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## Part of Us is Dead

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## HUMANITY UNBOUND

### Part of Us is Dead

“At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation’s ear, I would, today, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke.”

—Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

When the absurd is sustaining a slaughterhouse and we are witnesses. When our collective will to stop the slaughterhouse is met with imaginary structures built for us to fight with. A part of our common humanity and ourselves is dead. This death is not a source of despair, but newly found sense of ironic fearlessness.

#### **When the absurd is sustaining a slaughterhouse and we are witnesses . . .**

The absurdity of war is born at the interval of intersecting inferential inflections. An inferential inflection is a false label attached to something; it is calling something what it is not—like labeling anti-Zionism antisemitism. In the case of Palestine (and the business of proliferating war more generally), there is an excess of false labels used to justify and blur the brutality of reality and the stream of interests sustaining it. What is new in human history is the deep layering of such false labels to the point that even the reality of a live-streamed genocide and a long-running, overwhelmingly documented, settler colonial project can be contested to the point of denial.

These false labels are created in factories funded by the power of capital, otherwise called factories of consent<sup>1</sup> building on historical micro-fascist and individualist tendencies. Media corporations are well aware that images of dystopia can be promoted and desensitized as long as that reality remains distant from the spectator. The creation of false labels was always a condition for the sustenance of coloniality and aggression. The distance between those creating false labels and the reality on the ground has always been wide. Globalization and new technologies have stretched the distance between the source of the false label and the relevant reality, and they have complicated the falseness of such labels to unprecedented levels.

Herein, distance and complexity allow those facilitating the violence to claim ethical innocence. I recently overheard a casual conversation between a father and son from the United States having dinner in Madrid. The father was explaining to the son that the genocide must continue as he slowly sipped on wine. Of course, questions of ethics are generally rendered irrelevant outside interpersonal relations within the belief system of individualist capitalism. This small fact casts a gloomy shadow over any contemporary claim of innocence—the word “innocence” itself has been beaten to oblivion. Meanwhile, when observing the global south, the global north is obsessed with determinations of

“innocence” as per the prescribed parameters of legitimate violence. This is clear in the rare humanitarian rhetoric of “innocent Palestinians” found in Israeli newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

Discussions based on accumulated false labels lose relevance to reality. Observing politicians of the global north speaking about Palestine is like watching a cruel iteration of the theater of the absurd. Trump calling Biden a “Bad Palestinian,”<sup>3</sup> or Kushner exclaiming that “waterfront property in Gaza could be very valuable,”<sup>4</sup> or Israeli human rights organizations shocked by the ICJ’s decision on the illegality of the occupation, or counter-protesters pink-washing colonialism, mixing the blue of the Israeli flag with the rainbow of the pride flag.

As a result of this deep-running absurdity, Sisyphus has become a central figure of Palestinian poetry. Footage is circulating that shows people in Gaza cleaning up the rubble and creating spaces that can evoke the semblance of home. They perform these tasks with the full knowledge that, at any point, a bored soldier might decide to bomb that household and create a TikTok video out of it,<sup>5</sup> or an AI might coldly decide that their resilience is a source of threat.<sup>6</sup> This scene of repetitive destruction and rebuilding has been on repeat for five generations of Palestinians.

In the context of the frenzy of killing, I cannot help but think that these young Israeli soldiers are purging the same way they would if they were playing a video game. Indeed, it has been argued that the technological barrier between the perpetrator and victim can induce a PlayStation mentality.<sup>7</sup> Bombing a family using a drone, or even dropping a one-thousand-ton bomb from a warplane—the soldier is not there to conceptualize the hell he just created. What is more absurd than the murder of multiple family generations by a soldier who is cognitively disassociated?

False labeling using the language of international law has been repeatedly called out in this context. Notably, Francesca Albanese referred to the practice of humanitarian camouflage—to use the language of international humanitarian law in a technical, reductive, reading to justify criminal activity.<sup>8</sup> Similar reflections are found in the work of Nimer Sultany.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon have repeatedly warned of the false label “human shields,” used in this context to justify medical lawfare.<sup>10</sup>

International legal false labeling have also occurred in assessments of gravity. Different violations of international law have been granted varied levels of importance with no valid legal premises—the mass incarceration of over ten thousand Palestinians coupled with accounts of widespread torture,<sup>11</sup> rape, deprivation, starvation, humiliation, and forced disappearance by a power denying the relevance of human rights law or prisoners of war status is being treated as a much less important violation than hostage keeping of a hundred Israelis or so (at the time of writing),<sup>12</sup> where scarce evidence of an intentional policy of abuse in custody exists,<sup>13</sup> with one witness statement of sexual abuse.<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, Israel refuses calls for a ceasefire without fulfilling its military goal of eliminating Hamas—a historically absurd military goal that can itself be argued to provide evidence of genocidal intent.<sup>15</sup> They created a false label and believed it. Worst of all, other governments and UN agencies have engaged with this goal with apparent seriousness. To sustain this false label, Israel invokes the micro-fascist tendencies of the spectator through signifiers of the clash of civilizations and security. Israeli and allied authorities label the Palestinians “terrorists,” arguing that any Palestinian violence is simply triggered by anti-semitic, uncivilized Allahu Akbars.

As reiterated in the declaration of Judge Charlesworth in the International Court of Justice case on the legality of the Occupation,<sup>16</sup> Palestinians have the legitimate right of

resistance against an illegal occupation; and, as noted by Judge Tladi,<sup>17</sup> Israel's security concerns do not override international law or Palestinian security interests. Israel seeks to render invisible the contextual note of "an illegal occupation which will inevitably generate resistance in an asymmetric fashion." By contending that armed Palestinian groups are terrorist groups akin to ISIS, Israel can assert its goal to eliminate them. Indeed, this military strategy is arguably illegal;<sup>18</sup> nothing in the doctrine of self-defense says you get to eliminate your opponent into oblivion—the goal of annihilation is de facto aggression.<sup>19</sup> The limited perception of those seriously engaging with this military goal compounds the absurdity.<sup>20</sup>

The false label of "terrorism" is clearly illogical, sold in its simplicity to legitimize violence to the poorly informed spectator. As history has repeatedly shown, citing "terrorism" in a settler colonial context is de facto a bad faith inferential inflection. The term terrorism itself lacks a definition, and almost every liberation movement in the world has been called a terrorist at some point or another. By believing their own false label, the Israel Defence Forces have forgotten one basic premise of military strategy: you need to understand your opponent's violence to fight it.

Palestinian violence is prompted by a shared sense of resistance under whatever ideological banner. The violence of resistance has roots in the hearts of all those subjected to dominating violence. Such violence cannot be eradicated without annihilating the people themselves. The IDF are hoping to cripple the people of Gaza to the degree of collective loss of self. To doom them into repetitive, collective Sisyphean exercises until their will collapses. The only innocent Palestine is she without agency. Able-bodied men are collected for mass torture, released only when the scars of trauma are engraved too deeply.

### **When our collective will to stop the slaughterhouse is met with imaginary structures built for us to fight with . . .**

بننادي على عالم مين علشان يستكر ويدين دن كما شئت فأى إدانة لما يجري جوا السلخانة مش هتخف بارود  
الدانة ولا قادرة ترجع له صباح  
مصطفى إبراهيم — تلك قضية

"What international community are you calling upon? So that they may denounce and condemn? Condemn as you wish. For any condemnation of crimes in the slaughterhouse, will not soften the powder of the gun, and won't bring back the daylight."

—Ibrahim Mostafa, "Telka Qadeya," later sung by Cairokee

Humans spend a significant portion of their time seeking to understand the world around them so as to build the best possible prospects for themselves, their loved ones, and communities. Parents are willing to pay any imaginable price to protect their children. Imagine the cruelty of observing culminated false labels used in the debate shaping your own family's prospects of life, death, disease, hunger, thirst, and agony. Your daughter burning in front of your eyes, or your infant losing a head in the same timeline that a crowd in American Congress claps endlessly for the man intent on sustaining this horror.<sup>21</sup> Without the truth, justice cannot be pursued.

In the past ten months, I am often reminded of the cinema scene in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*: eyelids locked, strapped into a chair, and forced to watch the most

gruesome scenes. Our screams are met with the gentle voices of the institution consenting to the continuation of this torture.

As we collectively bear witness to a live-streamed slaughterhouse, many of us seek spaces of resistance and resilience. In these engagements, one finds an even deeper sense of absurdity—debates about a comma and slight difference in wording in a decision by the International Court of Justice;<sup>22</sup> debates about the technicalities of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court;<sup>23</sup> bans on the slogans “from the river to the sea.”<sup>24</sup>

After months of engagement with different legal mechanisms, one is stuck with the feeling that they are fighting with Don Quixote’s windmills: illusionary giants created by the contemporary nation-state and international institutions. These are structures established to sustain patently absurd claims to “legitimate” violence. For example, in the quest to lobby for a change in U.S. arms exports policy, activists are asked to undertake the impossible exercise of proving how each weapon was used and the legal classification of each usage.<sup>25</sup> This time-consuming task is rebutted with nonsensical bureaucracy designed to uphold the fortress of the military-industrial complex.

**A part of our common humanity and ourselves is dead. This death is not a source of despair, but a newly found sense of ironic fearlessness.**

When a dry forest is consumed by flames, the ashes provide nutrients from which a new and stronger forest emerges. The phoenix rising from the ashes is also an emblematic theme in Palestinian thought. This theme builds on the religious connotations of martyrs, the death of whom is seen as a price of national liberation. To soothe myself, I listen to Palestinian folklore songs of martyrdom that celebrate death as a ritual of rebirth, blending symbols of marriage, birth, and spring.

ادفنوا امواتكم وانهضوا

Bury your dead and then rise up. ”

The pain felt by the people of Palestine scarred the consciousness of humanity. As expressed by the Ashqeen band in relation to the Sabra and Shatila genocide: “There is no excuse for the deaf or the blind, for this massacre shocks even death itself.”

Whatever happens, Israel has lost the war. It has permanently shed its mask of European liberalism. The young can see it better than the old. Denying the inevitability of its own loss, Israel is igniting the worst forms of human tragedy. The brute reality is famine, amputations, pandemics, people losing their heads, people burned alive, sexual abuse, people buried alive, and dog attacks.

Very little ammunition is left in false labels the global media desperately use in defense of Israel. Such false labels are now brittle and thin. The only weapon left for Israel is excessive physical coercion. It is a historical tale of a dying tyrant taking as many lives as possible on his way to death. On its way, it is dragging some of the false labels of European liberalism down as collateral damage. Israel’s weaponization of international legal language weakens its claim to legitimacy within the present global public sphere.

Collective pain can provide clarity of perception in an age that individual sense of purpose has been buried under the candy of unfulfilled desire thrown at the masses by the capitalist machine. In the words of Gibran Khalil Gibran:

“Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.  
Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must  
you know pain.”<sup>26</sup>

For many of us, the absurdity of some false labels has been stripped naked by collective pain. The numbers of those standing witness to atrocities have grown in magnitudes. Some spaces of veiled violence under the label of liberalism are now a joke. Scorching irony is the overwhelming feeling at the sight of liberal violence in all its nakedness.

This pain has now become a collective bond shaping the relations of millions around the world. The intersecting powers of capital and racism shaping this extreme horror resonate with a wide host of various imbricate struggles. Those chanting “Free Palestine” are the same people chanting “Black lives matter,” “Indigenous land back now,” “No peace, no justice.” This pain has given birth to a clear sense of purpose, forging organized networks of resistance rising like a phoenix from the ashes. It has reopened channels of solidarity, grassroots work, and internationalism.

The pain has pushed many academics outside disciplinary and institutional bubbles, collectively invoking the ethos of guerilla intellectuals.<sup>27</sup> A similar ethos of intellectualism is represented in the icon of Basel Al Araj, a Palestinian intellectual who was murdered through the collaboration of the Israeli and Palestinian authorities. He famously questioned the value of intellectualism disconnected from struggle.<sup>28</sup>

As I write these words, I can hear the echo of the students at Melbourne Law School chanting in the street “The people united will never be defeated.” The only way to overcome the power of capital sustaining this absurdity is through the unity of peoples who see beyond the false labels and feel the collective pain.

“They united us with pain, we became a people and we prevailed”  
—El Ras

The case of Palestine has become emblematic of modern-day domination. The false labels sustaining this horror are engraved within the structures of the liberal status quo in the global north. The violence of these structures is often veiled through false representations. The ongoing genocide has stretched this structure, signaling the falseness of the labels and the brutality underneath. The masses have a sharper perspective on reality and the false labels are weaker. Resistance is born when the masses look upon the false labels with scorching irony. Such resistance is a critical act, deconstructive by nature. Nevertheless, such deconstruction does not come in a vacuum—but with an intent to elevate representation of the brutality of reality through collective action. Such collective action has the capacity to override capital’s power to manufacture consent.

I write these words because I can feel death in my body. In the past ten months, I have changed—I feel death, yet I am more alive than ever. As I mourn, I chant. In the past eleven months, my network of comrades has grown rich in pluralities. I can draw a mental tapestry of kind eyes telling me that we are all one. Chants of revolution by older generations revived a historical continuity of struggle from which I derive strength and a closer affinity to the truth. I have derived strength from the anthems of racial, feminist, anti-colonial struggles—my body movement synchronized to the beat of collective struggle.

“What a treacherous aggressor!  
 We will rise with a sun that will destroy like wildfire  
 With the march of the brave, the roar grows louder  
 Palestine, here you go!  
 Palestine is a nation built by struggle”  
 —Ahmad Fouad Nijm, Palestine is a nation built by struggle

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