

FOR AN AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE

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As I write, it is six months since Refaat Alareer, Professor of English at the Islamic University in Gaza, was killed by an Israeli airstrike on December 6, 2023, that also killed his brother, sister, and four young nieces when their home in the al-Daraj area of Gaza City was destroyed. The recordable death toll from Israel's genocidal campaign that, in the wake of Hamas's Operation Al Aqsa Flood on October 7, massively amplified the sporadic warfare that Israel has inflicted on the Gaza Strip since 2006, exceeds 36,500; over 85% of Gaza's population has been displaced and forced to seek refuge in Rafah in the ever-shrinking south of Gaza, where none are safe from Israeli bombardment and shelling, and where a major offensive has lately been launched; over 70% of Gaza's built structures have been destroyed, and the population, denied adequate access to water, food, medical supplies, shelter, and sanitation by Israel's criminal blockade, faces death by starvation and disease. Under such conditions, it may seem misplaced to single out for remembrance and mourning the life and the death of one individual. And yet those who do so are not wrong: They insist on the individual value of Palestinian lives that are so often reduced to mass statistics, and recognize the insidious colonial intent that Alareer's assassination symbolizes and encapsulates.

Among the structures demolished in Israel's relentless assault, in addition to the hospitals that have been systematically and notoriously targeted, have been schools, cultural centers, and universities, including the Islamic University where Alareer taught. Not a single Gazan university remains standing, and by January 2024 alone, many of Gaza's writers and teachers had been detained, injured, or killed, including at least 221 teachers.¹ Israel's colonial war does not, and does not intend to spare from annihilation Gaza's cultural life, any more than its civil infrastructure or its civilian population, which is being devastated by bombs or driven out by a "voluntary migration" coerced by those same bombs. Such a sustained and militarily incomprehensible assault on Gaza's cultural life is a no less intrinsic dimension of the settler-colonial project than its military onslaught; it may even be the most significant and programmatic aspect of that onslaught.

Understood in the context of the long history of colonial practices globally, however, Israel's sustained and apparently gratuitous attacks on Palestinian cultural institutions and activists appear as a quite typical settler-colonial strategy aimed at the elimination not only of the immediate will to resist but, more importantly, of the cultural life of the colonized. The cultural life of any people embodies, if only by virtue of persistence, not only resistance but also alternative modes of living on in recalcitrance to colonialism. Palestinian cultural forms—like those of any colonized culture that has yet to be subdued or “eliminated”—constitute “a formidable ... archive of the historical fact and experience of ongoing dispossession and displacement, but also continued survival on the land.”² Israeli assaults on cultural artifacts and producers alike are not the incidental outcome of strikes whose intended targets are military forces or installations, as Israel so often pretends. The great Kenyan writer, anticolonial cultural activist, and theorist of decolonization, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, offers a critical context:

The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. ... It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish.³

Every colonizing power has sought to destroy indigenous cultural life in some manner, whether by negating the value and validity of that culture, by seeking to eliminate it through imposed schooling in the colonial language and the destruction of indigenous forms of education and cultural transmission, or through the assassination of its cultural figures. The same pattern persists in every colonial location, from Lord Macaulay's celebrated, and nonchalantly uninformed pronouncement in 1835 that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia,” to South Africa's effort to force Black students to study Afrikaans in segregated schools, which led to the Soweto

demonstrations in 1976 and the massacre that ensued, only to invigorate the national and global anti-apartheid movement.⁴ As Patrick Wolfe argued, the “elimination of the native” does not only take the form of genocide, but also deploys all the tools of assimilation and cultural destruction available.⁵

Zionism’s efforts to establish control over the biological and demographic reproduction of Palestinian life, which found their most absurd expression in the Israeli term for Palestinians who managed to return to their homes after the first phase of the Nakba in 1948, “present absentees,” goes hand in hand with the more openly violent assault on the institutions and practitioners of its cultural reproduction.⁶ Alongside Israel’s military Dahiya Doctrine,⁷ which, in open violation of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions, explicitly calls for the destruction of civilians and civilian infrastructure as a tactic aimed at liquidating support for resistance, runs a long history of appropriation and destruction of archives, from the theft of Palestinian libraries and other cultural artifacts, sequestered in Israeli libraries as Abandoned Property after 1948, to the looting of the research center of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut in 1982. This history now extends to the targeted bombing of schools, university buildings, and libraries in the serial Israeli assaults on Gaza down to the present war, in which every past record of cultural destruction has been far exceeded. The willful theft or destruction of cultural materials all over historic Palestine, including heritage sites and buildings, as well as historic Palestinian villages whose whole populations had been killed or expelled, demonstrates an ongoing and consistent pattern of attempts to erase the cultural continuity of Palestinian life.⁸

In 1970, the Guinean–Cape-Verdian anticolonial militant and theorist, Amílcar Cabral, offered an analysis that could be transferred from the Portuguese colonies of West Africa to Palestine now:

History teaches us that, in certain circumstances, it is very easy for the foreigner to impose his domination on a people. But it likewise teaches us that, whatever the material aspects of this domination, it can be maintained only by the permanent and organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned ... In fact, to take up arms to dominate a people is, above all, to take up arms to destroy, or at least to neutralize and to paralyze their cultural life. For as long as part of that people can have a cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation.⁹

Accordingly, “foreign domination, for its own security requires cultural oppression and the attempt at direct or indirect destruction of the essential elements of the culture of the dominated people.” [142] The two-thousand-ton bomb dropped on closely inhabited civilian areas finds its counterpart in the cultural bomb whose role is to eliminate the vitality of the colonized’s forms of life. As Cabral grasped, precisely to the extent that colonial domination’s “denying to the dominated people their own historical process, necessarily denies their cultural process,” their resistance must pass by way of cultural struggle: “national liberation is necessarily an *act of culture*.” [143] It is so because, as Cabral understood, the cultural struggle in effect, though its own creativity and transformative energy, returns their history to the people: It restores to them the knowledge of their past, in all its contradictions and defeats as well as in its continuities and resources; it restores to them their historical agency as shapers of their possibilities and not as victims of what Frantz Fanon perceived as a colonial culture that had become paralyzed or fixed in “immobility.”¹⁰

What have these urgent contemporary considerations and the recall of past anti-colonial formulations to do with the unfolding of the philosophical questions that inform our thinking about aesthetics? We should not forget that the emergence of a fully elaborated philosophical aesthetics coincides with the rise of European colonialism to global dominance and that its post-war crisis is intimately related to the challenge of decolonization to Western models of civilizational and cultural supremacy. In my recent book, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, I argued that since the late eighteenth century, the aesthetic, in which humanism has found the reserves of freedom and a non-coercive relation to the world, is a racial regime.¹¹ I contended that the constitutive and reproductive effects of this racial aesthetic regime have been all too consequentially neglected by race-critical thought. That neglect, I argued, comes at the expense of our comprehending how a racial distribution of the human saturates modernity precisely in and through the languages of subjecthood, autonomy, freedom, and representation that found their most influential articulation precisely in the sphere that seemed most removed from social and political engagements, that of aesthetic theory.

Let me briefly unfold those terms. In the first instance, the aesthetic produces the possibility of a human subject emancipated from any form of outer determination, as the subject that, in Kant’s and

Schiller's terms, enjoys "the free play of the faculties" and who judges free from any specific particularities or properties. This subject is the universal subject of freedom, representative of, or capable of standing in the place of *all* subjects in general. In the second place, this autonomous, freely judging subject is differentially set over against the unfree subject, whom Kant, in both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*, designates the "pathological" or *leidende* subject of necessity. This pathological subject is subordinated or subjected to outer and inner nature, to need, fear and desire, the subject of heteronomy rather than freedom. Since this subject appears as the not-yet-human, always lodged at the threshold of development or cultivation, the aesthetic establishes a border or bar that continually separates civil human subjects from subjected humans. Kant's constantly racialized examples of such "vestibular" humans, such as the Iroquois or Carib of section 41 of the *Critique of Judgment*, remain subject to the inner drive of the subject that is realized in the gratification of the senses at the threshold of the civilizing process, while such afflictions of a natural state of necessity as fear, hunger, want, and so forth leave the subject in a constant state of heteronomy.¹² This constitutive embeddedness in the material, its subjection to nature, bars the racial subject from full entry into humanity. Kant's dichotomy here is thus not merely empirical: In the terms of his lectures in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, the critical writings separate man as a *physiological* being subject to his material nature from "what *man* as a free agent makes, or can and should make, of himself."¹³ By extending what is always a categorical element of any human—our physiological being—into a descriptive identification of whole classes of not-yet-fully human peoples, this racial regime of aesthetics constitutes the distinction between the autonomous subject of aesthetic judgment and the racialized subject of heteronomy.

This developmental schema, only sketched in the *Third Critique*, enabled Friedrich Schiller's elaboration of the aesthetic in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* as a fundamentally pedagogical project.¹⁴ For Schiller, the aesthetic instantiates the possibility of the subject's non-coercive or "liberal" relation to its objects, furnishing what he terms "the archetype of the human" whose canonical form is found to be the State. That archetype, which corresponds to Kant's universal Subject, is no more than a potentiality in each individual and is only gradually realized through an aesthetic pedagogy that defers the institution of the state of freedom that the aesthetic state anticipates. The process of aesthetic formation through which

each individual must pass in order to be prepared for the ultimate state of freedom corresponds to the universal history of humanity. This history is predicated, as it is in Kant, on a *typological* schema of human development, but is less anecdotal, and exceeds the still apparently contingent ascription of racial judgement by offering a systematic developmental history of humanity's evolution from the savage, subjected to the state of necessity, through barbarian despotism, or the state of might or force, to civilization and the state of rights. The aesthetic state prefigures, though it cannot realize, the possibility of an ultimate state of freedom. Obviously, this schematic history maps onto an equally ideal history of political state formation that equally leads from the state of necessity to the state of force to the state of freedom.

The racialized, on the other hand, remain as undeveloped particulars, subject to the state of nature and necessity—the *Notstaat*—of natural subjection that Denise da Silva has so brilliantly theorized in her essay “No-Bodies.”¹⁵ This should lead us to recognize that the spectrum of distinctions among humans elaborated through this dichotomy in aesthetic and therefore human capacity is not of merely cultural or, as in common parlance, “aesthetic” consequence. Kant's famous prescription in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that no person should ever be regarded as a means, but only as an “end in himself,” by no means stands as a proscription of enslavement or, for our own time, the use of torture or the bombardment of civilians. On the contrary, that proscription is grounded in the distinction between the autonomous subject, representative of humanity, and the pathological subject of heteronomy, always already subjected to force. The dehumanization or, as Aimé Césaire put it, “thingification”¹⁶ of the colonized and the racialized, continues to take the form of this distinction between free or sovereign subjects and those denied humanity and therefore laid bare before the exercise of unremitting force.

Israel's successive assaults on Gaza, culminating in its currently ongoing genocidal campaign, its extrajudicial murder and maiming of unarmed protesters, and its policy of destroying civilian infrastructure in the spurious name of a sovereign state's right to self-defense, all with the fullest range of lethal technology civilization has proven capable of developing, is only the latest instance of a division of the world among the categorically human and those whose final ends can be ignored. As Benjamin Netanyahu declared at the very outset of the war, in a statement that expressed long-standing Israeli

attitudes, it is drawing “a line between civilization and barbarism.”¹⁷ This is a pattern we have seen unfolding from Afghanistan to Guantanamo, from Iraq to Yemen, and along the US–Mexico border. The formal distinctions that structure Kant’s inaugural aesthetic philosophy play out with all-too-material effect in the New World Order of our present, and form the global background to whatever claims to freedom and critical judgement the aesthetic subject may make. Kant’s legalistic “domains” or “jurisdictions” of the human faculties find their material, geographical counterparts in the division of the world and its populations into the human and the less than human, much as the international state system divides between what are effectively Westphalian states whose sovereignty is absolute, and the other states whose sovereignty is always provisional.

This universal anthropology distributes the gradations of humanity along the axis that separates necessity from freedom according to the development of a capacity for reflective judgment that definitively produces the subject as human. Aesthetics furnishes, then, the discourse that knits together the political concept of human freedom attained through the production of one’s own representative autonomy with a racialized distribution of the human within which certain subjects “fall short” of humanity precisely insofar as they are deemed not yet capable of freedom or self-determination. In this racial distribution, a merely biological description of racial difference is displaced by one that is cultural, arrayed along the axis that separates necessity from freedom. “In its ‘fundamental but unavowed geopolitical differentiation’, a hierarchical order reasons ‘a racist universalism, which thus calls for us to rethink the concept of universality.’”¹⁸

But what if we try to rethink the possibilities of aesthetic work—of cultural production as of reflection upon what is produced—from the place of those that Kant dismissed as the pathological subjects, a rethinking that would be in line with the initial understanding of aesthetics as the science not of judgment but of pleasure and pain, that is, of affectability? Rather than understanding the aesthetic in the Schillerian tradition as designating the space of compensatory freedoms in a world of domination or of the reconciliation and harmonization of the faculties of the whole man [sic] in face of the division of labor, we might embrace an understanding of the artwork and of cultural life in general as emerging from the wounded, suffering, desiring, hungering and, indeed, joyful body of the dominated. This would inevitably be, given the history of aesthetic judgment

and its racial regime, an “aesthetics of resistance,” to borrow a phrase from the title of Peter Weiss’s great historical novel.

But for Weiss, the aesthetics of resistance is still bound up with the question of representation in a literal sense, with “the impossibility of doing justice to other people’s experience,” and accordingly with the problem of whether “the sufferings of others could truly be felt by anybody else.”¹⁹ Another aesthetics of resistance predicated on the subject position of the affectable and the non-free understands the resistance of the material and corporeal dimensions of cultural practice as a fundamental refusal of the universalizing logic of aesthetic discourse that is grounded in the reflection on form. As Kant put it, the universality of aesthetic judgment is grounded in the formalism that stands off from the material “so far as possible” and is thus achieved:

by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else, as the result of a mere abstraction from the limitations which contingently affect our own estimate. This, in turn, is effected by so far as possible letting go of the element of matter, i.e., sensation, in our general state of representative activity, and confining attention to the formal peculiarities of our representation or general state of representative activity.²⁰

But the material moment in the artwork and the recalcitrant cultural practices of the colonized alike resist, and persist against, the formalization of the aesthetic: Projected as the antithesis or negation of universality and the abstract subjecthood that subtends it, the so-called pathological subject returns from the sites of domination a resistance that is lodged in the very cultural formations that all the forces of colonialism yearn to annihilate. From this space, we can expect no formal, abstract or universalist object of contemplation to emerge. Doubtless the modernist aesthetics that descends from the Kantian and Schillerian tradition is obliged, as Adorno asserted, to acknowledge in the “radically darkened art” of the times the absorption into the work of the conditions of unfreedom and suffering that are reflected in its damaged forms. But this still only registers [stet] damage inflicted upon the autonomous subject of art and the aesthetic, even as monopoly and neoliberal capital successively reveal the real form of the universal to be the equivalence of the commodity form and the domination of its circulation.²¹ As Hanan Toukan has suggested, even the very form of the incorporation of the Palestinian culture into the global art market is one

dimension of the post-Oslo extension of the possibility of “the right of Palestinians to be part of the universal,” and not a recognition of a fundamental resistance to the terms of that civilizing process.²²

For such an absorption into the global cultural institutions of colonial capitalist culture would constitute a form of recognition that is tantamount to elimination. As against representing what Fanon called “a minor term” in the dialectics of universality, out of the very reduction of the subjugated to their thingliness their difference speaks as an irreducible remainder that cannot be subsumed.²³ For now, I pause with the words of Gazan poet Mosab Abu Toha, writing even before the current Zionist assault destroyed his family home once again:

I am a shadow of something
At best,
I am a thing that
does not really
exist.
I am weightless,
a speck of time
in Gaza.
But I will remain
where I am.²⁴

- 1 “According to the Ministry of Education in Gaza, between 7 October 2023 and 2 January 2024, 4,119 students and 221 teachers were killed, while 7,536 students and 703 teachers injured across the Gaza Strip.” <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-94#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Ministry%20of%20Education%20in%20Gaza%2C%20between%207,injured%20across%20the%20Gaza%20Strip.> Accessed June 7, 2024.
- 2 Hanan Toukan, *The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 199. On “living on” in the colonial context, see David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8–9 and passim.
- 3 Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986), 3.
- 4 See Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, “Indian Education (Minute of the 2nd of February, 1835)” in *Prose and Poetry*, ed. G.M. Young. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 722: “I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education.” A detailed account of the Soweto Uprising and its causes may be found in “The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising,” in *South African History Online: A People’s History*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising>. Accessed June 7, 2024.
- 5 Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 387–8.
- 6 Edward Said offered a scathing account of this designation of the original inhabitants of what was to become the state of Israel as “a legal fiction of Kafkaesque subtlety,” in “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims,” reprinted in *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 105.
- 7 On the Dahiya Doctrine, see Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred-Years War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), 225. The Dahiya Doctrine was articulated in 2006 by Major General Gadi Eisenkot, now a leading member of Israel’s war cabinet.
- 8 Striking examples of such destruction during Israel’s current war on Gaza would be the Omari Mosque and the Church of Saint Porphyrius, both bombed under the pretext of “pursuing Hamas.” See “Images show major damage to Gaza’s oldest mosque,” *BBC* online, 8 December, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67664853>; and Chloe Veltman, “More than 100 Gaza heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed by Israeli attacks,” *NPR* online, December 3, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/03/1216200754/gaza-heritage-sites-destroyed-israel>. Both accessed June 7, 2024.
- 9 Amílcar Cabral, “National Culture,” in *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 140. It is worth noting in the current context that Cabral’s essay was originally delivered as a speech in honor of a literature professor, Dr. Eduardo Mondlane, president of the Mozambican liberation movement, FRELIMO, “who in a cowardly way was assassinated on 3 February 1969, in Dar-es-Salaam by the Portuguese colonialists and their allies” (p. 138). Cabral concludes by remarking that “If Portuguese colonialism and imperialist agents can still with impunity murder a man like Dr. Eduardo Mondlane, it is because something putrid continues to decay in the heart of mankind: *imperialist domination*. It is because men of good will, defenders of the culture of peoples, have not yet accomplished their duty over the planet” (p. 154). The Israeli assassination of Dr. Refaat Alareer, with complete impunity, means that we still have that task to accomplish.
- 10 Frantz Fanon, “Concerning Violence,” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1981), 51.
- 11 David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). My summary of the text in what follows draws in good part on my essay, *Repræsentationens endeligt og kunstkritikkens almene subjekt*, trans. Marie Louise Krogh (Copenhagen: Kunsten som Forum, 2024).
- 12 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. with analytical indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982): §41, 155–156.
- 13 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974): 3.
- 14 I have discussed Schiller’s elaboration of the pedagogical logic implicit in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* in “Kant’s Examples,” *Representations* 28 (Autumn 1989): 34–54.
- 15 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “No Bodies,” *Griffith Law Review* 18, no. 2 (2009): 213–36.
- 16 On “thingification,” see Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.
- 17 Benjamin Netanyahu, “The Battle of Civilization,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 31, 2023, A15.
- 18 Iain Chambers, “Losing Kant in Kassel,” *estetica. studi e ricerche* 13, no. 2 (2023): 276, citing Marie Louise Krogh, “Tutelage or Assimilation? Kant on the Educability of the Human Races,” *Radical Philosophy* 2.13 (2022): 46; 45.

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- 19 Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance: A Novel*, Volume 1, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 305–306.
- 20 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 151.
- 21 See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 40–41. Fumi Okiji has persuasively identified Adorno's inability to rethink his aesthetic judgment from the perspective of the traditions of the oppressed in relation to his essays on jazz. See *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), Chapter 2 and passim.
- 22 Toukan, *The Politics of Art*, 211, citing Yazid Anani.
- 23 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markham (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 138. For further reflections on the racialized “human thing” and on thingly resistance, see David Lloyd, “The Racial Thing: On Appropriation, Black Studies, and Thingliness,” *Texte zur Kunst* 117 (March 2020): 74–95.
- 24 Mosab Abu Toha, “Displaced. In Memory of Edward Said,” in *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear: Poems from Gaza* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2022), 71.