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Bearing Witness to Ecocide: Contagious Imperial Infrastructures at the Borderlands of Mexico and Palestine

Abstract

This essay argues that ecocide should be included as a framework of analysis in border studies in order to complicate how environmental destruction consequently affects people, history, and culture. The borderlands of Mexico and Palestine are taken up as case studies because both spaces share relational histories of colonization, dispossession, and environmental violence (ecocide). Contagious imperial infrastructures, which take shape as the proliferation of political rhetoric around the planet and the construction of physical barriers, are interconnected systems of material and immaterial networks partly responsible for ecocide. Contagious imperial infrastructures disrupt vital ecosystems in the borderlands and thus precipitate adverse effects on all forms of culture. This essay especially asks us to consider the cactus plant as a metaphor of resistance and as a medium in which artists visualize traumatic histories. The plant is endowed with evidentiary attributes, bearing witness to ecocide on temporal and spatial scales.

To our land,
and it is the one surrounded with torn hills,
the ambush of a new past.
To our land, and it is a prize of war,
the freedom to die from longing and burning
and our land, in its bloodied night,
is a jewel that glimmers for the far upon the far
and illuminates what is outside it...
As for us, inside,
we suffocate more!
-Mahmoud Darwsih, from *Our Land* (2005)

Tenuous global politics in the twenty-first century has reinvigorated extreme right-wing nationalisms and mobilized stringent measures for border security in response to geopolitical conflicts and flows of displaced peoples into the so-called Global North. Xenophobic anxieties have materialized into discriminatory immigration policies targeting, expelling, and containing racialized groups into stateless, illegal, and subhuman categories. These anti-immi-

grant policies enforced to prosecute humans have a record of materializing into borders, some of which become physical structures that delineate territory and obstruct human mobility.

Although borders evidently affect humans, we cannot omit attention to the ongoing decimation of biodiversity. Animals, for instance, migrate seasonally for survival, and indigenous fauna serve a purpose to the land as food, medicine, oasis, and culture. It is therefore imperative to focus on diverse living organisms in relation to humanmade border troubles and the alarming consequences this holds on a planetary scale.

This essay proposes contextualizing United States-Mexico and Palestine border studies through the framework of ecocide. Plant biologist Arthur W. Galston first introduced the concept of ecocide at the Conference on War and National Responsibility in February 1970. Galston presented his research on environmental catastrophe in Vietnam as a result of the United States' invasion of this region to doz-

ens of scholars who convened to discuss and assess the scale of the crimes against humanity attributed to the war. After having concluded four years of research on herbicide in Vietnam under Operation Hand Ranch, enacted from 1962 to 1972, Galston concluded that the destruction was an act of ecocide.¹ Galston remarked:

After the end of World War II, and as a result of the Nuremberg trials, we justly condemned the willful destruction of an entire people and its culture, calling this crime against humanity genocide. It seems to me that the willful and permanent destruction of environment in which a people can live in a manner of their own choosing ought similarly to be considered as a crime against humanity, to be designated by the term ecocide.²

Following Galston's interpretation of ecocide, I argue that United States' and Israeli borders, walls, and fences are contagious imperial infrastructures that achieve more than safeguard an insular national body: these architectural designs and their immaterial networks destroy the environment and the biodiversity that resides therein. More specifically, I am motivated to problematize how the politicization and normalization of discourses on "contagion," activated to ostracize racialized peoples, rationalize logics of panopticism by assembling physical barriers that in turn contaminate the environment.

I advance two strands of thinking on this notion of contagious imperial infrastructures: the rhetoric of borders as infectious as these conversations impassion other nation-states to replicate such rhetoric in their own contexts, and physical borders as systems that multiply and contaminate the environment, both of which are entangled with one another. Mexico and Palestine earn a privileged position in this essay due to relational histories pertaining to colonization, dispossession, displacement, and land destruction. As the essay will exemplify, I understand the formation of imperial infrastructures by the United States and Israel as relational histories in the sense that both settler-colonial countries have used the logics and architects of colonization to depopulate communities and annex the land into the nation-state project, including developing partnerships that support each other's ongoing expulsion of

migrants and refugees. United States' and Israeli transnational surveillance technology development reifies each nation's expansionist imperial projects through military and defense systems. The United States and Israel share practices of divide and conquer that dispossess Indigenous people from their land and dismiss their connection to the environment.

This essay forwards two ideas of thinking about cacti as a metaphor for resistance emerging in sites where the plant was once uprooted and as a visual medium through which an optics of resistance and poetics of perseverance can develop. When moving images and still images are absent in recording assaults against people and the environment, nature finds a way of resisting and telling those stories, as do cultural makers and bearers. Why is studying cacti important for understanding the ways in which plants function as metaphors for resistance? What historical and cultural meaning emerges when cacti is used to visualize resistance against erasure? I elaborate on how through cacti we might make a theoretical leap to imagine how the plant itself struggles against human reengineering of the land and how the prickly pads have been appropriated as mediums for decolonization. Embarking on this theoretical project demands us to reconsider plants as visual evidence that documents ecocide. I am not gesturing towards a study of the inhuman or plant agency, but rather maintain how cactus is a metaphor for resistance, especially in the Palestinian context.

This essay intervenes in border studies by attending to the discrepancy of studying the environmental crises that borders have created. The first section examines contagious xenophobic discourses that lead to the erection of physical barriers at the detriment of diverse ecosystems. While contagious imperial infrastructures are systems of material and immaterial networks, the second part of the essay complicates in looking at the ways in which nature itself is used as an imperial project and how we can think about these projects carrying out violence against nature and history through ecocide. The final part of the essay details the ways in which cactus is a metaphor of resistance and how the plant has been used to visualize traumatic histories.

BEARING WITNESS TO ECOCIDE

Xenophobic Discourse as Contagion

Borders and their invisible agents are contagious imperial infrastructures in that through environmental contamination, deracination of plants, nourishment of dangerous rhetoric, and illusory national immunity from pathogenic “others,” they enact on ecocidal practices. Contagion, broadly speaking, suggests rupture, abnormality, and corruption. The referent of the border as contagion is the harmful rhetoric that traverses and influences the cultural, political, and social spheres. Although biopolitics and racist medical discourse would seemingly inform our approach to contagion, our task at hand instead is to problematize how contagious border rhetoric directly leads to environmental degradation. How might situating ecocide in border studies of Mexico and Palestine animate an obligatory conversation on contagious xenophobic convictions?

Writing in the context of environmental humanities, the anthropologist Celia Lowe’s definition of “infection” resonates with this essay. Lowe writes, “Infection is an invasion; a breaching of boundaries. Infection is an event; a becoming with. Infection is a ‘fluctuation’ in the present order of things.”³ Lowe’s juxtaposing terms such as “invasion” and “boundary” invoke images of parasitic pathogens in search of a benevolent and unsuspecting host, where “event” signifies the flaring up of illness, and “the order of things” references the disruption of organized normality. Lowe’s vocabulary underscores and critiques the metaphor of contagion when describing “otherness.” Our study deals with how contagious anti-immigrant sentiments has led to contentious debates on the construction of border walls and fences in order to keep people out and how consequently, these anxieties affect biodiversity.

Contagion as an idea propagates across the planet through bombastic rhetoric and is mediated via images. Nativists, xenophobes, and nationalists have misappropriated the term contagion from scientific lexicon to promote intolerance. In doing so, and in the name of ethnic and racial supremacy, maps have been reconfigured and restrictive immigration laws have been passed. We might think about anti-immigrant sentiments as being the source of contagious discourses and ideas. For example, proposals for border walls and fence con-

struction have multiplied in the world, notably in Europe in response to the refugee crisis of displaced Middle Eastern people across land and water. Hungary serves as a case study since the country has erected barbed wire fencing along its border with Serbia in order to impede refugees fleeing violence in their homelands from passing through the country.⁴ The appeal of the border as an enclosure to ward off “others” is inherently racist and imperialist. The idea of protecting the nation from contaminated racial “others” by militarizing borderlands spells out negative outcomes for humans and biodiversity.

Although attention to the human condition in border studies continues to expand in significant and critical ways, biodiversity remains in the periphery of this field. This concern does not call for undoing the symbiosis of nature and humans, but it does call for a more sustained focus on plants. It is therefore urgent for scholars to take into account environmental degradation in border studies in order to branch out and draw out new connecting nodes. Furthermore, the scope and scale of environmental degradation must be clearly defined in the process. For instance, environmental degradation pales in comparison to ecocide. Ecocide entails physical and symbolic violence, erasure of space and culture, and appropriation of land as a display of human domination over nature. I include ecocide in the vein of imperialism to call attention to the ways in which the latter takes various forms and shapes that are not always discernable in the present moment. The legacies of humanmade environmental disasters take place over space and time, affecting generations of biodiversity.

Galston and colleagues reprobed the United States military’s defoliation, herbicide, and various forms of landscape destruction of Southeast Asia.⁵ This inflection elevated the scientists’ concerns on herbicidal warfare and its impact on quotidian human life and culture. At that specific moment, ecocide took on a definition concerned with how war and environmental destruction affected people. The meaning of ecocide, writes David Zierler, has since expanded significantly to include other concerns that scholars did not address in the 1970 conference. Zierler reminds us that the environmental justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s should “not obscure the original meaning and context of ecocide,”

which first appeared in response to United States' counterinsurgency projects of defeating communism and other uprisings in Vietnam through environmental and human destruction.⁶ The concept has been used to raise awareness of similar cases in other global regions, and it stresses how this assault on nature has had adverse outcomes on humans, especially if they depend on agriculture for survival.

Israel's uprooting of olive trees exemplifies Galston's definition of ecocide as the environmental devastation disturbs Palestinians' right to humanity. Under inhumane blockade, Israel deprives Palestinians of economic agency in destroying olive trees.⁷ Palestinians rely on the tree to produce oil as a means of currency when exchanging goods. Moreover, Israel's environmental violence invalidates Palestinian cultural and historical claims to the land. To the outside world, this violence is not always immediately perceivable. For Palestinians, this violence unfolds over time in what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence." Nixon explains that violence "is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility," complicating our understanding of violence and its temporal register.⁸ In other words, if the uprooting of Palestinian trees is an immediate ecocidal event, slow violence is the ripple effect that remains latent, inevitably manifesting itself as cultural and economic distress. To use Nixon's term, environmental violence "needs to be seen—and deeply considered—as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time."⁹ In taking this point forward, we might consider environmental violence, or ecocide, not only as the destruction of the environment, but also as geographical modification and historical revision. For example, afforestation projects inscribe a manufactured narrative on the land, complicating our approach on what constitutes imperial infrastructures, a point to which we will return to momentarily. If planting cypress, pines, and eucalyptus over formerly inhabited Palestinian villages is a mechanism for erasing the existence and humanity of the Indigenous, then this environmental violence, or act of ecocide, should be considered in the vein of imperial infrastructures.

The United States-Israel Imperial Infrastructures

The display of imperial infrastructures is associated with the violence of nation-state powers. A contagious imperial infrastructure is at once intangible and invisible; it transcends the material form held together by concrete and metal. These hidden systems of beliefs and actions are mobilized through political discourse. Lowe draws our attention to how language and rhetoric spread: "Behaviours, like laughter, are infectious. Infection can create a 'we; where there was once an 'I.' We might not always like this emergent multiplicity."¹⁰ In addition, the author explains that emotions like fear are "epidemic and contagious," and that these reactions have crystalized into outbreaks of "Anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, and anti-Communism" that in return rouse nationalist fervor.¹¹ In characterizing racism and xenophobia as "outbreaks," Lowe suggests that such attitudes infect the national body and debilitate the prospect of an equitable and progressive world. As a result of hostile language, Lowe references how the Peace Lines in Northern Ireland, the United States-Mexico border fence legislation, and the Israel-West Bank wall "clumsily attempt to hold contagion at bay."¹² Walls and fences do nothing but incubate isolationism. Imperial infrastructures such as borders embody the vehement sentiments that created them, and they play a role in fostering an isolationist ideology rooted in the "I," foreclosing collectivity and the possibility of a borderless planet. These imperial infrastructures are bandages that protect the integrity of the interior from a phantom threat, a hyperbolic, imagined threat. Under the pretext of erecting walls and fences to keep countries secure, governments fail to address the internal problems of the nation by scapegoating dispossessed and displaced people as menaces.

I define imperial infrastructures through Brian Larkin's conceptualization of infrastructures, which he describes as "objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems."¹³ Larkin situates his approach on the idea that invisible interconnected systems are symbiotic. The border does not simply function as a barrier that delineates national territory. A superficial description of borders would overlook the dynamic systems

BEARING WITNESS TO ECOCIDE

that profit from the existence of the barrier, such as the military-industrial-complex, transnational economic entities, border authorities, and political power brokers capitalizing on divided land. Borders are increasingly deterritorialized and permeate the digital realm, regulating freedom and liberation. In this sense, borders are porous to certain entities, granting them immunity to pass through without restrictions, mostly supported by globalization and nationalist ideologies that further imperialism and partition. Demystifying borders as structures without interest groups and networks challenges us to look beyond the materiality of walls and fences.

On the other hand, how do we move past concrete walls and metal fences to think about other material borders such as housing settlements, exclusive roads and highways, surveillance towers, and afforestation as part of contagious imperial infrastructures? The construction of border walls and fences enables corporations to erect institutions adjacent to the physical barriers. Israeli settlements, for example, are built along the wall, while on the other side Palestinians are violently displaced and their homes demolished. In the United States, proposals and designs for the construction of a border wall have come from various international corporations, including those from Israel.¹⁴ The borderlands of Mexico and Palestine share similar characteristics, such as geographical partition made by various infrastructures such as asphalt roads and national parks created by the imperial party. In addition, the borderlands function as laboratories from which surveillance technologies and other military experiments are developed. In taking into consideration that borders create detrimental consequences for human migration, in that migrants and refugees are forced into perilous detours in order to avoid encountering militarized zones, we must also acknowledge that the border cuts across landscapes, endangering natural habitats rich in biodiversity.

Postcolonial studies and studies of the Anthropocene, especially the former, attend to the issues of land privatization and the extraction of natural resources in the so-called developing countries as ongoing colonial legacies. The perceived disposability and monetization of the environment undermines natural conservation efforts and disregards environmental rights and Indigenous rights.

The United States and Israel have showcased their commitment to imperial infrastructures, much of which involves the Israeli security firm Elbit Systems developing surveillance technology for United States Customs and Border Protection. The United States-Israel alliance makes the Mexican and Palestinian connection stronger, considering that both borderlands share a relational history of colonization and military occupation. Elbit Systems' importation of militarized technology for the United States-Mexico border exposes transmilitary networks entangled in ideological imperial arrangements. And although borders do indeed affect humans the most, we must think in the context of ecocide to illustrate how the erasure and occupation of the environment wages violence against history and culture.

Of ecocide in the Palestinian context, Damien Short writes that the Israeli Occupation and the construction of borders have material consequences on the lived experiences of Palestinians because ecocide has "far-reaching social, economic, and political implications."¹⁵ In citing the 2003 "Desk Study on the Environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories" composed by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), Short and Haifa Rashed explain that the occupation of Palestine has adverse effects on biodiversity. Short and Rashed write that the biodiversity in Occupied Palestinian Territories are at risk of major degradation as a result of "military operations, the rapid growth of Israeli settlements and supporting roads in areas where land is already scarce, the construction of the separation fence and wall that effectively block movement of terrestrial fauna and cut the natural ecological corridors, as well as Israel clearing land of vegetation for security purposes."¹⁶ The networks partaking in imperial infrastructures render visible the transformation of the land, but the environmental disaster, as Nixon suggests, is slow and unfolds at different temporal rates.

Large-scale engineering is generally used as a metric to measure the successes of empire. Railroads, dams, electricity, communication technologies, and borders are presented as civilizing projects of modernity. Addressing ecocide complicates the dimension on how land appropriation and environmental modification produces an imperial

space. Displacement and land erasure are imperial projects used at the service of the colonizing nation to erase geography, cultural histories rooted in ecosystems, and the existence of Indigenous populations by fabricating a narrative that alters landscape. Afforestation and designation of national parks on stolen land is a prime example of an imperial infrastructure. The Jewish National Fund's (JNF) afforestation campaign in formerly populated Palestinian villages displaced during the *Nakba* of 1948, or the catastrophe, is an extension of the imperial project where cultural and environmental memory is supplanted by a colonizing one. The remnants of Palestinian villages, standing in as relics of displacement, such as house foundations, are hidden and transformed into forests. Carol Bardenstein writes that afforestation is a tradition of Jewish rootedness, although reminding us that, "Not only do tree-planting and afforestation campaign create memory [...], but they have also served to *erase* memory by erasing or planting over traces of places in Palestinian collective memory."¹⁷ The counter-historical narrative in afforestation is an act of ecocide that rejects Palestinian existence, one that conceives the environment as a tabula rasa where a new history blooms, layering an invasive new plant and narrative over an indigenous one. Likewise, the United States participates in designating land as national parks, although creating contradictions when dismissing environmental protection laws in place.

At the intersection of anti-immigrant rhetoric and anxieties of terrorists entering the United States through the Southwest border following 9/11, bills like HR 4437, "Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005" prove inconsistent law application. These laws are bypassed in order to build borders. Although HR 4437 did not pass, alternative laws like the Secure Fence Act of 2006, signed by then-president George W. Bush, allowed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to build border fences along protected habitats. Moreover, laws interfering with border construction could be waived under the REAL ID Act of 2005. In 2017, DHS announced that it would use its authority to overwrite environmental laws to allow border construction along the United States-Mexico borderlands.¹⁸ Evidently, environmental protection laws in the United States

are not prioritized and constantly circumvented, thus transforming natural habitats into surveillance fields. The United States displays its imperial power in conquering and transforming nature into a panopticon and occupation structure where the imperial presence is harshly inscribed into the land.

In the context of the United States-Mexico borderlands, the inauguration of the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in 1937 was a project of empire rooted in ideas of land appropriation on the United States' side of the border, a site where spectacle and exoticism converge. In claiming ecosystems as national property, the United States legitimized nation-state boundaries and jurisdiction over land transformation. The status of the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument as protected property is contentious and debatable. In the post-9/11 era, the United States government has built additional fences, damaging the environment at the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. What good does designating a natural landscape a national monument do when environmental laws are ignored for building fences through the space? The construction of the fence through the national monument can be read as a metaphor of the United States' psychosis: contagious discourses on invasion leading to the construction of walls and fences at the expense of destroying its "own" national heritage.

Visualizing Resistance in Cactus Plants

The term ecocide most notably focuses on the disastrous consequences of human action on the environment. Ecocide, as evinced in the examples above, must also be thought of in terms of symbolic annihilation. Cacti stands in as a medium for visualizing resistance. Furthermore, such an act endows the plant with evidentiary value.

The spines on the cactus are natural deterrents, natural defense mechanisms. Despite its prickly feature, the plant offers refuge to animals such as the gilded flicker, elf owl, purple martin, and sparrow, protecting them from the arid desert and predators. For Mexicans and Palestinians, cactus is endowed with cultural and historical significance because it symbolizes resistance, rootedness, and Indigeneity. Despite the depopulation of Palestinian villages, afforestation projects, and the appropriation of nature

BEARING WITNESS TO ECOCIDE

as militarized borderlands, nature manages to resist imperial infrastructure projects. The regrowth of cacti in Palestine, and the presence of various species of cacti along the United States-Mexico border, functions as a metaphor of resilience, reemerging and withstanding harsh events. In a sense, the plant bears witness to environmental changes and humanmade traumatic historical events.

900 of the 1,800 species of cacti are located throughout present-day Mexico. The prickly pear cactus, for instance, has been mythologized as a national symbol of the country. The mythohistorical significance of the prickly pear cactus is found on the account that the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli instructed Aztec leaders to migrate and to settle on the land upon coming across an eagle perched on a *nopal*. The place would be named Tenochtitlán, situated in present-day Mexico City. Writing on cacti and its historical and cultural importance in Mexico, David Yetman explains that “The Aztecs elevated it [the cactus] to sacred status,” and we could add that its prominence as a national symbol as represented on the Mexican flag and in popular and visual culture exemplifies resistance and national identity.¹⁹ For Palestinians, the cactus stands in as a symbol of community formation and often referenced and represented to make rightful historical claims of the right of return to their land. In both contexts, the use of cacti as symbol of resistance helps us visualize how the plant inspires identity among the dispossessed and how it mobilizes political action.

The cactus plant has resisted incursion throughout history due to its thorny characteristic. But it has also been used as a natural barrier. In the Mexican context, Yetman adds that cacti were planted contiguously to create hedges and used for claiming plots. In addition, cacti hedge size exhibited social power; the larger the cacti hedge, the wealthier the people who owned the land. The only lethal uses of cacti fencing included deterring “the most ornery of cattle, goats, or pack animals.”²⁰ The uses of cacti for boundary marking and community identity is similarly true for Palestinians. Similarly to Yetman’s explanation of cacti fencing in Mexico, Nasser Abufarha writes that “Traditionally, it [the cactus] is planted as demarcations of land boundaries. Especially on the hillsides, rows of saber separate people’s orchards and olive groves from each other.”²¹ Reading Yetman and Abufarha’s

account on the uses of cacti as natural fencing for delineating personal space for agricultural purposes, we must not conflate this kind of territorial outlining with contagious imperial infrastructures put in place to keep out and contain racialized groups. The uses of cacti as boundary distinctions operated on a minor scale to cultivate land and not to segregate people; to respect neighboring plots. An imperial border, on the other hand, is larger in scale and built to discriminate and dehumanize.

Evidence of cacti fencing remains today. In Palestine, the remnants of the foundation of homes and the regrowth of cactus hedges around spatial markings disprove false ideas that Palestinian villages and Palestinians never existed. It is therefore impossible to erase Palestinian space and cultural memory, especially when nature reclaims its territory despite the imperial power’s effort to erase fauna; thus making cacti a metaphor of resistance. The plant in Mexico and Palestine visualize histories in various ways. I am not calling for the universalization of the meaning of cacti, but we should work through the role plants play as visual culture of resistance. In this case, how can we think about plants such as cacti as possessing evidentiary value?

In thinking about the cactus plant as a medium for visualizing historical memory and opening new inquiries, we might shift our thinking in arguing that nature bears witness to violence. For example, Abufarha argues that the planting of olive trees for many generations of Palestinians was a practice for passing down “history, culture, and rootedness.”²² This is relevant considering that the uprooting of olive trees displaces history and induces trauma. “In this sense,” writes Abufarha, “the olive tree is a medium for Palestinians to experience the relationship to the land across time through the chain of exchange.”²³ Whether cacti regrows on sites marked by violent removals, or whether the deep roots evade the superficial reorganization of stolen land above soil, the plant makes its own claim; it has inspired cultural bearers to use cactus as evidence of their humanity.

Art functions critically for helping visualize stories of dispossession through metaphors. Artist Ahmad Mohamed Yaseen uses cactus pads to carve out symbols of Palestinian oppression and self-determination. Yaseen draws with acrylic and carves on the plant the faces of displaced and brutalized

people. The artist uses cacti as a canvas to symbolize resistance and rootedness and to advance claims for Palestinian right of return, making cacti a powerful medium for invoking traumatic experiences and for resisting catastrophic historical events and their aftermaths. For example, his on-site installation work includes pieces such as *Return Key* (2016) where he draws a door lock, carves-out a piece of the cactus pad, and inserts a key. The key is symbolic of the forced eviction of Palestinians and the keys they kept in the hopes of returning to their homes. Other provocative pieces include drawn hands, carved-out cactus pads, and rocks inserted into the aperture, visualizing the ways in which Palestinians use nature's weapons to fight back against the militarized state of Israel. In addition, Yaseen renders visible the outcome of resistance in representing injury, such as his 2016 untitled piece where bloody gauze covers a cactus pad. The artist shows us that resistance is not romantic and that it often leads to countless injuries and fatalities. Perhaps the most uplifting piece in his installation is *Earth day* (2016), the drawing of a young Palestinian boy whose outstretched arms transform into roots on the cactus pad, visualizing and advancing historical and cultural claims to the land.

Yaseen's artistic work is activist-oriented in that he uses nature as a medium to represent the humanitarian crisis in Palestine. Abufarha reminds us that "Palestinians perceive the cactus tree as a witness that refuses to die, so defiantly battling Israeli bulldozers that have tried to kill it and erase the traces of the Palestinian villages the cactus tree surrounded."²⁴ Following Abufarha, we can make a similar claim: cactus plants in Palestine withstand ecocide, as their roots reclaim annexed space, show-

ing us that contagious borders are no match for nature.

Conclusion: On the Aftermath of Ruins

We need to acknowledge the coexistence of biodiversity—namely of humans, animals, and plants; they are interconnected, and the destruction of one impacts the larger ecosystem of life and culture. We cannot take biodiversity for granted when it comes to imperial violence on nature. In this essay we directed our attention to cacti in Mexico and Palestine, but this minor, yet vital, emphasis is a fraction of the planetary whole. The concept of palimpsest is relevant to our inquiry on ecocide. Questions on truth, remnants, traces of original Indigenous spaces, and failed obliteration of culture and history suggests to us that nature prevails over imperial infrastructures. Although it is difficult to imagine working towards undoing the damage imperial infrastructures have precipitated throughout the world, we can assert that the evidence of such acts will always resurface. How do we contend with the aftermath of ecocide? How might plants (and humans) shift ground and begin efforts to heal the land damaged by what Ann Laura Stoler calls "imperial debris"?²⁵ Stoler defines imperial debris as the formation of empire and its sedimentation of power and destruction over time where such violence takes shape in the environmental, economic, and cultural dynamics of "othered" spaces. The struggles to clean up the imperial debris rests at the hands of humans. In this decolonial pursuit, we must respect and defer to Indigenous people, whom have been dispossessed, to guide us in restoring ecosystems. How do we listen to the environment and sync with its call for resilience, justice, and resistance?

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BEARING WITNESS TO ECOCIDE

Notes

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- 6 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 7 "New UN report finds that without obstacles Occupied Palestinian Territory's economy could easily double gross domestic product," *UN News*, September 6, 2016. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/09/538382-new-un-report-finds-without-obstacles-occupied-palestinian-territorys-economy>
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- 10 Lowe, "Infection. Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities," 303.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
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- 16 Short and Haifa Rashed, "Palestine" in *Redefining Genocide*, 84.
- 17 Carol Bardenstein, "Threads of Memory and Discourses of Rootedness: Of Trees, Oranges, and the Prickly-Pear Cactus in Israel/Palestine," *Edebiyat* 8.1 (1998): 8.
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- 20 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 21 Nasser Abufarha, "Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange and Olive Trees in Palestine," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 15.3 (2008): 346.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 358.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, 363.
- 25 Ann Laura Stoler in "Introduction. 'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination" in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, edited by Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 2.