Concepts of Home

Land Stewardship through Intergenerational Stories in Palestine

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ABSTRACT

Sometimes the natural environment is the reason for conflict in the context of resources and borders. Other times the natural environment is a victim of the conflict, damaged and destroyed. Other times, still, the natural environment may appear to be the aggressor as we battle the effects of climate change. Awareness of the conflict cycle maintained by internalised hierarchies of power and value must also be understood to begin challenging existing perceptions. Given that government policy development, academic research, and education continue to operate under the influence of colonial legacy, lived experiences and stories of the land and environment have been undervalued. Emphasising the inclusion of narrative in research and paying close attention to the details that surround the lived experience of conflict holistically, is integral to developing better understanding with the hope of better solutions.

KEYWORDS

Narrative, Environmental Education, Dialogue, Conflict Transformation, Storytelling, Community-building

INTRODUCTION

I often wonder what it would mean to be Palestinian if traditional wisdom about the land, water, and animals could be put into action. Grandparents and parents often spend time telling stories from their childhood or stories that have been passed down through generations about the way of life before occupation. However, the persistent destruction along with constant fear for safety makes it difficult, if not impossible, for young people in Palestine today to put those lessons into practice. The stories remain for now, but as the conflict causes distance between individuals and their environment—refugees, destruction of the natural environment, appropriation of land—the stories and the lessons they teach are at risk of becoming lost.

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with the realities of colonialism and occupation on one hand while also acknowledging my position as a settler on Indigenous peoples' land on the other. I am often left without a clear title, caught between identities. Born and shaped by conflict in Palestine, I wrestle with the complexities of holding a multifaceted identity physically distant from my homeland yet deeply affected by the ongoing occupation that continues to impact my family and community. As a writer and storyteller, I strive to shift the perception of Palestinian people from one of historical victimisation to a narrative of strength, resilience, and hope. The oppression of the occupation and the resulting spirit of strength is evident in the historical narratives passed down through generations, in the cultural celebrations, and even in the humour, all of which are often tied to the land and environment that sustains the people and the culture. While there is a deep desire for the occupation to end, for the killing to stop, for the checkpoints to be removed, and for the land to be returned, there is also a great fear of the unknown.

While there is ongoing hope that these questions will be answered for the next generation, there is also a deep sense of fear about what will come next. Recent events have also highlighted the need to examine this question through the lens of what will be left after the destruction particularly as it relates to the environment that has sustained a population with limited outside resources. In the face of uncertainty, often what remains are the stories, the tradition of oral narratives, grandmothers, grandfathers, and neighbours sharing wisdom about the preservation of the land through one hardship after another. This chapter explores the effects of colonialism, occupation, and displacement on Palestinians, emphasising the power of storytelling in resisting the colonial process by preserving the connection to the land.

GENERATIONAL GIFTS: STORIES FROM THE LAND

When I was growing up in Palestine, my grandfather spent many years teaching me and other children in my community the importance of dialogue. In Arabic my grandfather would often tell us '*Asmeny mleeh ashan nearf nehkey* (listen to me well so we can talk together).' As my grandfather said those words, he would bring all of us to our land and start working on watering the lemon trees, fixing

the fence so the sage plant could grow bigger, creating small canals so water could make it to the far away fig tree. He would do all of this while talking to us about life. He would ask a question and say, 'If you don't know the answer, ask the *rumooan* (the pomegranate).' I learned early on that dialogue takes many shapes and forms as my grandfather would always say, 'Don't worry how different my talk is from yours, if we are talking, it's a start.' After he would say these things, he would lean against an olive tree and make sage tea and call us around to ask us for advice on what to do with the apricot tree in the distance that did not seem to grow quickly enough. From these beginnings, I was equipped with an abundance of curiosity about our land, as well as the love of sharing stories and tea with strangers. I spent a lot of time throughout my childhood knocking on doors in my community in an attempt to build connections and create relationships. Unfortunately, the occupation and the history of conflict has created a palpable fear and distrust that made many people frown upon my endeavour, but my grandfather would always tell me, 'Don't say you have a story, until you've spoken to those who disagree with you, only then you may find your story.' As an optimistic child, I took this to mean that even if people were wary of my presence at first, if I showed up to listen and demonstrated my true intentions, we could one day know and learn from one another.

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What I would later learn was that my grandfather's wisdom has been echoed in academic research. Over the years, research building on Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory has demonstrated that the initial hypothesis—'positive, face-to-face interactions between members of different groups have the potential to erode all but the most deeply embedded forms of intergroup prejudice' (Dixon, 2024: 172)—continues to apply across time and contexts. However, Dixon (2024) suggests that modern research has moved beyond that hypothesis to examine what happens when the demographics of the groups in contact are changed or when interactions are not shaped to be positive and are instead left to be

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authentic, organic, and contentious. While Allport (1954) did postulate that negative interactions could result in negative impacts, whether explicitly linked to Allport's (1954) work or not, it is more modern research that has examined potential outcomes in these contexts and has provided insight into how intergroup contact might be utilised to work towards positive outcomes in the absence of positive interactions. For instance, Kawser Ahmed's (2017) research focused heavily on the potential for transformative dialogue and acknowledged that if the goal is for social structures to begin to change, humanisation (to understand and accept that despite differences there is a fundamental value to all human life) and community-building must be integrated into planned approaches. Implementing dialogue increases the likelihood that the parties involved will feel that their position has been heard and that they will develop a sense of hope for the conflict's resolution (Thiessen & Darweish, 2018: 78-81).

It is important to understand the influence that colonial legacies have on the development of perceptions of conflict (Said, 1994). Awareness of the cycle maintained by internalised hierarchies of power and value must also be understood to begin challenging existing perceptions. The colonial influences often lead us to overlook the significance of environmental education and the stories of the land that are borne out of conflict. Sometimes the natural environment is the reason for the conflict in the context of resources and borders. Other times the natural environment is a victim of the conflict, damaged and destroyed. Other times, still, the natural environment may appear to be the aggressor as we battle the

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effects of climate change. Emphasising the inclusion of narrative in research and paying close attention to the details that surround the lived experience of conflict holistically, is integral to developing better understanding with the hope of better solutions. Dialogue can become an alternative to protest or resistance and allow for movement towards reconciliation (Abu Nimer, 2011; Hoffman et al, 2012). Abu Nimer (2004) explains that

> '…Arab-Jewish reconciliation encounter can help participants understand the complex, multidimensions historical and political circumstances…', '…address structural inequalities', and inform reconciliation '…if each community engages in a self-critique that recognises its role in the course of the conflict' (p.418).

While Abu Nimer's (2004) work relates specifically to the context of Palestine and Israel, there is potential to extrapolate the findings and recommendations to the context of environmental education around the world as the land and environment are inextricably tied to issues of structural power and inequality. Underpinning colonialism, imperialism, and conflicts around the world are debates over land ownership; resource extraction; and displacement of people, pants, and animals in the name of profit all without regard for the well-being of nature or humans. The goal dialogue-based education is to bring people together to acknowledge the impact of these actions and examine ways forward that foster empathy for all, human and non-human.

In addition to implementing dialogue-based approaches in the context of conflict resolution or transformation, it is also necessary to shift research approaches to create environments for data collection that are more representative and accessible across cultural contexts. Anne Bell (2003) argues that humans 'lead storied lives' and that narrative inquiry is essential to environmental education in that unlike objectivist research methods, the goal of narrative-based research methods is not to find a singular truth, but rather to understand how people perceive, interact, and 'cope' with the world (p.108). One such approach is through lifeline interviews, a form of narrative research in which participants draw and create visual artefacts that outline their life events. Tuck and Yang (2014) explain that to

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humanise research there must be an acknowledgement of the colonial legacy of academia and the resulting power dynamics in the context of academic research. Minton (2020) points out that, 'In a number of countries around the world, a system of residential schools in which Indigenous children were compulsorily enrolled was operational by the late nineteenth century…' and goes on to say that these schools operated 'with the usually expressed intention of "solving" the "problem" of Indigenous peoples' (p.1). Not only has the trauma inflicted by these schools created a legacy of harm and mistrust connected to education systems, it is also indicative of the fact that all educational institutions run by colonial and post-colonial governments were designed to uphold particular social structures and dynamics and ignore or hide certain experiences (Minton, 2020). Narrative-based approaches in education allow for the potential to recognise not only untold, ignored, or hidden stories, but also to receive participants' time, willingness to share, and contribution of their knowledge as gifts (Kuokkanen, 2007). In the realm of environmental education, the lifeline approach offers an opportunity for students to not only reflect on their personal experiences and knowledge about the environment but also sends the message that their knowledge is both valuable and worthy of sharing.

Throughout my educational journey, I had always wondered where the stories were hidden. I had a passion for history, but in Palestine the curriculum was consistently controlled by the governments that did not reflect the stories shared by my community or my family. They were stories limited to a particular perspective depending on who was controlling the narrative. As Muna Saleh (2019) highlights this is not only my experience, but one that is common. Saleh (2019) expresses that dominant educational narratives often silence or distort the lived experiences of marginalised communities and emphasises the significance of 'familial curriculum' as the lessons that are passed down within families and communities. When I came to Canada, I brought my passion for history with me, and I was excited to see what the freedom of Canada would contribute to the content of the curriculum only to find once again that there were so many stories missing. It did not reflect the stories shared with me by the community members who sat with me at the park reflecting on what it was like when they immigrated to Canada years and years earlier or what it was like for them to raise their children in that unfamiliar environment. It did not reflect the stories of our Indigenous neighbours who shared their experiences with racism and discrimination. It did not reflect the stories of the land locally or globally with conversations about conservation and sustainability often limited to to-do-lists, statistics, and ominous warnings. I found university to be a slight improvement, there were some individuals attempting to push forward the value of stories, personal and collective narratives, and dialogue in academic spaces and research, and I realised that through my work I had an

opportunity to create what I had been missing in educational spaces, what my grandfather had impressed upon me from an early age—stories.

STORIES

I began writing my own stories as a young adult. After moving to Canada as a teenager and navigating how to best adapt to living in this unfamiliar environment, it began to settle in for me that I could feel the distance between me and Palestine growing. There is a strange thing that can happen when you move to a new country. At first, you feel the physical distance. You are in a new place, far from family and friends, speaking a new language, adjusting to a new culture. These experiences are challenging, and I grieved that distance but knew I could one day go back. But, after a certain period of time it hits you that there is also a distance in time. You make new friends, and your old friends back home make new friends. You keep up with the English slang in Winnipeg, while your friends back home make jokes in new Arabic slang. You ask about your favourite cafe, only to learn that the owner became ill and had to close the business. It is this distance that gnaws at your soul and plunges you into deep cognitive dissonance over your identity and sense of belonging. Looking through the stories I have written over the years, I can see my journey from being closed off and lost to finding a sense of grounded-ness in being both Palestinian and Canadian. While this is a journey I predict will continue throughout the rest of my life, I have also come to understand that sharing stories has allowed me to connect with so many people from so many backgrounds because despite our differences, at times, we are all navigating difficult paths. I have realised many things through the process of telling and re-telling my stories. However, two of them are relevant to the context of this paper. The first, is that those years I spent authoring stories for myself, created a sort of lifeline that I can now share with others in an effort to build humanising connections. The second, is how often the stories are rooted in depictions of the land, the climate, the sounds, and smells carried through the air, the human-made borders, and the suffering of the natural environment itself.

The Bowl

My grandmother stirred the old metal pot on the stove as she sang *Ya Zareef Altool*—a story of a Palestinian folklore character who faces and passes through hardships to win his beloved wife. Zaref travels around Palestine collecting fruits and gifts to appease his lover's parents. Similarly, my grandmother also gets her (gift plate) out of the wooden cabinet and places it on the table in the middle of the kitchen. As a boy, I knew I was waiting for the meal to finish so Teta

(grandmother) could fill it with food so I could take it to our neighbours. My Teta would say this plate travels our village like Zaref travelled Palestine. As I watched the bowl sit empty on the table, I remembered how delicious the meal from our neighbours was last night. Our neighbours sent us my favourite meal *Dawali*—grape leaves. Teta would say, 'My childhood is in this plate' as she came near me and kissed me on my forehead. The stories in this plate are like a laundry line full of colourful clothes. Each story has a piece of her *Thoab*—traditional dress. The meals she cooked over the years and sent to people, as gifts, were accompanied with stories of birth, the arrival of spring, the moment when poetry leaves you. Teta sang while cooking *Mftool*, adding the *kosa*—chopped zucchini—into the big pot on the stove, 'My dreams are besieged by a checkpoint.' As I listened, watched, and carried the bowl with fresh food from home to home, my heart grew like a forest. When I arrived at a neighbour's home and knocked on the door, a mother would answer the door and greet me saying, 'Wait, let me make you a sandwich. You have a long walk back.'

In my village the pot was communal property, everyone used it to share food and stories. In my village, pain and trauma were revealed over a meal, an ancient remedy for belonging is sustained while exchanging the plate. My grandmother would advise me, 'If you ever find yourself alone, cook a meal and share it with anyone.' The bowl was my grandmother's connection to her land and to the morning sun. She would pick saffron and lemons from our land and say this land is in the ink we use to write our stories. Now, as I knock on my neighbours' doors to share a meal, I remember her words and share my dreams with them. The meal and the stories are gifts. The long way to my neighbour's home was the journey to the gifts. The sandwich the mother made me was like a flock of pigeons that carried pieces of my stories and hung them from the minarets, so the passer-by remembers my Teta.

In Palestinian culture, we say strangers must eat salt and bread together to become family. Salt is a symbol of hard days, and bread is a symbol of good days. Once the meal is shared, experiences are shared, and people build connections and form alliances. The world I was born into, the one I grew up in, made no sense. Surrounded by such beauty: the land full of rolling hills, green pastures, clear streams, and strong olive trees, the community full of welcoming neighbours who became extended family, the sun, the rain, the animals on the farm. That is home. Also surrounded by armed soldiers, giant military tanks, stolen land, homes destroyed, a 25-foot wall preventing the freedom to travel, daily checkpoints, ID checks on the way to school, death, sadness, and anger. That, too, is home. Upon reflection, I am acutely aware of my desire to make sense of the dichotomy in which I existed. The juxtaposition of the natural colours and shapes of the land alongside the cold hard steel and concrete of the checkpoints also alludes to the

difference in the perception of the environment. Acharibasam and McVittie (2022) suggest that approaches to environmental education rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and doing that reflect a relationship of 'respect, responsibility, and reciprocity' with the land is more effective than 'curriculum and pedagogy [that] is anthropocentric where the environment is seen as a resource to satisfy human needs' (pp.352-53). The experience with my grandmother demonstrates the belief that the raw food was a gift from the land and in turn the food was prepared as a gift for family and community.

I grew up in a house with my grandparents and ten aunts and uncles. The home I grew up in was full of people at all times. Teta was a respected woman in the village and women came into our home to seek her advice, have tea, make Mamool and to share stories with her. As a boy, I heard my grandmother and women of her generation talk about life before occupation. My Grandmother often said that displacement has a smell only a refugee knows! Refugees from her generation often talked about leaving their homes, land, and dreams behind as they held onto the only thing that connected them to their homes—a house key. As a child, I saw many people wear their keys around their necks. I would stare at the intricately designed pieces of metal as they glimmered in the sunlight. I imagined the keys—holding the hopes, dreams, and memories of its carrier—undergoing metamorphosis to become millions of butterflies dancing on everyone's faces before flying away; free to visit the homes of the keys, not so far but still out of reach. Sharing these stories, is a reminder to myself of the fragile connection between myself and the land. At the same time, it is an invitation to others to consider the way conflict inserts itself between the land and its caretakers, asking the listener to reflect on their own experiences of connecting or disconnecting from the world around them.

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I was breastfed war…

While pregnant, my mother witnessed a full-scale invasion of her city. She watched as houses in the village were demolished and soldiers entered homes without

warning or permission. I was born during the first Intifada in Palestine; it seethed in the background as I took in my first breath. As I opened my eyes to the world, my mother's tears reflected the clouds of teargas filling the air outside the window as the call to prayer struggled to break through the roaring of the tanks that filled the streets.

A few months earlier, soldiers raided my family's home in the middle of the night. They shattered family pictures hanging on the wall, they broke the radio, they went into the kitchen and destroyed my grandmother's china plates, they took my mother's Thobe (dress) out of the closet and stepped on it until it ripped. The soldiers' barks and growls reached me before I was born. As my mother balanced her fear for our lives with her hopes for my future, my life flickered in her womb like a candle in the storm. My mother did all she could to take care of me before I was born, and the Intifada was imprinted on my body like a summer storm scars an open field. My mother's pain and memories of war infused the tissue of my developing heart becoming enmeshed in my soul like a prisoner trapped in a cell. She says that when our city was invaded and the Intifada took over the streets, her body could no longer contain her hopes and fears, and me. She said she could feel the strain of war flowing through her veins as she envisioned the flames of wildfire materialising from the lines in the palms of her hands. I was born prematurely.

As a young boy, I watched school children chanting to end the occupation as they marched through swarm after swarm of stinging rubber bullets. I listened as my mother cried and agonised about passing on the anxiety and pain of the Intifada. I felt her heartbeat against my back as she laid next to me when I slept while she softly fretted over whether she had lost her humanity. I realise now that as I grew, so did the grip of the barbed wire on what should have been my childhood.

As a child who was born during the first Intifada, I wrote this story to detail how occupation has imprinted itself on children in Palestine even before they take their first breath. This story is shared between my mother and I, like two birds huddling on a branch. In one way, my mother was pregnant with me in a time where she felt immense anxiety and felt alone. On the other hand, I was born into a world where teargas have decided my fate. Through this story, I have tried to navigate this multifaceted relationship that I had with my mother and the conflict (as it has shaped my identity), and to reflect upon my innermost feelings as I continue to carry the weight of this conflict in my body. So far, I have been unable to identify or name the feelings connected to my own childhood. At times, when I slow down from the commotion of everyday life, I realise that after all these years I have not yet regained the feeling in my limbs. I am plagued by a palpable numbness—an acute awareness of nothingness—that consumes

the quiet moments. In those seemingly hollow moments, my mother's singing is strongest in my mind, it was her songs and questions—am I even a human in Palestine? —that pushed the words of this story out of my heart onto the page. Yet, this story is not only mine. It runs parallel to the story of the land shaped and re-shaped by conflict: my mother—the Earth; the baby—all living things. For environmental education to be impactful it is necessary to understand the impact of past and present human actions that have contributed to violence, displacement, and destruction while also examining actions rooted in resilience, preservation, and decolonisation (Battiste, 2017). As discussed previously, conflict, power, and inequity are inextricable from land and the environment. The story below exemplifies ways in which conflict acts to drive a wedge between people and the land. Living through a lifetime of conflict has resulted in trauma responses and anxiety whenever I think about the journey back to my ancestral land. Despite physical and emotional challenges associated with my land, it is through telling stories that I maintain the resilience necessary to advocate for the protection of that land.

The Bridge—The Crossing

Every time I plan a trip to Palestine, I am filled with excitement and anticipation thinking about seeing the home where I grew up, the olive trees I planted during a visit a decade ago, and my ever-growing extended family, but I am also overwhelmed by anxiety. Travelling from Winnipeg to Amman, Jordan typically goes smoothly. Long plane rides, a few layovers, and transitions to different planes are all accompanied by the eager chaos of travelling overseas. The 150-kilometre journey between Amman and Nablus is a different story.

Thinking about crossing the border between Jordan and the West Bank causes my heart to race and tighten in my chest until it is hard to breathe. Crossing the border involves a face-to-face confrontation with the occupation. The space between Jordan's King Hussein border crossing and Israel's Allenby border crossing, known among Palestinians as the Bridge, is occupied by the Israeli military. As a Palestinian who maintains a Palestinian passport and lives outside of Palestine, this is the only route I am allowed to take to enter the West Bank. If I want to go home and feel the land under my feet, the sun on my cheeks, and the warmth of my family's embrace, I must endure the occupier under the burning sun of the Jordan Valley.

As a Palestinian who does not live in Palestine, the Bridge is the first point where my eyes jolt me back into the reality of life under occupation. The memories of occupation live within my mind and soul continuing to impact everything I do and my view of the world, but I am not confronted by it every day. Every

time I arrive on the Bridge, I feel like I am pulled into a whirlpool of thoughts, memories, and emotions. I gasp for air as I am hit by the guilt of living a life removed from the brutality and dehumanising existence of my friends, family, and neighbours. I am only able to find relief when I hear the grandmothers and children around me begin to sing songs that remind me of my own grandmother and her infinite capacity for resilience.

I snap out of my state of dissociation just in time to hurriedly arrange my documents into three categories: Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian. I can hear the long line of people breathe heavily in what seem to be synchronised inhales and exhales, as if the shared experience has transformed us into a single entity—common goal, common suffering. As we enter the prison-like structure of the border crossing, a military jeep blocks the sun from touching my face. My body aches for the smell of home. I can see those around me wince from the discomfort of the stationary-nature of the journey so far, and the uncertainty ahead.

There are barriers and red lines everywhere: one line for your suitcase to be searched, one where you are to remove your clothes, and one where there is only more uncertainty. All of them remind you that as a Palestinian on this side of the Bridge you are not a human. Regardless of the line assigned to me, when I look to the sides, I see only concrete walls decorated with barbwire, coiled and dangling, forcing me to question my presence. Looking ahead does little to settle my mind as the barbwire continues past the concrete only to wrap itself around the palm trees cutting deep into their veins. An attempt to seek out a view of the sky leads me to focus in on a group of tanks multiplying on the horizon.

Hours later, I have made it through the line and have been approved to leave Jordan. I get on the bus to head toward the Israeli side of the border that will determine whether I get to see my family in Nablus before sunset or if, for any or no reason at all, I will be turned away and forced to go back to Jordan. Every moment on the bus I am reminded that every heartbeat in my chest is now under occupation. The bus driver breathes heavily as he shows his 'permits' for the sixth time in less than ten minutes. The bus moves forward as soldiers point their guns at a woman holding her child in her arms. The soldiers growl as destiny stares me in the face. The military towers seem to grow wider and taller at the Bridge. As the bus passes the tower, the soldier standing out front shouts, 'You are nothing here' to ensure we recognise there isn't even the illusion of freedom in the occupied territories.

As the bus continues to drive, I can sense that the land is smiling. It welcomes me with beauty so captivating it makes me breathless. But the closer I get to touching the land, the more anxious I get as military towers appear on each side of the bus. The towers have been built among the palm trees and the mountains as if to taunt me.

The number of soldiers standing alongside the road steadily increases and their faces pass like film credits rolling down on a screen. I can smell the olives as the wind blows gently through the open windows. I float in and out of dreamlike memories as I watch soldiers come onto the bus to do a third search. All around me, I hear the names of the villages we can see from the Bridge echoing throughout the bus as people point in the direction of their loved ones and ancestors. A grandmother shouts: 'My grandfather was born there!'. The voice of a young man rings out from the back of the bus: 'My grandmother was born there!' A child asks: 'Mama, why are we occupied?' The mother, stumbling over her answer, starts to sing, '*I am the smell of the sage*.' When she finishes, a grandmother begins to sing: '*When I was a child, I was a cactus.*'

The soldiers ask for papers I have never heard of before, despite having made this journey many times. They speak harshly and quickly to let all of us on the bus know that we have inconvenienced them. They are frustrated that we continue to return. They are even more frustrated that we return with our children and grandchildren. The soldiers know, the children preserve the land!

As we finally leave the Israeli border crossing, I make a conscious decision to silently resist the occupation. I breathe in the teargas. I take in all of the noise. I look into the eyes of the soldiers. I smile at the land as I hold the hand of a child. As people return home from all over the world, the Palestinians defy their occupier.

As we drive the road to Jericho, I look out of the window and I know the land recognises me; it has been longing for my return. The land sings the songs of my ancestors. The land sings: 'Ya ahl Alrooman; you are the people of the Pomegranate.'

Every second, my home is one millimetre closer to my fingertips. The experience of the Bridge lingers. The occupier's fingerprints are imprinted all over my body and soul. I wonder about the young family I met at the Bridge. Were the children, coming home for the first time, allowed to enter? I spend the rest of the trip in silence, as if my voice and vocabulary were seized and searched at the Bridge.

After a twelve-hour journey, that should have taken less than two, I finally meet my family. They were waiting hours for my arrival. I embrace their hugs and shed tears on their shoulders. Together, we get on a bus to Nablus. I can feel the wild thyme sprout from my chest.

As soon as I enter the West Bank, I see and feel the occupation spreading everywhere. Through the car window, I see settlements expanding through the villages and across the mountains. I see long lines of school children waiting at the checkpoint. I feel as if my mind and soul are physically tearing apart from each other. I breathe in the pain and helplessness brought on by the occupation and I breathe out the joy of sitting next to my family in the land of my ancestors.

I pass by a small village and see the people raising their hearts high, resisting the rubber bullets coming at them from a distance. The car slows down as it approaches the Hawara checkpoint. The driver says in a faint voice, 'Everyone, please get ready.' In a slow, deliberate motion, everyone starts to prepare their passports and permits.

At the checkpoint, my homeland awaits. As I breathe and look up to the mountains, I ask myself, 'Will I live long enough to see my land free?' Until I touch my land…

In my youth, I personally witnessed the destruction of three homes belonging to different families in the village. A family member of theirs had been accused of a crime against an Israeli soldier and because they were unable to find this man, Israel ordered the demolition of three homes belonging to people close to him. To this day, I am haunted not only by the visible destruction of the homes, but the faces of the people that lived in them. Loss of objects, people, land, and privileges are common in the West Bank. In a place full of instability, loss is a constant. Growing up I was taught to view loss not as something to be feared or mourned, but rather as an opportunity to build strength and determination to stand up for my rights. Every loss is to be used as fuel to continue enduring and thriving despite the oppression enforced by the occupation. But, on the day I saw the homes of these three families demolished, I saw helplessness and hopelessness I was not used to seeing in my community. It was as if an inner light inside of them had been extinguished.

Writing the Bridge story was difficult as I did not have the words to describe my experiences and the experiences of millions of Palestinians who endure the same experiences coming into Palestine. While writing the story, however, I felt like I was shifting the power out of the hands of the occupier to the people or communities directly impacted by the conflict. It felt like I was inviting my Canadian friends and colleagues to ride on the bus and to stand at the metal checkpoints with me to witness my own reality as an occupied Palestinian. At this same time, I hoped to show the idea of resilience—or as it is called in Arabic: *moqwama*—is a concept that Palestinians teach their children at an early age. Resistance and resilience are part of the daily Palestinian vocabulary.

As a young boy growing up in the West Bank, it was instilled in me that resilience was to be a primary part of my character; a trait without which I could not survive. On a daily basis, my family and friends were forced to withstand the inconvenience, abuse, and sometimes violence that awaited us on our way to work or school. The Israeli checkpoints located throughout the West Bank hinder any possibility of freedom of movement. However, for Palestinians this is an everyday part of life. Despite these hardships, the citizens have been able to maintain a life that resembles 'normalcy' (family, jobs, celebrations) and levels of

life satisfaction and happiness that are not only comparable, but at times exceed the data collected from other areas of the world (Baker & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, p.935). As discussed earlier, human suffering and harm to the environment are inextricably linked. Both must be addressed simultaneously to make progress. Storytelling, dialogue, and narrative-based approaches to environmental education aim to establish personal and interpersonal connections that build empathy for land, water, and all beings (Riley, 2023).

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

In reflecting upon my stories and the experiences that prompted me to write them, I am always drawn to the prominence of land and nature, both in the physical and spiritual sense. Joseph Pugliese (2020) argues that land, soil, and trees are not passive victims but active participants in histories of violence and justice. His analysis of occupied Palestine demonstrates how ecological destruction cannot be separated from the colonial legacy. As a Palestinian Muslim, I was raised to view the land as an integral part of our survival and to understand that preserving the land was resistance. For Palestinians being part of the land and connecting to every inch of soil is not only integral to appreciating the roots that have navigated the depths of the earth for generations, but also to uphold the principle of *Khilafah* (stewardship) which instils values that emphasise working with the earth rather than against it (Ayu Setianingrum, Setiyo & Dwiyanto, 2024). In other words, as a Muslim I am taught to not cut a tree or harm a living being, but instead to work towards making Earth better when I leave than it was when I arrived.

This concept is integral to the Muslim religion and it infuses the culture in Palestine; it is within every personal and collective story—every anecdote and every myth—encouraging the protection of the land, culture, and memory of every space from generation to generation (Al-Qobbaj & Marshall, 2024; Al-Saed, Abu-Mahdi & Heun, 2009). Writing a story about being connected to your land is an act of resistance and reclaiming. I remember my grandmother talking about how the land sits in our soul and writes our stories. The notion of holding land within you anywhere you are in the world is something that Palestinians talk about every time they get together. For me as a refugee living in Canada, I have struggled to balance holding and carrying my land with me and making a home in my new country. The struggle meant that I had to bring the smells of my home in Palestine into my new home and workplace in Canada offering my new community in Canada an opportunity to get to know my home and my land. In doing so, I was able to challenge the stereotypical narrative of my home, my people, and my struggle. I was able to invite community members to ask questions about my home, my language, and my culture. The stories were the lifeline that

connected both of my worlds and held them tight through a million threads we ring together stories, voices, and communities.

CONCLUSION

Using stories to engage in dialogue and narrative-based approaches to peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and research, allows storytellers and story listeners to evaluate the experiences and beliefs that impact their perspectives. It then provides them with opportunities to reflect in order to identify challenges and propose solutions. There should be a shift from the outsider perspective—'this is what is best for you.'—to the perspective of the individual or group—'this is what is best for me/us'. In relation to this idea, it is also important to have a strong understanding of the history of colonialism in Canada and the lasting impacts that it has had and continues to have on the land and people. We need to be deeply committed to reconciliation and to ensure that marginalised voices are not only included but can lead discussions without the need for validation from non-marginalised sources.

As a Palestinian who has been impacted by the ongoing violent conflict on my land and who was made a refugee, as a result, I know that the land has shaped my identity directly. Being indigenous to Palestine and having lived under the occupation lends me a full and deep understanding of what it means to be impacted by British and Israeli colonialism (Elkins, 2022). I am a product of colonialism and have lived through various human rights violations. I find myself lost when trying to talk about the story of who I am. There is, usually, a story of me in the West that is unfamiliar to me (Said, 1994). It is a story that is supported by mainstream media and clearly lacks authentic details of me and my people (Bar Tal, 2023; Khalidi, 2021; Kimmerling & Migdal, 2003). It leaves out the details—those of the harvest season, the great olive tree, the *Hijab* of my grandmother as she waves it in the wedding party, and it never speaks of how Palestine and I have both inherited a history of violence and trauma (Özerdem, et al, 2020; Peters, 2015).

As an educator, I advocate for the inclusion of stories of students, educators, and community members in the classroom for the purpose of humanising conversations around sustainability, climate change, and the human activities contributing to the destruction of land. Stories are based on lived experiences and have the potential to foster cross-cultural understanding, empathy, awareness about environmental concerns, and increased interest and engagement in generating solutions not only locally but globally through engagement in larger scale digital storytelling projects (Modi, Gupta, Rahmatullah, 2024). When students recognise that their own stories are valued and they have opportunities to engage with the narratives

of peers and community members, they begin to see how environmental issues intertwine with historical, social, economic, and political context and how these connections impact their lives. My stories were missing from the classroom. I will continue to remind educators about the importance of opening spaces where the oppressed can speak for themselves and tell their own stories (Abu Elaish, 2011).

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