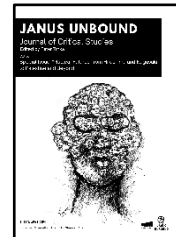


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“The Earth is Closing on Us”: Predatory Empires Through Japan, Palestine, and Iran

Fazil Moradi

Introduction

Reflecting on the state of the world and confronting the daily bombardment of Palestine and Palestinians, and the way the United States defends this program of colonial imperial violence in the so-called “United Nations Security Council” of former and living empires, my mother couldn’t help but speak as if every sentence were an exile turning to homelessness.

“You can’t kill someone without killing yourself,” mother said, not as a proverb, not as a warning, but as a historical colonial imperial condition remembered too long. I do not answer aloud. I think with the long lineage of thinkers who understood that every act of dehumanization boomerangs back to its author: *you can’t strip someone of their life on earth or humanity without tearing away your own, or the nation you claim to defend*. I didn’t know that even thinking and remaining silent has its own politics. It keeps one in an exile where the possibility of justice or hospitality as responsibility to wholly others is haunting.

My mother continues, as if the US were a riddle whose violence refuses critical thinking. “This America can’t sit still. It has hot chilies in its ass. It is behind all the brutalities in the world. I don’t understand, when we learned the mullahs [in Iran] were pure evil, we were left with no option but to flee and seek refuge elsewhere. We thought that was our protest and that we would return home soon. We left everything, forever. We were cut off from Iran.”

What about Palestinians? “Memory adds to the unrelieved intensity of Palestinian exile. ... Are they [forever] condemned to exile? ... Exile is a series of portraits without names, without contexts” (Said 1999, ix, 12). Or are they forever cut off from Palestine? Mahmoud Darwish writes in “Where should the birds fly after the last sky?”:

The Earth is closing on us
pushing us through the last passage
and we tear off our limbs to pass through.
The Earth is squeezing us.
I wish we were its wheat
so we could die and live again.
I wish the Earth was our mother
so she’d be kind to us. (2005, 12–13)

Memories connect not only those we identify as kin or contemporaries, but anyone with a sense of justice or all ethically responsible and hospitable human beings across time and space (Moradi 2024; 2025a). Mother's question cracks the surface of the Earth. The safe country is never safe; the violent state is never elsewhere. Political violence and forced displacement do not vanish from memories, even when a person has disappeared or been erased from a nation's archive and history, removed from the land of their birth, become *exilic*. Memories endure, traveling from mother to child and beyond. Perhaps to an epistemological revolution, such as the one embodied in the *Woman. Life. Freedom* movement, seen both in Rojava in Syria and across Iran in September 2022, following the murder of Jina/Mahsa Amini (see Moradi 2023).

"Yes," I tried to continue the conversation with my mother. "America is behind the rise of the mullahs in Iran, and your displacement too. It can't be separated from the memories of your losses that never stop being lost."

Mother repeats it, as if repetition could force the Earth to echo mother's voice and force the world to hear: "We were cut off from Iran. We were cut off from Iran. Forever."

Cut off performs its own severing. Each utterance amputates what remains or what memories of violence endure—*cut off*. Mother stands in that archive of mothers who did not choose to become exile: mothers in Palestine, Sudan, parts of Ukraine; D.R. Congo, Syria, Iran, Rohingya mothers; Indigenous mothers everywhere on this planet; mothers in the Americas, and so many other parts of the human world. Every mother carries a world; every world is made portable only by being broken.

Destruction and displacement can't just be accidents of empire. Empire takes us to what Jacques Derrida understands as "dispositif de savoir-pouvoir, de pouvoir-savoir, de savoir-voir et de pouvoir-voir souverain", a dispositive, infrastructure or "a setup of knowing-power, power-to-know, knowing-how-to-see, and sovereign being-able-to-see" (Derrida 2008, 378; 2009, 282). Empire's existential condition, thus, as colonial modernity, remains tangled with the colony, both at home and elsewhere. It is a colonial order of exile and erasure, a programmatic expulsion, where departure is mandated and return rendered impossible. The exile of the "shah" of Iran did not occur in isolation but as a recursive wave within the planetary composition of colonial governance, or the circulation of bodies, regimes, and desires according to the empire's logic of manageability and survival. His "peaceful" departure was less a fall than the imperial order reinventing or translating its own face, ensuring that what departs in the name of "liberation" returns as another form of domination, or a "*native council*" (Fanon 1956, my emphasis). For Frantz Fanon, the *native council* was the colonial order of destruction of histories, memories or cultures. It may be read like the machine in Franz Kafka's (1996) *The Penal Colony*, where the machine, in performing torture or punishment, also destroys any possibility of justice. The punishment of "some as warning for others," Michel de Montaigne wrote, "is a custom of our [French] justice" (2004, 30).

In one of the first photographs, of the "Ayatollah" Khomeini, taken just before he sets foot upon Iranian soil, he can be seen holding, with his right hand,

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the left arm of one of the Air France male pilots escorting him from the French national carrier. Suspended on the aircraft’s ladder, neither fully arrived nor still departed, Khomeini occupies a liminal threshold: the space between colonial empires and their colony, between the sky of France, Britain and the US and the ground of Iran. Behind him stands another mullah, and at the air-craft’s door linger five more mullahs, alongside another male pilot and what appear to be male journalists or functionaries of a broader colonial imperial infrastructure. In the photograph, the site of arrival withdraws from clarity. The colony appears as if still without name or lineage. At the door of the aircraft, some, all men, fix their gaze on Khomeini, as though manifesting the promise of “return to divine happiness.” Elsewhere, a mullah’s eyes drift past the visible, toward a horizon that refuses to appear, an unseen shore recalling those island prisons where the British empire once rehearsed its colonial *knowing-power*. The photographic scene folds in on itself: landing becomes exile; the colony becomes the colony once more, forever beginning.

The presence of Air France, the emblem of a former colonial imperial power, with an established “custom of justice,” renders the very act of “return” already compromised, already inscribed by the imperial vision of controlling any political order in the colony with impunity. What appears as an arrival is also a repetition or a colonial *knowing-power*, *power-to-know*, *knowing-how-to-see*: the empires once again scripting who may embody Iran’s “authentic sovereignty.” The photograph, then, remains as part of the visual archive of the colonial order of *knowing-how-to-see*, where the ground of the nation is never fully its own, and where every claim of independence remains shadowed by the invisible infrastructure of colonial imperialism.

Khomeini and the entire mullah assemblage soon proclaimed themselves not as emissaries of colonialism or empire who arrived in Iran on an *Air France* flight, but as devotees whose authority had been assigned by “God”: an authority no earthly being could question. In other words, the Islamic state perfected a colonial order while denouncing colonialism: rape as governance, execution as pedagogy, history as contraband, language as a crime scene. A state that imprisons those who teach Kurdish or Baluchi; a state that hangs artists in public squares with medieval choreography; a political order that Michel Foucault (1991) traced in *Discipline and Punish*, the spectacle of murder and infinite pain as political evidence of a *disciplined* “nation” or world.¹

It began, my mother reminds me, with the policing of vision itself: the vision of the Islamic state in Iran as the birth of epistemicide—*murder of knowledge, archive, histories, people, culture, art or freedom* (Moradi 2025b; 2022). Women forced into the *chador*, an imposed “Islamic” dress code. Classrooms purged. Cinemas gutted. Public culture recast under the sign of obedience. The actors and singers, who once contributed to the circulation of a racial fantasy of the “Aryan race,” as Kurdish, Baluchi, Azeri, or Arabic singers or actors were excluded. Those who gave the colonized Iran its vibrant scenes of bourgeois culture were now forced into silence or infinitely displaced. Mohamed Ali Fardin (1931–2000), adored by lovers of cinema in Iran, reduced to selling carpets in Tehran, and others muted or died in exile.

In the 21st century, films, songs, and the bodies of actors or celebrities and singers or artists have been grafted onto both the Islamic state's knowing-power and what is called "social media," producing a new colonial technology of *seeing* or domination. Tehran is fashioned as the technocultural factory of Hollywood kinds of dreams, dispersing its carefully manufactured effects across a "nation" that can't claim to share histories or memories of naked violence, losses, pain, and interminable sufferings. The heirs of the wealthy dream of comfort in western European countries or north America, while children of the colonized bodies in many parts of the country dream of bread.

What remains? Ruins? A country that feels like a world rubbed almost already blank; families that read memories like fragments on scorched paper; a mother whose story keeps rewriting itself as *autobiography* of incalculable histories of colonial imperial violence (Moradi 2023). "You can't kill someone without killing yourself," mother repeats. And in mother's repetition, I hear how every organized act of destruction turns against itself; every boundary leaks; every violence haunts the hand that performs it. No sovereign escapes the shadow it casts, or the Islamic state in Iran, too, will *crumble to dust*, just as Omar Khayyam once reminded every empire and emperor.

In the silence between us, mother and me, what remains is both memories that can't be contained or narrated once and for all. As the critical writings of Ilan Pappé (2006; Chomsky and Pappé 2010; 2015) and Tahrir Hamdi (2023), both contributors to this issue, and countless others, including the academic writings of *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, *Journal of Palestine Studies* and *Journal of Genocide Research*, tell us, today those uncontainable memories and controlled narration are in Palestine and we are turned into yet another generation of historical witnesses of the imperial destruction of Palestinian lives and to a justice that lies beyond the controlled frames of law. Today, Palestine is, perhaps more than any other world, the place where the very possibility of meaning, for both humanity and "modernity," and its colonial imperial after-lives, must be thought. One will have to think from the bombed kindergartens, libraries and universities of Gaza, or from the long-lived groves of olive trees continually felled by state-sanctioned or armed colonial settlers.

The unyielding transfer of advanced military technologies from Germany, France, Britain, Italy, and the US to Israel, and the incalculable, ceaseless bombardment of Gaza expose not only how Palestine is produced as a historical threat to the very illusion of "the modern, modernity and modernism as exclusively 'western' inventions" (Hall 1999, 4–5), but the haunting of the transatlantic trade in humans, colonization, colonial genocides and the Holocaust. You are cultivating a *society that hates instead of nurturing love* when you calculate the ongoing of political violence in Palestine or Ukraine as *love* for a people and *hate* for another. What unfolds is not just another episode of domination but a transformation of the colonial knowing-power or the modality of colonization itself, a reconfiguration of conquest that displaces direct occupation in favour of proxy sovereignties. Afghanistan and Iraq once served as overt theatres of imperial expansion; now Israel, Ukraine, and others are mobilized as surrogate states enabling colonial knowing-power to continue staging its long fantasy of

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planetary “racial” mastery. In such a shift, democracy appears not as a flawless visage but stripped bare, reduced to body count or an advanced panopticon that regulates assembly, discussion and protests (Moradi 2025b).

The colonial custom of manufacturing chaos can’t be confined to “democratic elections” at home and military destruction and ruins elsewhere. It circulated in the colonizing slogans, such as “shock and awe,” as colonial knowing-how-to-see, that designed and regulated memory through “global media,” turning the conquest of Iraq in 2003 into a spectacle of colonial imperial vision. But who now recalls the daily bombardments and killings in Baghdad, the routine tortures and rapes in Abu Ghraib, or the released photographs in which a soldier poses with a nazi swastika painted *between his eyes?* (Moradi 2024, 66). Let alone the organization of the transatlantic trade in humans, colonialism, the Holocausts, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Marshall Islands, or the French empire’s atomic bombing testing in Algeria. These fragments return as spectres, resisting incorporation into the colonizing mottos of imperial military necessity or democratic rescue.

The bombings of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Palestine, and even Qatar expose a recursive colonial knowing-power: that “in moments of difficulty one can trust ‘the Empire’ to strike back,” to borrow from Stuart Hall (2011, 18). The imperial administration of memory in these states operates as an adjunct to the legitimization, or, rather, naturalization, of the colonial order. Already in the early 1990s, Edward Said signs this entanglement when he remarks, almost as an involuntary parenthesis, “We are at a moment in our history, as Palestinians, we are led by, [*sigh*] I don’t know, words fail me, I don’t know what we are led by, but not a bright leadership” (1996, 45:35). This will have to be extended to the predatory colonial states worldwide.

Said writes, in *After the Last Sky* (1999, ix–x), that Yasser “Arafat’s despotic Palestine Authority” banned the Arabic translations of some of his writings in the Palestinian territories. In March of the same year, when traveling to visit his son, a volunteer worker in Ramallah, Said writes, “I was treated to a vituperative attack on Arafat’s radio station, The Voice of Palestine. I was characterized as a CIA agent, an enemy of the Palestinian people, and an Orientalist!” His *sigh* exposes the instability of the very ground, discursive or otherwise, on which “leadership” seeks to found itself. Today, almost three decades after Said’s talk and encounter, we witness the sedimented effects of a long colonial work: the work of deciding which political forms shall be preserved, defended, or allowed to appear as inevitable in the so-called “Middle East,” the historical and contemporary political context of Palestine.

What can be called the “Talibanization” of the countries mentioned above has been rendered so administratively permeable that the US, Britain, Israel or NATO may strike them at will, as though “sovereignty” as “international law” were a movable supplement, granted or withdrawn according to imperial calculus. Like every empire that has come before it, the US sustains its dominion through ever advancing technologies of destruction, embodied most visibly in its vast archipelago of military bases or infrastructure stretching from Japan to Guantánamo Bay (Vine 2015; 2020). As David Vine observes:

From a hilltop at the Guantánamo Bay naval station, you can look down on a secluded part of the base bordered by the Caribbean Sea. There you'll see thick coils of razor wire, guard towers, search lights, and concrete barriers. This is the U.S. prison that has garnered so much international attention and controversy, with so many prisoners held for years without trial. (2015, 1)

The US empire's military infrastructure functions as a planetary panopticon, performing unparalleled surveillance and violence across the planet (Wilford 2024). This infrastructure of imperial violence can be summoned at will, whether as the US's Central Intelligence Agency's covert operations, as a show of military power, or as experiments with ever more shocking weapons. In the Preface to *America's Greatest Game: the CIA's Secret Arabists and the Shaping of the Modern Middle East*, Hugh Wilford writes,

This book began with two surprises, the first being that it did not already exist. From the 1953 coup that deposed the nationalist prime minister of Iran, Mohammed Mosaddeq, down to more recent reports of secret prisons, waterboarding, and drone warfare, the Central Intelligence Agency has played a defining role in the troubled relationship between the United States and the Middle East. (2013, xix)

Tested first in the 2003 conquest of Iraq, and again in April 2017, the Massive Air Ordinance Blast—also called the “Mother of All Bombs” and the most powerful “nonnuclear” weapon—was first detonated by the US in Afghanistan in 2017 (Rajah 2023, 216–67). On June 22, 2025, the imperial logic of extra-territorial dominance was further demonstrated as US “B-2 bombers” released the so-called “30,000-pound bunker busters” on uranium-enrichment facilities in Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz in Iran (Ali 2025). Since the colonial knowing-how-to-see is at issue, these attacks were announced in advance and later made to circulate widely through the so-called “global media.”

The calculated acts of bombardment and of imagery, or colonial and colonizing “knowledge,” both linguistic and non-linguistic, that constitute the idea of the “Middle East” can't be separated, as the colonial archives or Said's *Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism* make clear. Consider, for example, how Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish languages, or Turkish came to naturalize the very name “Middle East” through literal translation, and how the academics everywhere are taking care of its survival. This linguistic adoption shaped memories and identification while showing how British, French, and American empires envisioned their own future survival as memory work. Here the very understanding of a single, solitary empire as the cause of all evil in the world is misleading. No empire exists or hunts alone; each is already the spectral trace of another, returning, repeating, contaminating the purity of any singular explanation. The *name*, which is also a *narrative* and *geographical*, itself was coined and popularized by three imperial male agents, British journalist Valentine Chirol, former British Army officer Thomas Gordon, and American admiral Alfred T. Mahan in the early 20th century, shortly before the British and French empires inscribed it onto the

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map through the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 16 May 1916 (see Crouzet 2022). The line inscribed on 16 May 1916, by Britain’s Mark Sykes and France’s François Georges-Picot endures as a sovereign boundary, dividing Iran from Iraq. Border is a manifestation of the imperial vision: “The boundaries defined by the modern system of nation-states were fundamental to European colonialism and economic expansion” (Hardt and Negri 2001, xii).

Through the making and imposition of names, narratives, and geography, a colonial memory cartography continues to define and confine what is called the “Middle East.” In other words, the empires forged in the transatlantic trade in *human(ity)s* and in colonialism continue to live on in the memories, racialized geographies, and everyday vocabularies of millions worldwide. There can be no empire or so-called modern state that does not, in the very movement of its advance, inscribe itself as the governance of memory, its transmission, interruption, and rewriting, across generations, whether in the metropole or in the colony. The empire can’t extend the welcome of a hospitality that it doesn’t have and sees as an existential threat.

In *Memoirs of a Kamikaze*, Kazuo Odachi writes, “I remember Japan gearing up for war in my childhood days. Physical training started to take precedence over academic classes in schools.... Schools were transformed into training grounds to prepare youths for battle, and bayonet training was added to Kendo practice” (2020, 12, 14). The empire needs to make itself known to its subject, the nation, and the world at large. Before defining and identifying a human collective as enemy to mobilize against, the nation itself must first be made through colonization. This political infrastructure of colonization, or knowing-power as “knowing how to cause fear, knowing how to terrorize by making known.... and so terror or terrorism as knowing-how to make fear reign” (Derrida 2009, 39), applies to any predatory imperial or militarized state, including Iran and Israel.

In the current context of colonial knowing-power or ongoing imperial scramble for domination of the “Middle East” there are now two *armed states*: Israel and Iran. Two states whose existence is made to depend entirely on modernity’s technologies of destruction and discipline, including armed forces, police and “national media,” militarized drones, satellite imagery, armed CC-TVs, militarized walls, and methodical oppression (see Qandeel and Topak 2025). Two theological constructs built not only on sand, but on the destruction and control of knowledge and the pulverized bones of the peoples they continue to annihilate. Two ideological infrastructures of radical dehumanization: *within the global colonial theatre (knowing-how-to-see), nuclear capability functions as the spectral centre of imperial power*. Israel wields it as a silent guarantor of dominance, while Iran is aspiring to that same *anti-Earth* threshold. In Palestine, the Israeli technologies of destruction continue to annihilate with impunity. Against this, Iran positions itself as the counter-sovereign champion of Pales-tinian survival. How can a genocidal state like Iran be seen as saviour? (Moradi 2023).

The two states that made their open “war” public for some days (June “13–25,” 2025), claim direct revelation, not from empires and colonialism but from God, and the right to unleash divine violence upon each other and their neighbours at any time. These states, though appearing oppositional, are haunted by the same foundational absence: the absence of *hospitality* toward others as *justice as giving place* (Derrida 2000; Moradi 2024; 2025a; Kikuchi 2024). Structured not by absolute or conditional hospitality, but by apocalyptic fantasy that materializes as murder, rape, torture, endless destruction, and control of memory and education (Puar 2017; Shakhshari 2020).

Their killings and wars are always righteous. Their maps, always holy, to the extent that critical thinking or protest of any kind is not welcome. The law of these states is “the law of the knife,” to borrow from Frantz Fanon (2004, 232); war is the fundamental necessity through which they ceaselessly reinscribe their claim to legitimacy: “The colonizer has the right to defend itself against those they have colonized and murder with impunity.” The two states invoke the fantasy of order and safety, but also histories or memories of imperial residues of conquest, mass murder and irredeemable destruction.

In many Iranian households in *exile*, the story is told as if around an evening table, passed from one generation to the next. They speak first of August 19, 1953, when the US empire, through its CIA, removed prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh (Wilford 2013, 160–74). “Operation Ajax” was staged as “a coup,” and in its wake Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was lifted to a throne grand enough for him to call himself the “King of Kings.” His rise, however, held the shadow of his father’s fall. Reza Shah had already been forced into exile by other empires, Britain and the Soviet Union, sent first to Mauritius and then to Johannesburg, where he died of a heart attack in late July 1944 at sixty-six. Decades later, his son would meet a similar fate: pushed by the US to flee, he died of cancer in Egypt in late July 1980. In 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini flew from Paris to Tehran to claim leadership of a “revolution” that promised justice and freedom. Over 40 years, the Islamic state built a political order that prized obedience over critical thinking, encouraging mosque attendance while constraining access to critical education and advanced learning. Told as a family story, the sequence of overthrows, exiles, promises, and betrayals becomes less an abstract history than a lived inheritance, narrating both the endurance of the Islamic state and the quiet longing, in many homes, for a future that is yet to come.

If we speak of two particular states whose survival depends on modernity’s technologies of destruction, we must immediately acknowledge the traces of empires and every other state that hovers in the “margins” of that sentence. The modern state, as it crystallized after the conquest of the Americas in the late 15th century, secured its authority through a double movement: it monopolized violence at home, while claiming mass murder and destruction as sovereign immunity in the colony: “one vast farmyard, one vast concentration camp;” a violence on such a scale exposes the “modern” as a euphemism for destruction and annihilation (Fanon 2004, 232). This double claim required not only armies and police, but an endless work of self justification, in which the

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state inoculates itself against the very violence it performs by naming that violence “progress,” “defence,” or “security” (see Grewal 2017; Moses 2021).

When we say *armed*, we do not simply list another institution beside the legislature and the courts. We name the spectral heart of the so-called “sovereignty,” the site where the state discloses, almost in spite of itself, that its reason for being is bound to the management of killing, murder, rape, plunder, and so forth. The police officer in the neighbourhood patrol car in Berlin, Paris, London, Tehran, and New York, the drone pilot watching pixelated figures half a world away or across the wall, as in Gaza, or the gated and controlled colonies that are hidden in the name, “West Bank,” and the spokespersons at the evening press briefings all participate in a differential economy of violence, in Washington DC, Jerusalem or Tehran. They occupy different positions, yet each wields the power to decide whose body may be exposed to the annihilatory violence of modernity and whose body must be protected at all costs. The protected body is the soldier armed with a gun and trained to kill the “enemy,” the professor of philosophy, history or anthropology trained to keep the line of “racial” difference by policing what texts to teach and what to exclude, or a journalist who is so colonized that they no longer have time to think together with others about the possible meaning of *being free*.

If we linger on only two states, Iran and Israel, we risk confining the critique to convenient exceptions, as though violence were an accidental property of a few rogue sovereignties (Derrida 2005; Chomsky 2001). Critical studies and archives of state violence demonstrate how the very invention of the predatory modern state, its king or/and president, prime minister, army, ministries, census, bureaus, bureaucrats dressed in suits and ties, railways, borders drawn by distant pens, institutions and technologies of control, was accompanied by colonial conquests and mass murder that linger (Trask 1999; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Tinker and Freeland 2008; Bacca, Guzmán and Quigua 2023). From the plantations of the Caribbean to the trenches of the imperial war now remembered as “World War I,” the state has been a laboratory for perfecting techniques of organized destruction. To single out two examples (Israel and Iran), however egregious, without naming this wider historical and contemporary infrastructure would be to forget that the ground on which we stand is itself sedimented with the ashes of millions of human and other-than-human beings, pulverized yet insistently present, haunting.

Archives of state violence, old and ongoing, show how empires and the imperial state always keep humans, citizens or foreigners alike, at a great distance, but do not permit us the comfort of *ethical distance*, for example, from Palestine or any other people that are made target of annihilatory violence (Moradi 2024; Moradi and Bognitz 2024; Moradi 2025a; 2025b). Since empires and imperial states are indeed infrastructures of radical dehumanization, our ethical responsibility is to confront the ways we inhabit and reproduce that machine in everyday life. Each time we demand absolute safety or security, each time we accept the conflation of dissent with danger, we reinscribe the imperial attitude or memory that renders some lives disposable. In other words, the possibility of hospitable encounter between a citizen, especially one rendered a target of annihila-

tion, and a brutal imperial formation is foreclosed from the outset. Empire materializes through impenetrable layers of bureaucratic and militarized rationality that permeate education, civic life, and everyday encounters, reorganizing memory itself. Memory's institutional organization produces forms of radical dehumanization that become most legible in places such as Gaza, where state violence saturates the social field to the point that soldiers, bus drivers, librarians, even professors of philosophy, not only in Israel or Germany but in many parts of the world, find their capacity to recognize the humanity of others steadily eroded. In that loss, the imperial subject forfeits not only the other's *right to cohabit the earth* or *freedom to narrate* but also the conditions for the possibility of their own.

The illusion of trying to talk to empire—the imperial state, citizen, or attitude—takes us to Kafka's *Before the Law*. In this parable, the villager who seeks justice encounters a gatekeeper who indefinitely postpones access to *the law*. This scene opens a broader historical condition: subjects of empire, citizens of the imperial state, are drawn into bureaucratic rituals that promise recognition yet withhold it, producing a liminal state of perpetual waiting and decay. The seeker of justice does not just die before the law; they are murdered or die within an imperial infrastructure that sustains its authority through delay, opacity, and *the deferral of hospitality* (Moradi 2025a).

To turn to Israel and Iran as two radically dehumanizing political orders, is, therefore, not to isolate monstrosity in a convenient pair, but to illuminate a way of learning in which every predatory modern state is at once colonizer and hostage of technologies of destruction. The task, then, is not to find the individual human perpetrator or to condemn uniquely, but to keep the archives of the colonial and colonizing state open (Derrida 1995; 1998; Said 2000). The colonial archives are not behind us; they inscribe us, already, in their exercise of political power, of murder, of the right to define, to identify, and to destroy.

We are now made witnesses, to what Fanon lived through and documented, “the colonial vocabulary,” naming and narrating with naked violence. The armed colonizer takes colonization “to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns [them] into ... animal[s]. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. ... Those hordes of vital statistics, those hysterical masses, those faces bereft of all humanity, those distended bodies which are like nothing on earth, that mob without beginning or end, those children who seem to belong to nobody” (2004, 42). There is *repertoire* for the settler imperial politician and citizen's language. The Israeli politicians' citation, “Palestinians are human animals,” is a citation of “the colonial vocabulary.” As Fanon and Aimé Césaire (2000) documented, *the colonized is not seen as a human, but is made a thing, a function, a number, a file*.

A planetary apocalypse, with the vocabularies of the last 500 years of imperial colonialism re-inscribed daily, with newer weapons, cleaner images, and deadlier silences. If industrialization went hand in hand with the march of predatory empires and the transatlantic trade in humanity, and the murder of people and cultures (Moradi 2022), the era of radical capitalism extends that logic to

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the human and other-than-human condition: citizen and alien become sites for perpetual extraction and monetization. Within such a society, one learns from the earliest years that education is less a pursuit of *ecological friendship*, or learning and well-being, than an initiation into employability, a prerequisite for livelihood and the promise of security (Moradi 2026). To navigate this order is to assent to its dehumanizing hierarchies, its relations of domination and sexual violence. To embrace its abuse of power, to obey its procedural rites. Accept that a single criticism may threaten your existence on earth.

After almost ten months of living and research, I am learning to live and think with, and write through, the living or haunting memories and ghosts of imperial violence in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as in Minamata and Fukushima. One early evening, Peter Trnka and I walked toward the place marked and remembered as the “hypocentre,” that is, the point beneath which, some five hundred meters above ground, the first atomic bomb exploded.

Peter visited Hiroshima to share his ongoing work on the endurance of colonialism in Canada, particularly the lived memories and present-day political conditions of Indigenous peoples, and to reflect on the question of nuclear weapons with scholars and students at Hiroshima University. Together with Tanami Aoe, a colleague from Hiroshima City University, we had also organized a panel discussion, *Nuclear Futures: From Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Palestine and Beyond*, hosted by Hiroshima City University and Academics Act for Palestine. During this time, Peter and I learned that our autobiographies intersect in unexpected and moving ways. Like Tanami, both of our families had survived imperial wars, his in what is now “Eastern Europe,” and mine in what is now “west Asia.” Those colonial histories forced (or, brought) our families to seek re-fuge in Iraq. We found ourselves sharing how, even after so many decades, our mothers still speak with gratitude about the hospitality of the Iraqi people who received them. Peter told me, “My mother is suffering from dementia but she remembers that hospitality.” For an entire week, we found ourselves immersed, almost without pause, in conversations about imperial and colonial memories, the present state of the world, and the unavoidable dangers that come with the predatory states armed with nuclear weapons. These autobiographical, critical exchanges reminded us of how intimately autobiographies are woven into imperial narratives and names (see Moradi 2023).

From above the hypocentre the blast of the advanced imperial science, or atomic bomb, descended, vaporizing all it touched, erasing nearly everything within two kilometres, on August 6, 1945. Eighty years later, in October 2025, Peter and I stood upon that same ground. We lifted our eyes toward the sky that had once turned into annihilating fire, then turned to face one another.

I had a similar encounter while following the words and steps of Ariyoshi Hanako through the Peace Park in Nagasaki. A postgraduate student at the School of Pharmaceutical Sciences at Nagasaki University, Ariyoshi also works part-time as a guide at the Peace Education Lab Nagasaki, leading groups of

high school students who travel to Nagasaki from across Japan, walking them through what is now called the Peace Park, which stands upon the very ruins left by the plutonium bomb of August 9, 1945. Ariyoshi agreed to participate in my long-term research on the memories of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and since the Peace Education Lab program did not accommodate visitors other than students, she offered to guide both of us through the park, refusing any payment. When we reached the monument, built directly on the spot of the hypocentre, Ariyoshi turned to me and said quietly, “Look up now. Imagine the atomic bomb falling. Imagine the explosion, the blinding flash, the heat rays, the blast, the fire.”

Ariyoshi: Can you imagine?

Me: No, I can't imagine. Can you imagine?

Ariyoshi: It is difficult. Because there are three waves of damages of atomic bombing. Heat rays, blast waves and radiations. And the ground temperature at that time was 3,000 degrees to 4,000 degrees. It is too hot to imagine. And the blast wave is 440 meters per second. It is too fast to imagine. In this text inscribed on the monument it is written: “In 1945, on August 9th, one atomic bomb was dropped here, 500 meters above this monument. 73,800 people died and 76,900 people got injured. 11,500 houses and 6,800 buildings were also destroyed.”

The air held a silence that did not simply fall between Ariyoshi and me (or between Peter and me) but radiated outward, as if acknowledging the gravity of the moment and the immeasurable violence and absences it contained.

In a Report on “Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” completed in Japanese in 1979, and translated into English and published in 1981, we read:

Records on the time of the explosion vary from 8:15 to 8:18 A.M. but the official time according to Hiroshima City is 8:15 A.M. With the explosion of the atomic bomb, the epicenter [hypocentre] instantaneously reached a maximum temperature of several million degrees centigrade and an atmospheric pressure of several 100,000 bars; with the formation of a fireball, powerful heat rays and radiation were emitted in all directions within a short interval. Radiation extended not only directly from the burst point but also from the surface of the ground—from fission fragments and the residue of neutron-induced radioactive materials. The shock waves propagated by the explosion and the tremendous blast that followed almost instantaneously demolished buildings and killed many people. The survivors suffered the agonies of thermal burns and radiation exposure, whose effects were in many cases delayed. (22)

Eighty years on, I remain haunted by the sense that our understanding is still incomplete, that the predatory empires have not yet reckoned fully with either the immediate destruction or the enduring violence unleashed by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In *Records and Diaries Regarding Atomic Bomb Casualties Written by Medical Doctors and Scientists*, Nakao Maika turns to Hi-

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da Shuntarō (1917–2017), “an army medic and a bombed doctor who worked at Hiroshima Army Hospital,” who wrote:

The face is, oh, is that the face? Weirdly big face, both eyes bloated, lips puffed up by half; oh the face, any strand of hair on burned head. I caught my breath and backed away from it. What I saw was that the old cloth was the human’s undressed skin, the black water was blood. There were burned human meat blouses with dangling skin from their bodies that could not be distinguished as male, female, or soldier. (Nakao 2019, 105)

By 9 August 1945 Japan was a world in ruins: landscapes shattered, cities reduced to cinders, people suspended in the radical existential uncertainty of bare survival. The bombed-out streets, traces of imperial wars, displayed the absence of lives once lived. The war of empires continued in the bodies that starved, in the fractured families, in the haunted return of those who had survived. The violence of empire-building left only long negotiation with despair, infinite exile, homelessness, the traces and silences of those now under occupation of other empires and deprived of the *right to narrate*.

Reduced to its island borders, the Japanese Empire and emperor Hirohito were confined to “unconditional surrender” and placed under the imperial rule of the US from 1945 to 1952 (Butow 1954). In September of 1945, the General Headquarters of the supreme commander, under the authority of General Douglas MacArthur, introduced a “Press Code” and established the “Civil Censorship Detachment” that strictly controlled public discussion, prohibiting criticism of the “Allied Forces” and, in particular, suppressing any media reports, organised assembly and research, photographic or art exhibitions of the violence and effects of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It also deprived the *Hibakusha* (survivors of the atomic bombs) both of the right to medical treatment and the right to narrate their suffering and memories (Braw 1991).

After the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US established the “Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission” (ABCC), turning the two bombed cities into laboratories for the advancement of the nuclear sciences and technologies. That is, the ABCC was instituted not to provide medical treatment needed by the survivors, but to objectify and study them. Human beings, annihilated by atomic fire, blast or radiation, were transformed into living data: “hearts, lungs, livers, eyes, brains” were airlifted across the Pacific for further study in the US. The organs of those annihilated by the atomic bomb, those denied the dignity of a “natural” death, “spent twenty-eight years as state secrets in an atomic bomb-proofed building in Washington, D.C. The first atomic bomb victim autopsy materials to leave Japan, they were the last to return” in wooden boxes in May 1973 (Lindee 1998, 376). The atomic bomb radiation led to the development of leukaemia in those affected, including pregnant mothers and their unborn (Yamazaki 1995).

If Hiroshima was the first city on earth to be destroyed with a uranium bomb, and Nagasaki with a plutonium one, then the subsequent pursuit of greater power, the testing and detonation of the first hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll in 1954, shows the limitless destruction at the heart of US imperial expan-

sion and preservation. In the 21st century, the most advanced nuclear states, including the US, Russia, China, France, the UK, Pakistan, India, and Israel, stand as heirs to that imperial calculation. Each claims the mantle of legitimate sovereignty or democracy, yet all possess the most refined instruments of annihilation: the capacity to sacrifice the planet, suspending law, critical thinking, protest, and ethical or ecological responsibility.

Peter and I had promised Tanami Aoe, associate professor of religion, ethnicity and “west Asian” studies at Hiroshima City University, and one of the organizers of *Hiroshima Palestine Vigil* Community, established in Hiroshima on October 13, 2023, that we would join their “Standing for Palestine” gatherings, held behind the ruins of the former Industrial Promotion Hall of Hiroshima, now memorialized as the “A-bomb Dome,” left in ruins after the US’ atomic bombing of the city on 6 August 1945. Upon our arrival on October 25, 2025 we encountered a small group, bound not by geography or politics of identification, but by a shared responsibility toward the ongoing destruction of Palestine. Engineer, journalist, historian, social scientist, philosopher, linguist, artist, fashion designer, young and old, they stood between two locations of historical importance: the “A-bomb Dome” enclosed by a fence that separates it from the city, and the monument to Tamiki Hara, the poet and critical thinker who “survived” the atomic bombing of the city.

A black marble tablet set upon the earth is inscribed with Hara’s words, in English translation:

Engraved in stone long ago
Last in the shifting
In the midst of a crumbling world
The vision of one flower
The fence had ceased to be a fence.

By twilight it had transformed into an historic altar, where fabric, words, and human breath had gathered to bear witness. A narrow strip of white cloth, carrying the bilingual plea “Free Palestine” in Arabic and English, the crescent of a painted watermelon glowing upon it like a second, defiant moon, hung on the fence. Beside it was another call, “Liberation and Peace,” stitched in English and Japanese on a broader fold of cloth. Three languages had been mobilized in protest against *the* cruellest act of political violence targeting Palestinians, more than two million people in Gaza, in the 21st century. Farther along, the message returned in a different register: orange letters on black fabric, forming again the call for freedom, draped around an emblem of peace. Between these banners hung a Palestinian flag. Then another flag, thrown across the fence, so that one half faced outward toward the world, and the other, inward, toward the “A-bomb Dome.” A last scrap of black cloth, smaller than the rest, marked with white lettering, illuminated by small violet lights: “Free Palestine.” Beneath them, scattered at the feet of the fence-turned-altar, lay posters depicting human conditions in Gaza, images that needed no translation. With a small speaker, some of the participants took turns holding the microphone, repeating in Japa-

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nese and English the refrains carried across continents: “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” and “Free, free Palestine.”

Passers-by, moving between the historical sites, heard the chorus each time they crossed the invisible line between the atomic bombings of 1945 and the destruction of Palestine in 2025. A member of the *Hiroshima Palestine Vigil*, a volunteer network connecting Hiroshima to Nagasaki, offered brochures to those who paused, containing event details and documentation of the violence in Gaza. The Nagasaki network also included people from various backgrounds, among them a retired professor of Japanese literature. They, too, gather, in Nagasaki Peace Park, approximately 100 meters from the hypocentre. When the standing concluded, we drifted together to a small space for dinner. Many had brought dishes to share. We sat around a table, exchanging names and stories, and the warmth of food passed from hand to hand. As conversation unfolded, a single thread wove quietly through the reflections of several members of the *Hiroshima Palestine Vigil*. What linked Gaza with the bombed cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they said, was not that Gaza is another tragedy, nor even the echo of the “Middle East crisis,” but the living on of colonialism. In that moment, the table felt like an extension of the altar we had left behind, another place where memories, responsibilities, and the desire for human liberation gathered, taking us beyond the borders of Japan and the nation-state, to “a dialogic of accountability” and the possibility of “planetary human beings,” to borrow from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2013, 350). Thus, the *Hiroshima Palestine Vigil* in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and anti-war movements in Fukuoka, Tokyo and many other parts of the planet, are not just a question of the human existential condition, but of *planetary survival*.

In both the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, Albert Einstein, who survived the imperial Holocaust in Europe, is remembered as tied to the birth of the nuclear age. He can also be found cited in the 1979 Report (1981, x) as having warned, “The release of atomic energy has so changed everything that our former ways of thinking have been rendered obsolete. We therefore face catastrophe unheard of in former times. If [hu]mankind is to survive, then we need a completely new way of thinking.”

After our panel discussion on Nuclear Futures at Hiroshima City University on October 29th, Peter turned to me and said, almost in disbelief, “Can you imagine? Immediately after our discussion, President Trump announced a return to testing nuclear weapons.” In an article in *The Asahi Shimbun*, Takuro Chiba and Taro Ono write that, during a meeting of the Lower House Budget Committee, Japan’s Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, challenged the long-standing principles of “not possessing, not producing, and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons.” They cite from Takaichi’s 2024 book, *Kokuryoku Kenkyu* (A study of national power): “I resisted this wording right before the Cabinet decision.... Even if we continue to adhere to ‘not possessing’ and ‘not producing’ (nuclear weapons), the ‘not permitting the introduction’ principle is not realistic if we expect the United States to provide extended deterrence” (Chiba and Ono 2025). The haunting of memories of colonization is border-

less; it continues past violence and reinscribes earlier forms of violence: the unresolved denial of the Japanese Empire's acts of destruction and annihilation, those acts that scarred much of Asia by casting its peoples as "animals" and the empire as condemned civilizer. The empire's violence, still deferred, remains excluded from Japan's national education and public discourse, persisting as a policy, a silence, that shapes what can and cannot be said beyond Japan's "history problem" (Igarashi 2000; Hashimoto 2015; see also Nakamura Taira in this issue).

The entangled colonial memories in *The Earth is Closing on Us* speak of a planetary condition, as it is *In the Midst of a Crumbling World*, that endlessly calls, from Hiroshima, through Tamiki Hara, to Palestine, through Mahmood Darwish, and back to us, the living, in the twenty-first century, for speaking not to justify violence, but to dismantle its political sanctity. For speaking, not because we are safe, but because we resist the safety that comes at the cost of the colonial imperial organization of the annihilation of *the Palestinians* or any other human collectives anywhere on the planet.

Biography

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Acknowledgements

I have not, until now, spoken my mother's name, Shekar Nazari, for "mother" here is meant to resonate beyond the singular, to invoke the countless mothers in the world who have been dispossessed, displaced, and violently forced to forget the very ground of their birth. As the Palestinian mother is exiled from Palestine with no promise of return, so too is my own mother deprived of returning to the place that is now only retrospectively called Iran. I remain grateful for my mother's love and the teachings she transmitted to us, her children, just as I am grateful for the love and teaching of Peter Trnka's mother, Nina Trnka (*née* Dobřickova), born in Prague. It is through the weave of their affections and lessons that Peter and I found ourselves meeting, perhaps inevitably, perhaps by chance, in Hiroshima in October 2025. My thanks extend also to Peter Trnka for his critical interest in this text and the world at large, and to all at *Janus Unbound* whose efforts made the release of this issue possible.

Notes

1. During his visit to Iran in early September 1978, at a moment when the “uprising” was taking shape, Foucault wrote of “an absence of fear” in Iran (2005a, 257). In his writings, he insists that, at moment like this, which he articulated as “absolutely collective will,” one will have to be “present” to encounter the materialization of “ideas” that one can’t get from reading books, as at issue was “perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane” (2005b, 222). Almost 3 decades after Fanon’s (2004) anthropological account of how colonial apartheid worked through division of settlers from the colonized in South Africa, Foucault observed a similar colonial condition in Tehran, the capital of Iran: the wealthy lived lives entirely inaccessible to most Iranians. Almost five decades later, in 2025, that colonizing divide remains alive in Iran (2005c, 198).

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