer Palestinian, as if their circumstances were radically different from those of LGBT Israelis, who supposedly live in total safety and free from their society's homophobia.[20]

Back in Toronto, Rabbi Reuven Bulka, one of the co-presidents of the Canadian Jewish Congress, which opposed the participation of QuAIA in Toronto Pride, sat on the advisory committee of NARTH, the US-based National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, an organisation that believes that homosexuality is a psychological condition that can be 'cured' through conversion therapy. Such deeply homophobic organisations, then, cannot possibly have the good of Palestinian queers in mind, or the good of any queers in mind, when they engage in pinkwashing. Instead, their motivation stems strictly from a desire to improve Israel's image

amongst gays worldwide, as these are one of the new 'target markets'.

The censorship and banishment of QuAIA led to unprecedented mobilisation of the Toronto queer community, long known for a principled stance against all censorship. Twenty-four former honorees returned their statuettes in protest, even as anti-censorship activists organised meetings to discuss the Zionist infiltration of the politics of Toronto Pride. Moreover, the public debate around the march highlighted the crux of the matter: this censorship was an attempt to stifle discussion of Israel's policies against Palestinians. As the debate around censorship raged, the Simon Weisenthal Center got involved, calling the expression 'Israeli apartheid' hate speech, and asking the City of Toronto to banish QuAIA because it made participants feel unsafe. QuAIA responded by organising a number of community events, educating Toronto about pinkwashing, and about the reality of life for all Palestinians – straight and queer – in Israel. Ultimately, the Toronto Pride committee relented and allowed QuAIA to march in 2010, and the hundreds of people who joined QuAIA made it the largest group marching for Palestine solidarity in the history of the Toronto Pride parade. The following year, in the summer of 2011, the City Manager of Toronto stated that the term 'Israeli Apartheid' does not violate the city's anti-hate speech policies and allowed QuAIA to participate in the parade. Nevertheless, facing threats from conservative City Councillors to de-fund Toronto Pride, QuAIA itself opted against participation, choosing instead to hold a number of educational community events over a week in July 2011.

MEN OF ISRAEL

While gay rights were being manipulated and exploited in North America to distract from the lived reality of Palestinians, Russian-born Michael Lucas was busy distorting history in his adopted country, Israel. A ruined Palestinian village serves as a backdrop to 'steamy scenes' in Lucas' gay porn movie, *Men of Israel*, which has the dubious honour of being the first such movie to feature an all-Jewish cast. Lucas, a gay porn mogul and staunch Zionist who once owned a travel agency, is also heavily involved in pinkwashing, with a special interest in projecting Israel as a gay tourist destination, one

to which queer Western tourists can flock for fun, frolicking, and taking in the stunning Mediterranean scenery. *Men of Israel*, filmed in Tel Aviv, Haifa, and inside the cordoned-off ruins of a Palestinian village which viewers have identified as Lifta, has been described as a 'pornographic stimulus plan' for Israel.[21] The film's official homepage confirms this:

> The global media has created an image of Israel as war-torn nation, which streets are lined with destroyed debris and crumbling ruins. Publicly broadcasted footage is always filmed in either Gaza or the West Bank, regardless of whether or not the story has a pro or anti-Israeli angle. Never are we shown Tel Aviv, Haifa, the Red Sea, the Dead Sea resorts, the beautiful beaches, the amazing architecture and the embracing culture that allows its citizens to thrive. For this reason, other than showcasing the raw, sexual prowess of Israel men, Lucas also has completed MEN OF ISRAEL as a bold move to promote Israeli culture and tourism.[22]

This focus away from religion, history, and politics, a diversion that underlines all 'Brand Israel' initiatives, is taken to extremes in pinkwashing, which zooms in narrowly on the supposedly liberal gay scene in Israel, while obscuring the rampant injustice in the country. The promotional language behind *Men of Israel* seems to be that of Lucas himself, as he later explained, noting that his film 'is free PR for Israel, and [that] it's much better than the PR they're getting on the news'. He then added:

> Nobody goes to Israel for Golda Meir, I'm so sorry. [...] Gay people, and straight people, want beautiful beaches, beautiful nature, beautiful men and women, good food, good hotels. Israel shouldn't be mistaken about why people go there. They need me.[23]

With his focus on Israel's beauty – the film is directed by Israel fashion photographer Ronen Akerman – Lucas completely rewrites the settler colonial country's past. In a brief video promoting the film Lucas states:

> we went to an abandoned village just north of Jerusalem. It was a beautiful ancient township that had been deserted centuries ago [...] however, that did not stop our guys from mounting each other and trying to repopulate it. Biology may not be the lesson of the day but these men shot their seeds all over the village.

Of course, contrary to Lucas' claim, Lifta has not been deserted for centuries, but was ethnically cleansed in April 1948. Additionally, as many Palestinians point out, there is no need to challenge biology in order to repopulate Lifta. Its original inhabitants are refugees, many living minutes away from the cordoned village, and longing to return to their homes.

The reported success of *Men of Israel* notwithstanding, the male gay porn film could not, by its very nature, reach out beyond certain communities, and other Zionist organisations have been actively reaching out to larger communities.

StandWithUs AT THE USSF

Another example of the broad national outreach of this pinkwashing strategy is the attempt by StandWithUs to infiltrate the United States Social Forum in 2010. Founded in 2001, StandWithUs is a right-wing Israel advocacy organisation whose mission, as stated on its website, is to 'ensure that Israel is accurately portrayed and justly represented on college campuses, in the media, and in communities around the world'.[24] StandWithUs, which had never before been known for gay activism, nevertheless submitted a proposal to run a workshop entitled 'LGBTQI Liberation in the Middle East' at the 2010 USSF in Detroit, Michigan. The workshop proposed to connect participants with 'Middle Eastern LGBTQI non-profits', and offered

'information collected by such organizations as Amnesty International for participants to walk away with, so that they can better educate their own communities about the realities of the Middle East'. Arab queers immediately responded with a Letter, 'Arab Queers Say No to Israel', in which they explained:

> Since Israel's brutal wars on Gaza and Lebanon in 2006 and particularly after the recent unprovoked attack on the flotilla of activists going to Gaza, the Israeli government has found itself increasingly marginalised by international condemnations and weakened through the growing success of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. To remedy this, it has launched a massive PR campaign using organizations such as StandWithUs to convince the world that Israel is not a brutal settler-colony state, but rather a free democracy where human rights in general, and LGBT rights in particular, are respected and upheld. StandWithUs deceptively uses the language of LGBT and women's rights to obscure the fact that institutionalized discrimination is enshrined within the state of Israel.[25]

From half a world away, in Palestine and Lebanon, as well as here in the US, Arab queers challenged the USSF organisers over their decision to allow this workshop to speak for us, when StandWithUs has no record of working for queer rights, and when the workshop facilitator himself, Brett Cohen, is neither a member of our community, nor was open, when approached about that option by USSF organisers, to having co-facilitators who are known Arab queer activists.

Meanwhile, a battle raged on the USSF Facebook page, with close to 17,000 members learning about pinkwashing.[26] The education about pinkwashing that USSF participants gained from this discussion was significant, as thousands of activists learned, through our efforts to have this workshop cancelled, that their own best intentions were likely to be manipulated by right-wing Zionists. Ultimately, the USSF decision to cancel the SWU workshop proved to

be a highly valuable public rejection of the exploitation of civil and political rights for the purpose of normalising apartheid. After all, as queer Palestinian activist Sami Shamali puts it: 'there is no magic pink door in the Apartheid wall'. Representing Al-Qaws, Shamali toured the US in 2011 with fellow Palestinian activists Haneen Maikey (director of Al-Qaws in Jerusalem) and Abeer Mansour, from Aswat (Arabic for Voices), to challenge pinkwashing and present the Palestinian perspective on queer liberation.

Palestinian women and queers have long organised to counter sexism, homophobia, and colonialism, and have been extremely eloquent in their response to Israel's exploitation of their challenging circumstances. There are no excuses for feminists and gay rights activists in the US to accept Israel's propaganda, unless it is because these 'allies' are not truly comfortable with Palestinian agency, and with our analysis of our oppression as it intersects with living under apartheid and occupation, or in the diaspora. Indeed, as the group PQBDS recently wrote in a petition calling on the International Gay and Lesbian Youth Organization to move its 2011 General Assembly out of Israel:

> Israeli policies and occupation do not distinguish between queer and straight. All Palestinians – queer and straight – must deal with the effects of the apartheid wall, checkpoints, and illegal settlements, and settler violence, not to mention living under Israeli military law that strips them off their rights as civilians. All Gazans, including queers, live under an illegal siege in the de-facto open-air prison that is the Gaza strip. And like all Palestinian citizens of Israel, queers are subject to institutionalized discrimination in laws, education, and throughout their public and private lives.[27]

As a strategy, pinkwashing is clearly not working. Members of the Palestinian queer community in Israel have long known that they are disenfranchised in Israel not because they are gay, but because they are Palestinian. Their politicisation has always been complex, addressing macro– as well as microenvironments of oppression. As

for queers around the world, they too are understanding that gay rights are being used as an excuse to cover up human rights violations. But gay rights cannot be served alongside apartheid, and civil rights must not be used to trump human rights.

CONCLUSION

A settler colonial country that openly violates another people's inalienable human rights, a country that engages in at least two internationally-recognised crimes against humanity, namely ethnic cleansing and apartheid, is a country likely to have an image problem. And there are ways to fix that image. One way requires justice: admit that the indigenous population has been wronged, redress the wrongs, end the human rights violations. The other way is strictly cosmetic: camouflage the ugliness, distract from the crimes. As it persists in its desire to be a 'Jewish state', Israel can only engage in the latter. Its efforts to rebrand itself as a vibrant democracy that respects civil rights is then by necessity a cover-up for the crimes it is unrepentant for. Yet what is needed is a remedy that goes beyond a smokescreen. A change in the very system is necessary, so that Israel is no longer practicing apartheid, and attempting to distract from it. As a settler colonial state, Israel also needs to respect the sovereignty of its indigenous population. The only viable option is that of one state – from the river to the sea – where everyone has equal rights, where apartheid is a thing of the past, and where sovereignty is redefined for the twenty-first century, so that the acquired rights of Israelis are not pitted against the inalienable human rights of the Palestinians.

POSTSCRIPT

Bringing this essay to conclusion proved extremely challenging, as the 'ending' could only be arbitrary, considering the proliferation of pinkwashing events, along with their repercussions, as I undertook my research. The only certainty is that Israel is exploiting queer politics for propaganda purposes, and that there is strong, organised resistance to this pinkwashing. Historical models show that Boycott,

Divestment, and Sanctions, the resistance strategy being used today to pressure Israel into abiding by international law, has succeeded in accomplishing its goals in similar contexts around the world. We shall overcome.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Nada Elia is a Diaspora Palestinian who teaches Global and Gender Studies at Antioch University, Seattle. A scholar-activist, she is a member of the Organizing Collective of USACBI, the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. Nada has served on the Steering Collective of AWSA (Arab Women's Solidarity Association), and the national steering collective of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, where she co-chaired the Anti-Militarism and Anti-Occupation taskforce. Nada is the author of Trances, Dances, and Vociferations: Agency and Resistance in Africana Women's Narratives *(Routledge, 2000) and guest-edited a special issue of* Radical Philosophy Review: A Journal of Progressive Thought *(2001). Nada's essays have appeared in anthologies such* as Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists *(South End Press, 1994),* Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging *(Syracuse, 2011),* The Case for Sanctions on Israel *(Verso, 2012), in magazines such as* Make/Shift *and* Left Turn*, and* The Electronic Intifada*. She is currently at work on* Who Are You Calling Demographic Threat?, *a book about Diaspora Palestinian activism.*

NOTES

[1] See Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, 4 (2006): 387-409.
[2] *The Sunday Times*, 15/06/69.
[3] Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'The Iron Wall: We and the Arabs'. Available at: http://www.marxists.de/middleast/ironwall.htm Accessed: 05/05/12.
[4] Benny Morris, *Ha'aretz* interview with Ari Shavit. Available at: http://hist.net/kieser/ma10/Haaretz8.1.04.html Accessed: 18/07/12.
[5] The latter is a legal designation for Palestinians who remained within the boundaries of the newly-minted Israeli state in 1948 but were dispossessed of their property when they could not be physically present on it for two weeks as a result of Israeli-imposed restrictions.
[6] *Israeli Apartheid: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).
[7] Speech available at: http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1997/sp971204b.html Accessed: 18/07/12.
[8] Haneen Maikey, 'Rainbow over Palestine', Guardian, 10/03/08. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/mar/10/rainbowoverpalestine Accessed: 18/07/12.
[9] While one may question the existence of 'actual ethnicity' as distinct from 'perceived ethnicity', I speak here of a 'perceived ethnicity' because Judaism is a religion, and a culture, but not an ethnic monolith. 'Semitic' itself is a linguistic designation that has come to refer to the people who speak Semitic languages. Yet even if we were operating within the modern-day understanding of 'Semitic' as someone of Middle Eastern extraction, a significant percentage of Israelis are non-Semitic, while most Arabs are Semites. Nevertheless, Zionism has equated Israel

with Jews, whom it pits against 'Arabs', as if the two were mutually exclusive poles of an ethnic or racial binary. Zionism then privileges this constructed ethnicity, 'world Jewry', over Muslim and Christian Palestinians.
[10] See Nathaniel popper, 'Israel Aims to Improve Its Public Image', *Forward*, 14/10/05. Available at: http://forward.com/articles/2070/israel-aims-to-improve-its-public-image/ Accessed: 24/04/12.
[11] With the exception of 'Naturae Karta', a very small fringe movement in Orthodox Judaism.
[12] See: http://www.hillel.org Accessed: 12/04/12.
[13] Nathaniel Popper, 'Israel Aims to Improve Its Public Image', *Forward*, 14/10/05. Available at: http://forward.com/articles/2070/israel-aims-to-improve-its-public-image/ Accessed: 15/05/12.
[14] See 'Faces of the Future: Hillel Annual Report 2010'. Available at: http://www.hillel.org/NR/rdonlyres/4C1AC55D-0D4B-4D5D-BB95-A8F4BD206F1E/0/AR2010weblowres.pdf Accessed: 17/05/12.
[15] 'Israel21c: A Focus beyond the Conflict', 06/04/2010. Available at: http://aafoi.blogspot.it/2010/04/israel21c-focus-beyond-conflict.html Accessed: 20/07/12.
[16] Ethan Bronner, 'After Gaza, Israel Grapples with Crisis of Isolation', *New York Times*, 19/03/09.
[17] Jasbir Puar, 'Israel's Gay Propaganda War', *Guardian*, 01/07/10. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/01/israels-gay-propaganda-war Accessed: 12/05/12.
[18] David Kaufman, 'Battle of the Gay Israel Trips: It's Holy War!', *New York Observer*, 26/03/10. Available at: http://www.observer.com/2010/daily-transom/battle-gay-israel-trips-its-holy-war Accessed: 29/04/12.
[19] Karoun Demirjian, 'Jerusalem hosts subdued gay pride march', *Associated Press*, 29/07/10. Available at: http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2010/07/29/jerusalem_hosts_subdued_gay_pride_march/ Accessed: 29/04/12.
[20] Obviously, the fact that Israeli law does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of their sexuality does not mean there is no *de facto* homophobia in that country, despite official efforts to project Israel as gay-friendly.
[21] Michael Kaminer, 'Pornographic Stimulus Plan'. Available at: www.forward.com/articles/114183/ Accessed: 04/05/12.
[22] Cited in 'Men of Israel', *Wikipedia*. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men_of_Israel Accessed: 04/05/12.
[23] Kaminer, 'Pornographic Stimulus Plan'.
[24] See: http://www.standwithus.co.il/ Accessed: 04/05/12.
[25] 'Say no to pinkwashing at the USSF'. Available at: http://www.alqaws.org/q/content/say-no-pinkwashing-ussf Accessed: 12/05/12.
[26] I have written in more detail about the 'Standoff with StandWithUs' on the INCITE! Blog. See 'Reflections from Detroit: Standoff with StandWithUs', 02/08/10. Available at: http://inciteblog.wordpress.com/2010/08/02/reflections-from-detroit-standoff-with-standwithus/ Accessed: 17/12/05.
[27] 'Call for Action: tell IGLYO to Get Out of Israel', 01/06/11. Available at: http://www.pqbds.com/archives/111 http://www.pqbds.com/2011/06/01/111/ Accessed: 18/05/12.