

## **Negotiations: From a Piece of Land to a Land of Peace**

**(June 19-29, 2003, Toronto, Multiple Locations)**

**Curatorial Statement by Gita Hashemi, for Negotiations Working Group**

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### A Message to Participants

Members of our group have been trying, for varying lengths of time and through different creative, intellectual and social activities, to work the land so it can sustain a political imagination capable of growing beyond momentary engagements in trendy causes. When Creative Response came together in April 2002, we all sensed the urgency to respond to Sharon's latest terror campaign deceptively named the "war against terrorism." In August 2002, a small group of us began thinking of an initiative that would effectively question the hypocrisy of "peace efforts" in the region. We wanted to re-articulate the discourse on "negotiations" to shift the public focus from fenced security and land claims backed by military might towards existing and emerging practices of shared entitlement and common responsibility.

We believe that true negotiations cannot be prescribed by any prefigured roadmaps, let alone by those mapping the roads already traveled and, paved by bulldozers running over living bodies to take down people's houses, come to a dead-end. We believe that negotiations aimed at positive social transformation cannot be dictated by (junior or senior) patriots presiding over people's destinies through behind-the-door dealings and vote-bendings insultingly called "democracy."

Beyond its tragic impact on the daily lives of Palestinians and Israeli Jews in the region and in diaspora, the on-going conflict in Palestine-Israel is of particular global significance because of its emergence through a complex history of European and American imperialist interventions, racism and war. The historical and current dynamics in Palestine-Israel challenge us to formulate ethical responses and accountable practices pertaining to Indigenous peoples' right to land, resources, citizenship, self-determination and cultural identity. In Palestine-Israel, in the Americas and the world over.

Initially envisioned simply as an art exhibition, *Negotiations: From a Piece of Land to a Land of Peace*, soon grew into its present formulation as an event as we became increasingly aware of the imperative of "staking claim(s)" to alternative public spaces for open exchange among people directly and genuinely interested in working towards social change. We invited artists of all disciplines, cultural workers, academics and activists to tackle, in new and creative ways, a series of issues which we proposed as the animating themes of *Negotiations* [see *Meeting Grounds*]. We called for projects that, through processes of creative collaboration and shared authorship, transformed intentions into specific interventions.

The work of translating our own intentions into action has meant a sharpening of our analysis of the politics and representations shaping the North-American responses to Palestine-Israel, and a commitment to pursue accountable solidarity with Palestinian struggles. This work has been difficult for the following reasons, among many.

1) In the present North American political climate, imbued with varying shades of fascism, fundamentalism, racism and self-righteousness, the work of thinking, speaking and acting about one of the world's most dramatic political, historical and ethical failings, Palestine-Israel, in a

manner that is not comprised of mere gestures and sloganeering but of meaningful and critical engagement, almost equals insurgence. As such, this work is subject to surveillance and censorship on the one hand, and to fear, indifference, misunderstanding or rejection on the other.

2) Death and destruction are distributed disproportionately among the people in Israel and Palestine as is power between the state (Israel) and a state-in-perpetual-waiting (Palestine). Yet, the North American public, with their widely different investments and belongings, rememberings and forgettings, are subject to mind-bending by the mainstream media who are now formally and self-admittingly in “bed” (have they ever not been?) with imperialist states that wage war branded as “preemptive attack.” The colonial nature of this violence hides behind the excuse of suicide bombings, which the media/states turn into spectacles to deflect public attention away from soldiers, missiles, guns and bulldozers let loose on civilian grounds, away from checkpoints, curfews, creeping illegal settlements on occupied land, and the systematic eradication of a people’s economic, educational, cultural, administrative, and medical infrastructure. The pervasive ideology of “victimhood” enables overt and covert silencing mechanisms directed at all those who honour the memories of the Shoah by universalizing the principle of “never again.”

3) The selectively-remembered horrific legacies of European anti-Semitism coupled with the denial of the conditions of existence of the United States and Canada as ‘settler’ states on occupied lands sustain a discourse about Israel (pervasive even amongst progressive intellectuals) that refuses to address Zionism as an inherently colonialist project, and so refuses to acknowledge the history that precedes 1967 and 1948. The work of surfacing and naming this history as a precondition for any present-day negotiations is a challenge yet to be taken up seriously by the left in North America.

4) Solidarity work must acknowledge the interconnectedness of our lives and destinies and thus our inherent equality. Only within this conceptual space can we begin to establish viable relationships and practical networks to change the geopolitical and economic conditions as well as the cultural attitudes and practices that keep re-producing the material and psychic patterns of colonial violence. Yet, much remains to be clearly and pragmatically conceptualized, articulated and enacted with regards to the ethics and politics of transcultural and transborder solidarity.

5) Soon after we began working on the *Negotiations* project, we realized that we had to walk the very rough roads of collaborating across the “partition lines” which we had publicly named. Our effort has been toned by moments of recognition (variously difficult or exhilarating) both of our different investments, desires and working expertise, and of the differences we consciously and less so insert into the work because of our cultural backgrounds and thinking habits. We have learned that ethical intentions must be substantiated by concrete commitments of labour. Thus, in the ‘here and now’ of our working relations, within and outside the group, we have to remain vigilant about the political and ethical viability of this project and continuously assess the existing rhetoric and practices of co-labouring.

Thus far, we have tried to take our clues from activists in Palestine-Israel. We have been inspired by Ta’ayush and their work in mobilizing Israeli citizens, Palestinians and Jews alike, in support of the besieged civilians in West Bank and Gaza. Ta’ayush (literally ‘co-existence’) challenges common stereotypes of “Arabs,” “Jews,” “Palestinians” and “Israelis” as mutually exclusive and permanently irreconcilable communities. We have been particularly inspired by the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) that has succeeded, in a short time, to deepen and radicalize the notions and forms of solidarity, and to foreground the leadership of Palestinians, as

the people who are most intimately aware of the history and priorities of their struggle, to set an example for cross-border collaboration and solidarity. As we write these words, we have news of yet another IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) raid on ISM's offices in Beit Sahour, Occupied Palestine (May 9, 2003). Beyond our deep concern for the individual safety of ISM activists, we are aware of the heightened urgency to step up our efforts in solidarity with international peace and human right activists to counter hypocritical "peace" plans about to draw the curtain, yet again, on the ongoing perpetration of violent injustice.

To us, *Negotiations* is a space where we can face the challenges of an open exchange about the most difficult issues pertaining to the history and current conditions of the crisis in Palestine-Israel. We believe this exchange to be crucial as we witness a new phase in global colonization schemes, set fast on further deprivation, disenfranchisement and displacement of Indigenous peoples. The Palestinian Intifadas exemplify counter-colonization movements. As such, they should compel us to make our political and social interventions meaningful, sustainable and visionary. This must be a collective effort, and no inclusive collectivity can be built in the absence of imagination and communication. Art, as a medium for both, is therefore essential to any project of transformation.

We believe that the people and projects brought together in *Negotiations* offer uniquely creative means through which art can trigger, facilitate and channel social exchange. *Negotiations* is not meant to be merely consumed. We have built into our programme of activities multiple opportunities for participatory dialogue and work. In addition to their specific presentations, some of our guests will join us at the *Meeting Grounds*, Sunday, June 22, to help further responses to the questions with which we began our project. We hope to see you there as active co-labourers.

In negotiations, will animates the imagination that animates the work. We are grateful to all artists, activists, cultural workers, academics, poets and performers who responded to our invitation and are joining us, remotely or in person, and immensely thankful to all those whose volunteer labour has nurtured this project. With love, courage and commitment. For peace.