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Originally published in Resources for Feminist Research, Vol 30, Nos 3 & 4, 2003.

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Across Divides, Against the Grain:

On Negotiations: From a Piece of Land to a Land of Peace

By Gita Hashemi and Hanadi Loubani

Beyond its unequally tragic impact on the daily lives of Palestinians and Jews in the region and in diaspora, the on-going conflict in Palestine-Israel is of particular global significance. Emerging through complex histories of European colonialism, this conflict challenges current-day peace activists to confront the efforts to strip it of its historical dimensions and reduce it to the question of the Palestinian territories that were occupied by Israel in 1967. Such amnesiac discourses are not just lacking in critical readings and engagements that, in Walter Benjamin's words, brush history against the grain, they are also incapable of recovering different possibilities for existence and/or co-existence in the present and future. The failure to offer resolutions to issues such as the right to return for Palestinian refugees of 1948 – an issue that has been consistently a source of tension and divergence, if not of breakdown, in all the so-called “peace” negotiations – is symptomatic of the paralysis endemic to such amnesiac discourses. Moreover, the Palestine-Israel conflict remains hostage to U.S. imperialist interventions, wars, investments and policies in the “Middle East.” Both the 1990 and the 2003 wars on Iraq show that attempts to draw the region's societies and economies into the orbit of a “new world order” have been marketed through European-proposed and/or U.S.-brokered initiatives that presumably will bring “peace” to Palestine-Israel and “stability” and “security” to the economies and countries in the region. Both Oslo and the Roadmap directly followed the wars on Iraq. The imbrication of Palestine-Israel conflict within colonialist histories and imperialist politicking challenges international/transnational peace activists to rethink the Palestinian struggles in their local, regional, and global dimensions.

The Second Palestinian Intifada, which erupted in September 2000, presents us with the invaluable opportunity to expose the inextricable links among the local, regional, and global coordinates of power as they manifest themselves in the Palestinian struggles for liberation and self-determination. A new instance in the ongoing Palestinian anti-colonialist struggles since 1897, the Intifada is not simply a localized nationalist response to the repressive Israeli occupation and its war machine, as even the best of the liberal discourses want us to believe. Rather, the Intifada is local, regional, and global in its dimensions and implications: It is an insurgency against the Israeli occupation, against the political and financial corruption of the Palestinian Authority and its sort of Vichy government, against the open-door and normalizing policies of the Arab regimes, and against American dreams of sole-hegemony in the region and, by extension, in the

world.¹ The impetus that the Intifada has given to the anti-globalization, anti-normalization and anti-war movements in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and other Arab countries exposes the extent to which the Intifada is embedded in regional and global relations of power and resistance.² It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to rethink not only the modes in which we represent the conflict and the struggles of the Palestinian people, but also, and simultaneously, the practices through which we respond to them as part of our anti-imperialist interventions and in our international/transnational practices of solidarity.

Over the past few years, we have witnessed a world-wide resurgence in solidarity campaigns that attempt to link diverse local/national struggles to other oppositional movements that come out in support of the right of Indigenous and local communities to organize their civil and political societies and economies outside the dictates of corporate-driven globalization processes. We have witnessed unprecedented numbers of people claiming the streets to protest against imperialist extra-territorial war-waging. We have also witnessed a proliferation in Palestinian solidarity groups all sensing the urgency to respond to the escalation in violence prompted by Sharon's latest war campaign deceptively called "war on terrorism." Elated as we may be by the manifestations of this collective will to articulate and establish networks of solidarity and resistance and to offset the ambivalence of intellectual ironicism [irony + cynicism], we must remain critical of the absences and excesses that are inscribed into oppositional political discourses and vigilant about the ethics and pragmatics of cross-border solidarity. The sloganeering of trendy anti-... [fill-in the blank] movements and their attendant conceptual paradigms and practices are inadequate responses at this time. The failures of these movements to account for the historical conditions and colonial context of the Palestine-Israel conflict and to advance counter-hegemonic representations of the Palestinian struggles are compounded by their pervasive unwillingness to support and foreground progressive Palestinian leadership and to draw on their political articulations as the people who are most intimately aware of the history and priorities of their struggle. In reproducing colonialist modes of representation and perpetuating their effects of silencing and erasure, these movements inevitably fail to articulate ethically responsible, accountable and sustainable networks of solidarity and resistance that are capable of effecting local and global change.

In *Negotiations: From a Piece of Land to a Land of Peace*, we took on such problematics in an effort to cultivate a political imagination capable of growing beyond amnesiac and

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the Intifada as a local, regional, and global insurgency see Hanadi Loubani, "The Palestinian Intifada: A Local/Global Insurgency," paper presented at the York Political Economy Student Conference (York University: May 3, 2003).

² Since the Second Intifada, two anti-normalization conferences have been held in the Arab world, in Baghdad in September 2001 and in Beirut in October 2001. Coined by the Egyptian nationalist left to signify its political opposition to the 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, "anti-normalization" has matured into full-fledged movements with manifest links to the anti-globalization and anti-war movements in many Arab countries. The first Arab anti-globalization conference, in Cairo in December 2002, issued the Cairo Declaration, which called for popular resistance to normalization with Israel, to U.S. aggression in the region, and to the free trade agreements between the U.S. and a number of Arab regimes. A second conference is to be held in Cairo in December 2003.

momentary engagements in trendy causes. *Negotiations*, a multi-part arts-driven event staged in Toronto in June 2003, was an initiative of Creative Response, a loose collective formed in April 2002 through a public meeting of over 60 artists, writers, cultural workers, activists and academics who felt the urgency to respond to the escalation of war in Palestine-Israel in solidarity with Palestinian struggles towards a just peace. Growing from a 6-member formation within Creative Response, the *Negotiations*' organizing group – Negotiations Working Group – expanded in December to an 11-member, all-volunteer group of women of Anglo, Greek, Indian, Iranian, Italian, Jewish and Palestinian backgrounds, variously positioned as artists, academics, cultural workers and activists, the majority also involved in one or more local and cross-border grass-roots organizing in anti-racist, feminist, queer, Indigenous rights, union, peace and social justice movements.

We came together around shared objectives. We wanted to effect a shift in the public discourse on the conflict, to resurface its colonial historical dimensions, and, more importantly, to re-articulate the discourse on “negotiations” from an obsession with fenced security and territorial claims backed by military might towards existing and emerging practices of shared entitlement and common responsibility. We believed that negotiations aimed at positive social transformation could not be prescribed by prefigured roadmaps, let alone by those dictated by (junior or senior) patriots presiding over people's destinies through behind-the-door dealings and vote-bendings. We called for projects that, through processes of creative collaboration and shared authorship, transformed intentions into specific interventions. We reasoned that 1) we must substantiate our critical deconstructive strategies with constructive social exchange towards building and strengthening *heterogeneous* [not “pluralist”] networks of resistance and solidarity; 2) only such networks can facilitate the formation and fortification of the collective will to dissent from the given and move towards the envisioned, from preaching “peace” prosaically as the abstract absence of conflict towards building the necessary conditions for a just peace; and 3) these conditions can only be enabled and sustained through dialogue with the past and by working through our present power asymmetries and geopolitical, social, economic and historical differences. Therefore, we made the notion of *collaborating across “divides”* (national, cultural, political, disciplinary) central to our curatorial concepts, maintaining that only in the spaces of shared labour could meaningful negotiations take place, and that art, as a medium of *communication* and *imagination*, could not only mediate such social dialogue but also facilitate the construction and circulation of creative strategies for shaping new parameters for peace in Palestine-Israel and beyond.

We faced many challenges throughout organizing *Negotiations*, and our work took shape under difficult material conditions. We had to cope with severe under-funding and/or lack of support by governmental arts agencies that are the primary sources of funding for the arts in Canada.³ Our work was additionally subject to gazes and criticisms

³ So much with regards to the politics of arts funding begs for critical encounters particularly as we witness a flourishing of sociopolitically engaged artistic practices that do not limit themselves to easily digestible political rhetoric engendering easily predictable responses. Although such critical discussion is quite important in terms of both an understanding of the specificity of some of the limitations we grappled with as well as an evaluation of the particular strategies we devised, it requires a much larger dedicated space that falls outside the scope of this brief.

more judgmental than edifying. The ethical failings that have historically marked the conflict in Palestine-Israel stretch beyond the realms of international politics and law and materialize in specific ways in cultural sites.⁴ As Edward Said writes “nothing – literally nothing – about Palestine can go without debate, contention, dispute and controversy.”⁵ The work of ethically, critically and creatively thinking, speaking and acting in solidarity with the Palestinian struggles is subject to surveillance and censorship on the one hand, and to fear, indifference, misunderstanding or rejection on the other. Our work was no exception.⁶

These difficulties stretched the limits of our individual and collective strengths, energies and resources beyond what we had initially anticipated and what some members of the collective could endure. In the absence of easy solutions, we had to either drop the project altogether, or engage the conditions solidly and creatively. Most of us chose the latter. The process was arduous and demanded intense negotiations within and outside of the Negotiations Working Group.

Within the collective, our micro-negotiations and co-labouring were seasoned by moments of friendship and camaraderie and sprinkled with moments of divergence, tension and conflict. As we write this text, we remember that moment when the smell and sight of food relaxed the lines on our foreheads after hours of debating, the bursting of that bubble gum balloon that birthed that moment of solidarity in laughter, the candles on that cake that moved us from almost insulting one another into that multi-lingual harmony of birthday songs, that moment of silence in the face of those tears pouring to remind us that the political is personal, that moment of awe we experienced as we previewed the International Solidarity Movement’s footage of that Palestinian woman crying over her olive trees just uprooted by Israeli soldiers and bulldozers visible in the background. We also remember those other moments when the divergences, tensions and conflicts were more consuming than the food, more overwhelming than tears, and, yes, even louder than the cries of that Palestinian woman for justice.

The material conditions of our work in *Negotiations* were only partly responsible for the tensions and conflicts that beset the collective’s micro-negotiations and collaborations. The fact that our identities were differently and asymmetrically gendered, sexualised, raced, ethnicized and nationalized exacerbated these tensions and conflicts. In the spaces of our co-labouring, we had to contend with differences in our cultural belongings, professional competencies and personal histories as well as with differences

⁴ For a brief analysis of some of these cultural manifestations, see Gita Hashemi, “A Message to Participants,” essay in *Negotiations* programme book at <http://negotiations2003.net/statement>.

⁵ Edward Said, “Introduction,” in *Blaming The Victims: Serious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, ed. Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (New York: Verso, 2001), 11.

⁶ In the midst of writing this piece, we received news of Rutgers University Administration’s decision to ban the Third Annual National Student Conference on Divestment from Israel that was to be held in October 2003 at Rutgers. Our grave concerns over the trampling of the rights of Palestinian solidarity groups to freedom of speech and assembly are coupled with deep concern for the safety of Charlotte Kates, a main organizer of the conference, who has been singularly targeted by a violently racist campaign. See: <http://vinylfrontier.com/3rd-CPSM-Ig.JPG>.

in our socio-political views on, disciplinary orientations towards, and individual investments of intellectual, physical and emotional labour in the Palestine-Israel conflict and, by extension, in the *Negotiations* project. At various points in the seven-month-long process we lost one another, in some cases permanently and in others temporarily. Although the factors effecting both forms of withdrawal were heterogeneous and overdetermined (as were the withdrawals themselves), we must acknowledge that both forms of withdrawal occurred and that the manifest and latent tensions that our differences engendered also factored in such withdrawals. In reality, only eight of us persisted and carried through with staging *Negotiations*.

In this context, the negotiations and collaborations that we activated with other progressive groups assisted us immensely. Financially, *Negotiations* became possible through the support of a variety of women's organizations, unions, students associations, cultural foundations, arts organizations and even many individual donors. Our ability to secure alternative funding and in-kind support strengthened our determination to carry on. What we initially perceived as a stumbling block metamorphosed into an affirmation of our commitment to accountable and responsible practices of solidarity, thus transforming our intentions into actions. This impressed upon us the need to continually and creatively work not around barriers but through them, not despite them but precisely because of them.

The connections and bridges we built with others were motivated not only by our need for alternative funding but also by our awareness of the urgent need for expansive, effective and sustainable networks of solidarity and resistance. In committing to this work, we were inspired by emerging forms of Palestinian-Israeli and transnational collaboration manifested in organizations such as the International Solidarity Movement and Ta'ayush. Mobilizing Israeli citizens – Palestinians and Jews alike – in support of the encamped Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, Ta'ayush (an Arabic word literally meaning co-existence) activists cross the military and discursive borders separating "Arabs," "Jews," "Palestinian," and "Israelis" and, in so doing, challenge pervasive stereotypes of these communities as mutually exclusive and permanently irreconcilable. Utilizing non-violent, direct-action methods to confront Israeli forces and illegal settlers, the International Solidarity Movement has thrived to deepen and radicalize transnational practices of solidarity and to foreground the leadership of local Palestinian activists.

Taking our clues from these two organizations, we endeavoured to strengthen our connections with two Toronto-based women's groups, Women for Palestine (WFP) and the Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation (JWCEO), who were dialoguing at that time to widen the scope of their solidarity work beyond the immediate pragmatics of their local campaigns. Their joint Dialogue Group was working to expand the debates on the Palestine-Israel conflict beyond an anti-occupation agenda to address the difficult yet fundamental problematics of Zionism, anti-Semitism, colonialism and the Palestinian refugees' right to return. Our dialogue with these two groups led to specific forms of collaboration in the *Negotiations* project, thus enlarging the circle of negotiating and co-labouring beyond the membership of the Negotiations Working Group. Our relations with WFP and JWCEO constituted critical moments in our processes within the collective, effecting a deepening of our historical and political understanding of the Palestine-Israel

conflict as well as a sharpening of our analysis of the politics and representations that shape North-American responses to Palestine-Israel.⁷

Our greatest challenge was in how to translate our concepts and analysis into specific programmes that could create spaces for dialogic exchange towards cultivating a wider, more critical public engagement with the repressed histories of the conflict and towards articulating different possibilities for peace and co-existence. As we worked to respond to this challenge, *Negotiations* came to consist of *WILL*, a trans-disciplinary/national art exhibition, three film/video screenings, two performance programmes (literary readings and music), three workshops, two panel discussions and a public forum. In all of these, *public participation* was conceived as an integral element of both form and content. We called for and actively sought a wide range of collaborative projects that drew on public participation in their creative and production processes and/or creatively capitalized on the collaborative nature of dissemination space to actively engage the audiences in the issues they raised.⁸ Insisting that *Negotiations* was not meant to be merely consumed, we also integrally built into our programme multiple spaces for participatory dialogue and work.

Our programme closely reflected the political discussions we had, in particular, with Women for Palestine. We came to agree that our claiming of alternative spaces for genuine dialogue had to be substantiated by an earnest effort to enable the return of the marginalized (if not altogether excluded) Palestinian voices, experiences and memories of dispossession, occupation and displacement. We worked hard to connect with Palestinian artists and activists inside Israel, in the Occupied Palestine and in diaspora. We invited them to participate in *Negotiations*, either by taking part in the already curated components or by curating their own programmes. *Check Point* – our opening night event of poetry and music, *Palestine BeComing* – an evening of spoken word and poetry, *Up Close* – a Palestinian short video screening curated by George Khleifi from the Institute of Modern Media at Al Quds University, and *The Price of Olives* – a creative workshop aimed at (re)shaping the *Olive Fair* installation in the gallery space and on the internet, brought forth Palestinian musicians, poets, videomakers and activists in creative dialogue with other artists and activists to elude mechanisms of isolation, surveillance and censorship and assert their agency through modes of resistance in art.

Negotiations became an opportunity not just for the mere return of Palestinian voices, experiences and memories, but for their return in new forms, proliferating in and through relations with the struggles of Indigenous people and their rights to land, resources, citizenship, self-determination and cultural identity; with the struggles of Israelis, Palestinians and Jews inside Israel and in diaspora to articulate alternatives to the dominant Zionist discourse; and with the struggles of local and international artists and

⁷ It is important to mention that when the initial 6-member Working Group set out to expand its membership, we actively recruited members of WFP and JWCEO to strengthen the already-existing relations that were instrumentally established in previous Creative Response initiatives by Working Group members who were active participants in the other two groups.

⁸ For examples, note “Farah: In Search for Joy” by Jaromil, “Destinations” by Galia Shapira, Aref Nammari, Haggai Kuprminz and Phil Shane, “Video Petition Project” by Artist Emergency Response, and “Olive Fair” by Negotiations Working Group at <http://negotiations2003.net/will>.

activists to mobilize art to do politics differently. Envisioning *Negotiations* as an opportunity to articulate these links critically and creatively, we included in our programme *Staking Claim(s)* – a screening and discussion of video art by Aboriginal artists in Canada curated by Steven Loft, Jewish/Mohawk media artist; *Shoot Back with Video* – a hands-on workshop with the U.S.-based Artist Emergency Response; *Land without Soil, Art without Artwork* – a panel discussion with Jewish Israeli artist Ilana Salama Ortar and Paris-based theorist Stephen Wright; *Unsettled Returns* – a screening and discussion with the Palestinian Israeli filmmaker Michel Khleifi and Jewish Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan that included excerpts of their collaborative work-in-progress at the time; *Mapping the Roads* – a panel discussion between members of WFP and JWCEO; and *Come Out for Palestine* – a creative workshop in collaboration with Salaam Toronto: Queer Muslim Community in preparation for participation in Toronto's Pride Parade.

The inclusion of programmes aimed at establishing links between diverse struggles was consistent with our curatorial concept of *co-labouring across divides*. Furthering this concept, we called on the diverse local and international artists, cultural workers, academics and activists who came in-person to *Negotiations* to participate in a public forum. *Meeting Grounds*, theorized and envisioned as a culminating moment of the event, was constituted in our contentions that *ethical* and *effective* solidarity, like *just* peace, must first begin by acknowledging, interrogating and negotiating our differences and asymmetries in location and power. Only by engaging in such practices can we begin to explicate the common and yet differential responsibilities we ought to shoulder as we collectively endeavour to construct against-the-grain conceptions of entitlement, existence and co-existence. Manifestly, this forum was but a beginning

Although we did not explicitly lay a claim to “feminism” in *Negotiations*, it is this authors' conviction that the histories of individual members of Negotiations Working Group in feminist *and* anti-racist theory and/or praxis directly informed our work in (and thus) this project. Our previous engagements with various feminisms and anti-racisms – as theorizing/organizing/mobilizing discourses – had primed us – in all their moments of exhilaration and disappointment – for undertaking the effort to articulate specific notions, forms and practices towards counter-hegemonic (read counter-colonialist/masculinist) ethics of solidarity, enabled across divides. The work of feminisms and anti-racisms must not stop at the borders of gender, sexuality and/or “race,” rather, we must use the spaces we open through contesting these borders to deliver moments of acknowledgement of our inherent equality and of recognition of the interconnectedness of our lives and destinies.