

"Journacide" and the Settler Colonial Assault on Reality

by Azeezah Kanji

ON MAY 11, Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was **killed**, shot in the head by the Israeli settler colonial regime her career was dedicated to exposing.

Even after the fatal bullet, the assault continued. Israeli forces **fired** at rescuers, **invaded** her family's home to tear down Palestinian flags and police their grieving, and **brutalized** mourners in the funeral procession on their way to the church (one of the beaten pallbearers has now been **arrested** and held in solitary confinement for interrogation).

For a few minutes, the world was forced to bear witness to the heavy fabric of violence that suffocates almost every aspect of Indigenous Palestinian life, **starting before birth** and enduring even after death. Just three days after Abu Akleh was buried, Israeli forces **attacked** yet another Palestinian funeral, injuring 71 people – although this time with virtually no international media coverage or condemnation.

Such acts of aggression are a manifestation of Israel's "necropenological" violence against Palestinians, as feminist Palestinian scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's writes: "The colonial state...operates over the flesh of the dead to further evict the native ... strip[ping] the colonised from their humanity by depriving them the right to mourn their beloved ones."

THE FABRIC OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE

Almost exactly one year before killing Shireen Abu Akleh, the Israeli military **bombed** the offices of Al Jazeera, the Associated Press, and several other media organizations; this was during the May 2021 iteration of its periodic devastating onslaughts on the Gaza Strip, **also known** in Israeli state terminology as "mowing the lawn."

Two weeks before the killing, the International Federation of Journalists, Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, and International Centre of Justice for Palestinians **filed** a war crimes complaint against Israel at the International Criminal Court for its "systematic targeting" of journalists. In the last four years alone, as Reporters Without Borders has **documented**, "at least 144 Palestinian journalists have been at the receiving end of live rounds, rubber bullets, stun grenades or teargas fired by Israeli soldiers or police."

The same week that Abu Akleh was killed, Israeli soldiers and settlers beat and besieged Palestinian journalists covering **demolitions** and **mass evictions** in the occupied West Bank, including the forcible transfer of more than 1,000 Palestinians from Masafer Yatta, **recently authorized** by Israel's High Court.

Four days after the killing, on May 15, Palestinians marked the 74th Nakba (“Catastrophe”) Day: the annual commemoration of the mass expulsion and massacres of Palestinians during the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. This year, several Palestinian students were arrested at Nakba Day events in Israel – where the “Nakba Law” penalizes remembrance.

Meanwhile, Germany outlawed any public marking or mourning of the Nakba at all. Under this anti-Nakba Day prohibition, a vigil for Abu Akleh, organized by a Jewish group in Berlin was also disallowed. What better admission that the current violence against Palestinians is part of an “ongoing Nakba” – a persistent project of ethnic cleansing that has never ceased?

The disciplining of Nakba memorialization exemplifies how the erasure of Indigenous peoples under settler colonialism is intimately intertwined with the erasure of the knowledges they hold. Through measures such as barring memorials, burning books, banning traditions and ceremonies, building over Indigenous histories and geographies, and brutalizing elders, intellectuals, artists, and other knowledge-keepers, settlers seek to overwrite Indigenous worlds and impose their own.

While “memoricide” attempts to delete “unauthorized” understandings of the past; “journacide” - the assault on journalism - works to obscure the violence and injustice of the present.

A BRIEF, RECENT HISTORY OF JOURNACIDE

In surveying recent practices of settler colonial regimes, their journacidal quality is clear.

Across the country that currently calls itself Canada – from Unist’ot’en Camp to Muskrat Falls – journalists reporting on state and corporate transgressions of Indigenous rights have been arrested for violating injunctions: the legal instruments through which courts protect corporations’ presumed “right” to invade and deplete Indigenous lands.

Journalists Amber Bracken and Michael Toledano, arrested in November, were maligned by the RCMP for being “embedded” with the Wet’suwet’en land and water protectors resisting pipeline colonization by Coastal GasLink. Apparently, journalists should stick to “embedding” themselves with the RCMP and other forces of occupation, like the American military in Iraq.

At Standing Rock, at least ten journalists were among the more than 800 people arrested while defending Sioux sacred waters and lands from the Dakota Access Pipeline; Indigenous women journalists in particular were targeted for invasive strip searches and other forms of state abuse.

Shoshone/Pauite journalist, filmmaker, and professor Myron Dewey was charged with “stalking” the pipeline’s private security guards by filming them with a drone. If Dewey is a “stalker,” then what about the state? Consider its pervasive use of drones and other mechanisms of aerial surveillance to enforce the “vertical occupation” of Indigenous space – extending into the sky, and penetrating deep into the ground to extract the petrochemicals for which colonial pipelines are built.

Similarly, journalist Aaron Turgeon was charged with “reckless endangerment” for using a drone to livestream footage of state police assaulting water protectors with freezing water hoses and tear gas; it was Turgeon’s recording that was the “act of violence,” according to police.

In China, more than 40% of imprisoned journalists documented by the Committee to Protect Journalists are Indigenous Uyghurs: targets of the state’s secretive campaign to assimilate Uyghur lands and dismantle Uyghur peoplehood through mass detention, “re-education,” sterilization, child separation, and surveillance in East Turkestan, referred to by China literally

as its “new frontier” (Xinjiang). Accusations against detained Uyghur journalists include having “given too many media interviews,” being “two-faced,” and producing “problematic” books.

In Kashmir, the most densely militarized zone in the world, India’s occupation is immunized by a complex of laws – a legacy of British colonialism – that permit journalists and other human rights defenders to be detained “preventively” for up to two years without trial, while the occupying army’s own prolific tortures, rapes, and murders are shielded from legal consequence.

A special police unit in Kashmir is dedicated to investigating journalists and others for “narrative terrorism”; as in Palestine, journalists’ exposure of colonial state terror is treated as a form of “terrorism” itself.

WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO LOOK?

The real, basic “crime” of journalism is in breaching the settler state’s self-granted prerogative to surveil and scrutinize, but not be surveilled or scrutinized in return; to render the colonized transparent to the colonial gaze – whether through the surveyor’s census or the sniper’s rifle sights – while its own operations of power remain opaque, hidden behind walls of secrecy and non-accountability.

“We are not here to be examined by the Indians. We are here to examine the Indians,” as the chairman of the 1912 McKenna-McBride Commission on the “Indian land question” in BC proclaimed, in refusing to respond to Indigenous nations’ questions about their impending dispossession at the hands of the Canadian state.

The assertion of a unilateral “right to look” is perhaps most graphically and literally illustrated in the Indian “security” forces’ mass blinding of civilians by pellet gun shots in Kashmir, and in the “souvenir” photos posted by Israeli soldiers on Facebook of blindfolded Palestinians detained, tormented, and degraded in their own homes.

The purpose of colonial “seeing” is not accuracy, but assertion of mastery; not to faithfully represent reality, but to remake it in its desired image.

Israel boasts that it can precisely target even a single Palestinian in a wheelchair, yet “mistakenly” wipes out entire families, homes, schools, hospitals, journalists, and children playing on the beach; with the ensuing “investigations” almost invariably letting the perpetrators off the hook.

India has placed Kashmir under the glare of omnipresent surveillance; yet “grounds of detention [in Indian-occupied Kashmir] ... exhibit routine factual errors and oversights,” legal scholars Shrimoyee Nandini Ghosh and Haley Duschinski observe. For instance, journalist Sajar Gul, who reported on police demolitions of Kashmiri homes, has been charged with “rioting” at a protest despite having been 40 kilometers away from the alleged scene of the “crime” (according to his defence lawyer, as reported by UN Experts).

As Ghosh and Duschinski note of this phenomenon, “the errors relating to basic biographical details, dates, and events do not indicate the lack of surveillance or information gathering, but rather the absence of need for accuracy or accountability.”

“SETTLER BULLSHIT” IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

It is commonly said that “knowledge is power”; but under settler colonialism, the colonizers’ ignorance is power too. Israel’s killing of Shireen Abu Akleh highlights, yet again, how colonial ignorance is not simply a passive absence of knowledge or information, but is actively – coercively – produced and enforced.

Philosopher Charles Mills coined the concept of “white ignorance”: “an ignorance militant, aggressive ... indeed presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge.” And philosopher Harry Frankfurt theorized the phenomenon of “bullshit”: in contrast to lying, which is “responding to

the truth, and is to that extent respectful of it,” bullshit is characterized by an utter disregard for the truth altogether. The truth is not merely contradicted, but **made irrelevant**.

Settler colonial societies, then, are sustained by what one might call *settler bullshit*: the production of “knowledges” that enshrine the colonial project’s self-image as legitimate, enlightened, and just, even in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary.

In Israel’s response to Abu Akleh’s death, and in the media coverage of her killing in allied colonial states such as Canada and the US, several classic varieties of settler bullshit were on display:

- **Projection** – blaming the colonized for violence perpetrated by the colonizers themselves (“there is a good chance that armed Palestinians, firing wildly, brought about the tragic death of the journalist,” Israel’s Prime Minister Naftali Bennet **initially claimed**, against the testimony of eyewitnesses and **forensic analysis of video footage** indicating it was the IDF);
- **Obfuscation** – creating confusion about the facts to generate “plausible deniability” and thwart the attribution of responsibility (“according to an Israeli official, this ‘PR blitz’ has already influenced leading news organizations ... which initially reported that Abu Akleh had been killed by Israeli fire [but] were now reporting that the circumstances of her death are under investigation,” the Israeli newspaper **Haaretz disclosed**);
- **False equalization** – distorting exercises of colonial domination as a situation of “clashes” between “both sides”;
- **Mystification** – dismissing incidents as the result of mysterious “accidents” or “technological failures” beyond the colonial power’s control (“**citing** an unnamed Israeli official, Haaretz said the soldier [suspected of shooting Abu Akleh], despite his rifle having a telescopic lens, did not see Abu Akleh”);
- **Justification** – rationalizing colonial violence as warranted by the inherently violent nature of the colonized (Abu Akleh was “filming and working for a media outlet amidst armed Palestinians. They’re armed with cameras, if you’ll permit me to say so,” **in the words** of Israeli military spokesperson Ran Kochav);
- **Dissociation** – representing individual outrages as “aberrations” or “tragedies” **disconnected** from the colonial structure as a whole (the New York Times’ headline, for instance, announced that Abu Akleh had “died at 51,” without mentioning that this was due to her having been shot by an Israeli soldier);
- **Self-sanctification** – portraying colonial violence as benevolence (“**Israeli police** insisted Saturday they only charged into the funeral procession of slain American Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh because her coffin was being stolen by a violent [Palestinian] mob”);
- **Inversion** – depicting Indigenous responses to violence as the source of violence, and the colonizers as the ultimate victims (“**this inflammatory** rhetoric [condemning Israel for murdering Abu Akleh] is intended to ignite rage against Israel,” and “unlike other countries, Israel doesn’t ever get to make mistakes or even be given the chance to show that it was innocent,” op-eds in the Jerusalem Post bemoaned, while “the Palestinian Authority’s offensive use of slain journalist for anti-Israel propaganda” was **denounced** in Canada’s *National Post*);
- **Investigation** – **defusing** calls for accountability and justice with potemkin state processes, in which the conclusion of self-exoneration is practically pre-ordained. Indeed, Israel **announced** on Thursday that it will not be pursuing any further criminal proceedings regarding Abu Akleh’s death.

REMEMBERING SHIREEN ABU AKLEH

In this case, as in others, the cover-up in fact further reveals the crime.

Colonial regimes' erasure of evidence is evidence of genocidal erasure. The blank spaces on maps showing where **ethnically cleansed and destroyed Palestinian villages** or **razed Uyghur historical and holy sites** once used to be; the unmarked graves concealing the bodies of the "disappeared," from Tk'emlups to **Kashmir**; the silenced voices of critical journalists, whether targeted by the covert violence of censorship and secret detention or the overt violence of a bullet to the head – all testify powerfully to the atrocities intrinsic to settler colonial states, as do the living voices of the colonized.

In Arabic, the word for one killed in the struggle (*shaheed*) and the word for witness (*shaahid*) are derived from the same root. For Shireen Abu Akleh, killed while bearing witness – may we continue the anti-colonial struggle for truth, justice, love, and peace, inspired by her brave model and memory.

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