

# Settler Moves to Indigeneity: From Canada to Israel

by Megan Scribe

**THE WEEK** leading up to CBC's Fifth Estate documentary investigating Buffy Sainte Marie's claims to Indigeneity was tense with anticipatory grief, anger, and anxiety. Our conversations were dominated by what might be revealed about the internationally recognized singer and beloved community member.

Another line of discourse, focused on the timing. It seemed like a convenient distraction from Israel's total siege and unrelenting bombardment of Gaza since the Hamas surprise attack on October 7.

There isn't much to laugh about these days, but I did chuckle at Darcy Lindberg's X (formerly Twitter) thread baiting users with the caption: "My thoughts on Buffy, a thread" only to find: "The state of Israel is undertaking genocidal actions right now to Palestinians, and we can't look away. If there are shreds of humanity in nation states, they would be calling for a ceasefire and a path to end the occupation."<sup>1</sup>

**Lindberg continued: "this isn't flippant towards the shock, anger, etc., from the CBC story, or a measuring of griefs. But sometimes a forest is on fire while a garden needs tending, while a loved one needs nurturing."**

This is a call for a social triage system, of sorts, to establish the urgency of needs and required care. To this, I'm inclined to believe that bodily threats constitute an emergency requiring immediate attention. This is not to suggest that the matter of ethnic fraud is not important.

Race-shifting belongs to an ecosystem of settler colonial violence present in both the Canadian and Israeli context. It is possible to bring our most urgent attention to mounting deaths while examining the implications of ethnic fraud.

The questions raised about the veracity of Buffy's claims to Indigeneity are not mere distractions, but direct us toward a crucial dimension of settler colonialism in both the Canadian and Israeli context. Sustained solidarity with Palestine requires critical engagement with Israel's military occupation, as well as the settler nation's moves to Indigeneity in order to lay claim to the land.

## Colonial Governance: 'planting a new people'

But comparing the two cases is difficult. There are considerations of geographic context, distinct histories, and social characteristics of respective populations. Nevertheless, there are similarities in the concealed colonial dimensions and dynamics and existing connections in the two settler contexts.

The establishment of the state of Israel can in large part be attributed to Zionism, a nationalist movement that emerged in the nineteenth century to establish a Jewish homeland. According to Noura Erakat, Palestinian human rights lawyer and professor, this objective first required Zionists to transform Judaism into a unified political community and, second, "obtain from a colonial power a territory to settle."<sup>2</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, Erakat observes, colonial governance had not yet been discredited and "Zionists sought to collude with, rather than resist, colonial domination in order to establish a Jewish state."<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, there are many examples of Zionists freely drawing on colonial discourse to justify and strategize the establishment of the state of Israel.

Palestinian scholar, Steven Salaita shares the words of David Ben-Gurion who is considered the father of Israel, “Look what the Americans did, they took this land that was filled with savages and filled with swamps and they displaced the savages and drained the swamps and they ended up building this great civilization and that’s what we’re trying to do.”<sup>4</sup> Ben-Gurion also stated in 1947, “we adopt the system of aggressive defense; with every Arab attack we must respond with a decisive blow: the destruction of the place or the expulsion of the residents along with the seizure of the place.”<sup>5</sup>

The first president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann stated that Palestinians, “are in the country, and have been there for ages. We are the newcomers and have to become part and parcel of the country. We are planting a new people in the country.”<sup>6</sup>

## The Post-Colonial Pivot

With the post-colonial movement in the mid-twentieth century came the decline of overt colonial rhetoric. This shift coupled with growing Indigenous socio-political movements has prompted settler societies to develop new colonial tactics.

This brings us back to Buffy Sainte Marie and race-shifting.

‘Playing Indian’ is a settler tradition older than both Canada and the United States.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, settlers have also begun appropriating Indigeneity as an identity to inhabit on a full-time basis. Israel and Canada both rely on a colonial strategy that I’m calling the settler move to Indigeneity.<sup>8</sup> The settler move to Indigeneity describes systemic ethnic fraud in late stage settler colonialism.

**Ethnic fraud is the fullest extension of settler colonial dispossession. After disappearing, dominating, and dispossessing Indigenous peoples, the settler becomes the Native.**

In Canada, Indigenous calls for justice and restitution compel Canadians to reflect on their role in colonization. This is deeply uncomfortable and drives a faux Indigenization among those seeking to evade responsibility for wrong-doing and ‘legitimately’ claim their place as the rightful owners of the land.

Meanwhile, the Zionist move to Indigeneity seeks to maintain sole ownership over contested land to the point of erasing Palestinian presence altogether. Take for instance the popular Zionist phrase, “a land without a people for a people without a land.”

In the attempt to claim the rightful Indigeneity, Zionism also erases the presence of Jewish people already living in historic Palestine and other parts of the Middle East. This goes back to Erakat’s point that Zionism constructs Judaism as a unified polity for the purposes of establishing a pseudo-Indigenous nation-state. It draws on imperialist logics of possession and ownership and narrow interpretations of Indigeneity in religious text on the Promised Land.

In both cases, moving to Indigeneity is a strategy to legitimize colonization.

## First Nation-Israel Friendship Ties

While distinct in so many ways, these moves to Indigeneity in Canada and Israel have actually come together. In particular, Zionist moves to Indigeneity have involved strategic alliances with First Nations people in Canada.

In 2006, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) participated in a large mission to Israel, ostensibly to learn about Israeli culture and languages.

Co-chaired by Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) National President Ed Morgan and AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine, the six day tour brought seventeen First Nations leaders on an all-expense paid trip to Israel. The CJC-funded trip estimated to cost a total of \$72,000 took place from February 17 to 22, 2006.<sup>9</sup>

The itinerary planned for visits to sites of historical, religious, and cultural significance, but the subtext was sovereignty, governance, and international diplomatic relations.

Phil Fontaine is reported to have shared with then-President Moshe Katsav, “We see what you have accomplished. It is a lesson for us. We strive for identity and we want to reclaim our land – not all of Canada, but the land that we need to survive and thrive.”<sup>10</sup> In response Katsav claimed heritage was central to the creation of the State of Israel, but that the nation-state continues to face threats from Iran and Hamas.<sup>11</sup> Here, Katsav failed to acknowledge Israel’s militarized suppression of the Second Intifada and Palestine’s previous resistance efforts.<sup>12</sup>

This was not lost on activists who were paying attention. In an open letter to Fontaine from forty-seven grassroots groups, they describe the trip as a ploy to conceal, “Israeli atrocities committed against the Palestinian people.”<sup>13</sup>

Fontaine responded to criticisms by saying that, “our interest is in building bridges, not turning groups away.”<sup>14</sup> Without responding to charges of Israeli occupation, ethnic cleansing, or genocide, Fontaine simply concluded, “Israel and the First Nations share a common interest and goal in rebuilding from inflicted harms and commemorating catastrophic pasts.”<sup>15</sup>

### Norway House Mission to Israel

More would go to Israel. Between 2012 to 2016, members of my community, Norway House Cree Nation, participated in three separate missions to Israel under the leadership of Ron Evans, former chief of Norway House Cree Nation and grand chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs.

Evans was inspired to organize the mission after his own trip to Israel in 2010. With the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg (JFW) organizing the itinerary, Norway House Cree Nation funded at least one of the missions through a series of fundraising activities<sup>16</sup>

The first 10-day mission trip, which included 30 young people and a band councillor, departed on April 29, 2012.<sup>17</sup>

Community Relations Director of the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg, Shelley Faintuch observed, “For most of the young people, and possibly all of them, this was the first time they had even been overseas.”<sup>18</sup>

Faintuch’s expression of charity inadvertently gestures toward the economically exploitative nature of these

missions, which requires First Nations young people to fundraise and ultimately contribute to a booming tourist industry. That same year was described as a ‘record year for incoming tourism.’<sup>20</sup>

There are layered enactments of settler colonialism in these types of trips.

While not explicitly Zionist, the aims of these trips were to build relationships between Israel and First Nations to better concretize Zionist claims to Indigeneity. Like the 2006 AFN trip, the socio-political context is evacuated. When presenting First Nations people the opportunity to travel to one of the holiest sites in the world, Zionist organizers exploit the systemic Christian indoctrination of First Nations as part of state-funded, church-run Indian residential schools designed to assimilate and eliminate.<sup>21</sup>

**The language of Indigeneity and collective oppression is deployed to justify Israeli occupation and genocide of Palestinians. Israel’s creeping proximity to First Nations is absolutely a settler move to Indigeneity and an example of ethnic fraud across two settler colonial nation-states.**

### Crossroads

First Nations leaders have been quick to condemn Palestinian resistance and assert Israel’s right to defend itself with little consideration of the preceding 75 years of Israel-Palestinian relations.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, at the grassroots, a cross-section of Indigenous political leaders, activists, academics, artists, and community members have taken an opposing stance in support of the Palestinian struggle.

We understand violence, assimilation, and dispossession. We know what it’s like for others to claim our lands and our very identities. For our struggle in the Canadian context to have any integrity at all, we must call out the dynamics of settler colonialism in contexts elsewhere; to challenge moves to Indigeneity that threaten us all. How we show up for Palestine reveals a lot about how we show up for ourselves as Indigenous peoples.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Darcy Lindberg (@Darcy13Lindberg), “My thoughts on Buffy, a thread,” X, 27 October 2023, 1:49 PM, <https://twitter.com/Darcy13Lindberg/status/1717961750828781707>

<sup>2</sup>Erakat, Noura. 2019. *Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press. 27-28.

<sup>3</sup>Erakat, 28.

<sup>4</sup>Salaita, Steven. “On Colonization and Ethnic Cleansing in North America and Palestine.” In *Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders*, edited by J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, 264. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

<sup>5</sup>Flaphan, Simha. “The Palestinian Exodus of 1948.” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 16, no. 4 (1987), 3-26

<sup>6</sup>Litvinoff, Barnet, ed. 1983. *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Vol. 1. Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press. 486.

<sup>7</sup>Deloria, Philip J. 1998. *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>8</sup>This phrasing is inspired by Janet Mawhinney’s concept ‘settler moves to innocence’ found in Tuck, Eve and Yang, K. Wayne. “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1, no. 1 (2012), 1-40.

<sup>9</sup>Sault Star, “Jewish Congress Paid for Fontaine Trip: Forty-Seven Grassroots Group Protest,” Sault Star, March 9, 2006, B4.

<sup>10</sup>Cashman, Greer Fay. 2016. “Canada’s Indigenous Groups Seek Ties with Israel.” *Jerusalem Post*. February 22. <https://www.jpost.com/israel/canada-indigenous-groups-seek-ties-with-israel-1409>

<sup>11</sup>Cashman, “Canada’s Indigenous Groups Seek Ties with Israel.”

<sup>12</sup>Adam, Ali. 2020. “Palestinian Intifada: How Israel Orchestrated a Bloody Takeover.” *Al Jazeera*. September 28. <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/28/palestinian-intifada-20-years-later-israeli-occupation-continues&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1699916363620809&usg=AOvVaw2g8vSR1qf4zab2TiBk0psy>

<sup>13</sup>Sault Star, “Jewish Congress Paid for Fontaine Trip: Forty-Seven Grassroots Group Protest,” B4.

<sup>14</sup>Lungen, Paul. 2006. “Native Groups Rejects Criticism of Trip.” *Canadian Jewish News*. March 16. <http://ezproxy.lib.torontomu.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/native-groups-rejects-criticism-trip/docview/351402093/se-2?accountid=13631>

<sup>15</sup>Lungen, “Native Groups Rejects Criticism of Trip.”

<sup>16</sup>Love, Myron. 2016. “Aboriginal Trip to Focus on Israeli Innovation.” *Canadian Jewish News*. February 21. <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://thecjn.ca/uncategorized/aboriginal-trip-to-focus-on-israeli-innovation/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1699916363620104&usg=AOvVaw2T-w4HoHWdPlnERaoPP-9Zf>

<sup>17</sup>Hasten, Josh. 2013. “Natives of their Land.” *Jerusalem Post*. June 13. <https://www.jpost.com/magazine/features/natives-of-their-land-316399>

<sup>18</sup>Love, Myron. 2012. “Aboriginal Leader Looks to Israel as Role Model.” *Canadian Jewish News*. May 18. <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://thecjn.ca/news/canada/aboriginal-leader-looks-israel-role-model/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1699916363620388&usg=AOvVaw05q9WrD3TVW3VsOkoERG72>

<sup>19</sup>This is further compounded by charges of financial mismanagement by Evans. See: Blackburn, Mark. 2013. “Former Manitoba Grand Chief Linked to Draining of Education Fund.” *APTN News*. June 19. <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/former-manitoba-grand-chief-linked-to-draining-of-education-fund/>

<sup>20</sup>Ministry of Tourism. (2012). 2012 - A Record Year for Tourism. Embassy of Israel in Croatia. Israel: Ministry of Tourism. <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://embassies.gov.il/zagreb/NewsAndEvents/Pages/2012-%25E2%2580%2593-A-Record-Year-for-Incoming-Tourism-.aspx&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1699916363622994&usg=AOvVaw1tXu-6caQ4h3-cFc-3c5LRs>

<sup>21</sup>Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Ottawa: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://nctr.ca/about/history-of-the-trc/trc-website/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1699916363624490&usg=AOvVaw0AQGxnuQiM1D5tiRhhOapb>

<sup>22</sup>Hopper, Tristin. 2023. “First Reading: The Indigenous Rejection of Massacres as ‘Decolonization.’” *National Post*. October 25. [https://www.google.com/url?q=https://nationalpost.com/opinion/first-reading-the-indigenous-rejection-of-massacres-as-decolonialization&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1699916363624955&usg=AOvVaw1Crfl1\\_\\_b6gtpWW-TtKR](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://nationalpost.com/opinion/first-reading-the-indigenous-rejection-of-massacres-as-decolonialization&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1699916363624955&usg=AOvVaw1Crfl1__b6gtpWW-TtKR)

<sup>23</sup>See IndigenousScholarsStatement. (@Indigenous1948), <https://twitter.com/Indigenous1948> and Indigenous Solidarity with Palestine, <https://therednation.org/statement-of-indigenous-solidarity-with-palestine/#:~:text=We%20see%20and%20feel%20the,to%20resist%20colonialism%20and%20genocide.>

## CITATION

Scribe, Megan. “Settler Moves to Indigeneity: From Canada to Israel”. *Yellowhead Institute*. 14 November 2023. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2023/11/14/settler-moves-to-indigeneity-canada-israel/>