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Settler Colonialism and the Engineering of Historical Amnesia



Image by Ömer Yıldız.

It should come as no surprise to those of us with even a cursory understanding of the history of U.S. imperialism that the once sovereign Kingdom of Hawai'i became the very first state in the nation to call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Hawai'i is an occupied nation, and has been since 1893 when the U.S. launched a coup to overthrow the sovereign rule of Queen Lili'uokalani. We don't need to dive that far back into historical memory to discover that even this imperialist overthrow was acknowledged by none other than then president Bill Clinton, who, in 1993 (on the centennial of the coup) issued an official apology to the Hawaiian Kingdom—an apology that notably *did not* include a return of the land to the people of this occupied island nation.

In fact, we only need to turn the dial of history back less than one year to the devastating wildfires that occurred in Maui in August of 2023 to understand the imperial and settler colonial legacies of U.S. intervention in Hawai'i — a legacy so potent that it even made it to the opinion pages of the *New York Times*, as [Yarimar Bonilla put it](#), “The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has acknowledged that the climate crisis is rooted in the exploitation and degradation of the environment, people and cultures, which were foundational principles of colonialism. Settlers prioritized immediate resource gains over long-term ecological health, shunning Indigenous land management practices as outdated barriers to progress.”

Although partial credit is perhaps due to the *The New York Times* for this as well as [their earlier reporting](#) on the colonial history of U.S., French, and Canadian intervention in Haiti, readers of the so-called “paper of record” should ask why *NYT* journalists [were censored from using words like “Palestine,” “genocide,” and “ethnic cleansing”](#) in their reporting in the midst of Israel’s ongoing genocidal campaign in Gaza.

A quick peek at *NYT* [reporting during the U.S. occupation of Haiti \(1919-1934\)](#) might yield a historical clue: while U.S. colonialism exported its brand of Wall Street imperialism and expansion to the island nation during the military occupation of 1915-1934 (and after), the *NYT* normalized this legacy for its millions of subscribers; a relation that continues up through our present moment.

That the *NYT* was just awarded the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for International Journalism adds insult to injury: as reported by *The Grayzone*, *The Intercept*, and, most recently, *The Times of London*, the *NYT* has been systematically debunked for their coverage of “mass rape” and other falsified atrocities alleged to have been committed by Hamas on October 7, 2023.

That Minouche Shafik, president of Columbia University, currently sits on the [Pulitzer Prize Board](#) should not be a surprise, given their recent involvement in authorizing the [violent suppression of student journalists](#) who were covering the police raids on anti-genocide student encampments on the Columbia campus. This entanglement is seamlessly aligned with the *NYT*’s frequent normalization of colonial, imperial, and genocidal violence.

It should also not come as a surprise that Israel’s genocidal campaign in Gaza, backed ideologically, financially, and materially by the U.S. State Department has caused an [uproar on college campuses across the country](#)—and around the world. [These Students](#), not unlike the Hawaiian state legislature, are not only directing their passionate demands

for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza but also focalizing the long history of settler colonialism and imperialism that continues to be disavowed by the media and the U.S. ruling elite. How else can we understand Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza, which includes forced starvation, ecocide, ethnic cleaning, and, at the time of this writing, upwards of 35,000 people murdered, nearly 15,000 of which are children, unless we situate it in the *longue durée* of settler colonialism and U.S. imperialism?

Contemporaneous with sublime acts of historical disavowal such as President Biden's recent rhetoric regarding Hamas' "ancient desire" to exterminate the state of Israel, and Antony Blinken and Mitt Romney's dorm room, pseudo-intellectual struggle session linking the congressional ban of Tik-Tok to Israel's failing PR image, students on university and college campuses are on the frontline of an ideological war, struggling against the tides of historical amnesia and modern day capitulation to fascism; their collective demands that institutions of higher education divest immediately from Israel and U.S. weapons manufacturers are an organized, measured, and ultimately strategic national and international political intervention which recenters the twin legacies of settler colonialism and U.S. imperialism, as well as, to borrow the title of Alberto Toscano's recent book, the "late fascism" that marks our present moment.

In tandem with the ongoing "history wars" taking place in professional circles, college campuses, as well as state legislatures, former presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton recently took to the airwaves to berate students protesting genocide, telling the hosts of MSNBC's Morning Joe, that students "don't know very much at all about the history of the Middle East, or frankly about history, in many areas of the world, including in our own country."

We must remember, following the lead of students protesting Israel's genocide, that the mentality that spurred on the colonization of Turtle Island was the deeply held conviction behind the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny, which served as the justification for the genocide and forced removal of millions of Indigenous people while also, over time, permeating both the European-American psyche and the United States legal system (in another moment Americans like to forget, even the liberal's sweetheart, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, cited the Doctrine in 2005 as reason to rule against tribal sovereignty).

Such creation and ownership mythology is also at the root of the Zionist project, exemplified not only through the old adage used in the creation of Israel about a land without a people but also in fictions of birthright narratives. European settlers colonized Turtle Island with similar creation myths and strategies used by the European Zionist

[settlers](#) who have been colonizing Palestine. And the cultural forgetfulness that conveniently downplays “residential schools” in America is the same that allows for Israel to bury the history of the [Yemenite Children Affair](#), in which thousands of babies and children from Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, and other nearby countries were kidnapped out of absorption camps by Israeli authorities and adopted into Israeli families — two contemporaneous tragedies on the historical timeline. It becomes all too clear how the descendants of the early Puritan settlers and the original Zionists are so easily able to come together in their joint willful ignorance of the brutality of their practices, both past and present.

For decades, Israel, like many colonizing nations, has been able to hide under the security of the blanket of historical amnesia. It’s been all too easy for Israel to float by in the public eye as the world pays little attention to its past supporting violent regimes. For instance, it’s rarely broached by our politicians or mainstream U.S. media that Israel supplied [weapons and surveillance technology](#) to the right-wing government and military in El Salvador; planned and helped to [execute “scorched earth” plans](#) against the indigenous populations of both El Salvador and Guatemala; [provided military training and support](#) for General Jose Efraim Rios Montt’s successful coup and violent dictatorship; and [gave weapons and training alike](#) to the Rwandan military and Hutu militias before and throughout the 1994 genocide.

The mobilizing of the global Palestinian solidarity movement happens simultaneously with the receding of this historical amnesia — the very selective forgetting which has both served to keep empire safe from mass resistance has also been weaponized by political leaders to discredit the movement and the people leading it. It’s not hard to read the fear cloaked in disdain in [Hillary Clinton’s remarks](#). Ironic, though unsurprising, for such commentary coming from someone who has relied on the general historical ignorance of her own problematic history; recall her time using prison labor for yard and house work while in the [Arkansas governor’s mansion](#), among other [misdeeds of imperialism](#) which bear her bloody signature.

Her commentary also conveniently neglects to address the fact that if young people in America don’t know about history, it’s because it has been kept from them through deliberate attempts to facilitate and spread such historical amnesia. The American education system has long been known to [erase and whitewash much of its history](#), and major publishers of school textbooks have a record of [purposely publishing discrepancies](#) in their history books. In the case of SWANA history in particular, students often [find the](#)

[history skipped over entirely](#), and one major publisher, McGraw Hill, was forced by Zionist lobbyists to [discontinue a book with a map of Palestine in it](#). Meanwhile, those very students Clinton speaks of are educating themselves and each other by [creating content](#) and [leading teach-ins](#) about the historical and current connections of settler colonialism across the globe.

Clinton's interview reveals her own insecurity and anger that the younger generations are calling attention to what she and the ruling powers would like to keep hidden: the reality of the historical and ongoing colonial violence of both Israel and the United States. Such insecurity is also at the root of Tennessee Representative Andy Ogles [introducing a bill](#) to convict and send the Palestinian solidarity student protestors off to Gaza. The historical amnesia they feel receding from the minds of the young masses terrifies them because their positions of power are reliant on maintaining a culture of minimizing and outright denying past and current atrocities.

The struggle for Palestinian liberation is intricately tied to the historical and current struggles against colonialism around the globe, and many of these violent forces are intertwined. Consider that Elbit, the very same Israeli company which built the Apartheid wall in Palestine, provided design recommendations and surveillance technology for the US-Mexico border wall as well as on [Indigenous reservations in Arizona](#). There is a reason that [Mexico City](#) was [a major location of escalation](#) against the Israeli occupying forces in Palestine; protestors threw stones at police officers and set ablaze the Israeli embassy because they were compelled to act against the interconnected forces of colonialism and imperialism which work to violently oppress Indigenous people globally.

In [2017](#) and [2019](#), a delegation of Chicana, Indigenous, and Black activists from Turtle Island visited Palestine to build solidarity in the struggle against apartheid walls and colonial borders. In 2023 and 2024, the chant repeated at protests, "From Palestine to Mexico, these border walls have got to go," isn't just symbolically referring to imperialism-made borders, it directly calls out the creators and enforcers of these militarized boundaries.

Meanwhile in May, during the ongoing invasion of Rafah, former Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley [signed her name on a U.S.-provided Israeli artillery shell, and adorned it with a heart](#), encouraging the IDF to "Finish them!" On the same trip, she participated in [a fear-mongering interview](#), saying "When these Iranian terrorists say 'death to Israel' what do they say next? They say 'Death to America...Israel is fighting America's enemies.'" What her statement reveals is that the ruling class knows what the

masses are awakening to — not only the connections between the colonization in Palestine and oppression globally, but also the power of resistance movements to fight them off.

Empire always reacts to movements and moments of liberatory potential by tightening its grip, by pushing down their boot on the neck of the colonized because they know what is coming for them when the time is up — as the recent SCOTUS decision regarding presidential immunity seems to indicate (although, there is plenty of evidence that “presidential immunity” has been the status quo for centuries in the United States, particularly in terms of its application abroad, [as the history of U.S.-sponsored political assassinations, coups, and other covert actions clearly indicates](#)).

Historical amnesia seeks to have us forget not just how these systems of oppression have functioned, but also how they have been resisted. Just as the Doctrine of Discovery was met with Pontiac’s Rebellion (1763 – 1765); U.S. chattel slavery saw Turner’s Rebellion in 1831 and John Brown’s Rebellion in 1859; French colonial rule of Saint-Domingue was met with the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), which, to quote historian Gerald Horne, [“ignited a general crisis of the entire slave system which could only be solved by its collapse.”](#) Meanwhile, the larger cultural milieu under the rule of the colonizers works to have its populace demonize or, better yet, [entirely forget the history of these rebellions altogether](#).

Now that a large Palestinian solidarity movement is erupting as the details of the Israeli colonialist expansion come to mainstream media, our political leaders are reacting from a place of fear that is at the core of every colonizer’s heart. In 1972, [Dr. Angela Davis put it well](#): “They don’t want us to relate to this world wide movement because they feel that we might become a little bit more confident about our ability to win. We might be a little bolder, we might start doing more things to challenge the power of the monopolies here. But things are gonna change.”

We suspect we will continue to see these eruptions in escalation tactics to be led by Indigenous and other people of color around the globe against the tides of settler colonialism and neo-fascism. Hillary Clinton and other rich, white lawmakers know deep in their core that the clock is ticking on their time in power; they can perhaps detect the steady march of the growing people’s movement pulsing like the tell-tale heart pounding beneath their floorboards.

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