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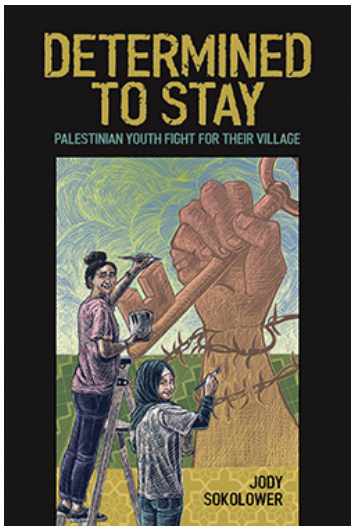

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A Unit Comparing Palestine to the Americas

By Marcy Newman

My last year teaching in Boise, Idaho, my Latin@ students were worried about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) night raids into their homes and communities. Their parents were agricultural and dairy workers who had traveled north for work, often without documents. They felt unsafe and insecure.

Photo credit: Pablo Pitcher DeProto

One of my students, who was born in the United States but whose parents were not, found herself suddenly head of household when her parents were rounded up one evening at their home, close to the dairy factory where they worked. My student and her younger siblings had guns pointed at them during the raid. Their parents were moved to a detention facility in Tacoma, Washington, where they awaited their eventual fate: deportation. My student shared her family's story with class, including the

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context: Her family was in Idaho after being forced to leave their land in Mexico as subsidized American corn flooded the Mexican marketplace at prices that undercut locally grown crops.

No matter what we talked about in class, ICE's intrusion into their lives was on my students' minds. Although we were close to the US border with Canada, one of the subjects that most interested my students was the separation wall along the US-Mexico border. From their standpoint, making this border visibly, palpably permanent did not mean that all of a sudden a border was defined; rather, it meant that loved ones who were deported would face even greater challenges returning. The fact that George W. Bush's Secure Fence Act of 2006 came two years after the International Court of Justice ruled Israel's "security wall" in Palestine illegal was not lost on my students. Like the Palestinians, they did not cross a border; the border crossed them. Because both walls separate people from their families, and from their ancestral and agricultural lands, I decided to use these walls to introduce my students to Palestine and to the many similarities between these two geopolitical situations.

That determination led to a unit comparing walls in Palestine and in the United States that I have now taught in many contexts. To begin, I ask my students what questions they have about borders. Their answers help me frame the rest of the unit:

- What does it mean to be Indigenous?
- What does it mean to be an immigrant or a migrant?
- What are the different ways someone becomes a member of a nation?
- What does it mean to leave one's country because you need to earn a living?
- How do borders get created and changed?

Their concerns remind us that the issues facing Palestinians in 1948 or First Nations people and Mexicans in 1848 remain with us today.

Words Change, Maps Change

I start with an activity about some of the terms we will be using. I break my students into four different groups and hand each group a set of words:

- border/partition/separation
- migration/immigration/displacement
- refugee/exile/undocumented
- fence/wall/border

I tell the students they may either focus on individual words or group them together. I tell each group to come up with their own definitions of their words without consulting a dictionary. I want them to have a sense of their own understandings and to think about the meaning of the words in common usage. When they have their own definitions, I hand out photocopies from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and ask students to compare their definitions with the etymological root of the words. Then as a class, we discuss the meanings and the way words and their meanings evolve over time. Finally, I ask them to comment on how these words do or do not affect their lives. Through this process students come up with a working definition of each word that we will use throughout the term. Beginning with this exercise helps students to understand that language is not fixed.

This exercise leads us into a geography lesson. As with the definitions lesson, I try to create a process that makes it clear that borders change over time. I begin by handing out two maps: one is photocopied from Peter Nabokov's *Native American Testimonies* and the other is Salman Abu Sitta's Nakba map (see resources). I project images of the maps in order to zoom in and out of the various locations that we discuss (I also place these on a class Wiki so students can access digital versions later). The first map is a borderless rendering of North America with the names of First Nations tribes that have historically inhabited particular regions. The second one is a map of historic Palestine highlighting the 531 villages that were destroyed during the *Nakba* (the Arabic word for catastrophe, this is the Palestinian name for the events of 1948 that resulted in the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their land).

I ask students, "What do you notice?" Inevitably they note that the only markings cutting through the respective territories are geographic features like rivers and the names of peoples and villages. This enables us to delve into questions they raised in the beginning of the unit about how nations get made by drawing lines through communities.

I ask students, “What do you think happened to the people who lived on these newly created borders?” Then I use an exercise I adapted from the Palestine Education Project in which a map is outlined on the floor with masking tape. I do this twice—once with a map of North America and once with Palestine. I do the North America exercise first. I I give each student a colored name tag that identifies them as part of a specific Indigenous culture, or as a colonist/settler from a specific country in Europe. The students representing Indigenous peoples stand inside the map outline, and the colonizers start outside. I take them through a chronology of major events in colonial history little by little. As I explain each date and event, I pull some students off of their land and have “colonist” students take their places. In the case of North America, I continually push students westward. As we move towards the end of the 19th century, there are fewer and fewer students representing the Indigenous population and more students standing in for settlers. Those final “Indigenous” students remaining on the map in small spaces get a small sense of what it might be like to be constantly pushed off one’s land.

Then I repeat the exercise, this time for Palestine. In this case, some “Palestinians” are first pushed out of their homes from inside what are now called the 1948 borders of Israel and into what has become the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Many others are pushed off the map entirely. The Palestine Education Project uses hula hoops to approximate the impact of Israeli settlements on East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank.

Then we process: What happened? How did it make you feel? What questions do you have? Does this remind you of anything in your own experience or that of your family?

At this point I introduce some reading assignments: Students read the first two chapters of *Our Roots Are Still Alive: The Story of the Palestinian People* (on Palestinian people’s ties to the land and early Zionist colonization) and selections from Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (on Columbus and Manifest Destiny). I ask students to share any questions they have about the reading. As necessary, I fill in gaps with additional historical context. Then I invite students to brainstorm elements that are common to both histories. From our brainstorming work, I take historical terms they are more familiar with, like Manifest Destiny, and ask how that idea can be applied to Palestine. In this way we

begin to link the two histories together by deepening our understanding of Manifest Destiny compared to the Zionist concept of the Promised Land, the ideology that led to the colonization of Palestine. By comparing these similar ideas, we can begin to see how a group of people's sense that they have a divine right to someone else's land works to displace the people who lived there originally. Our discussion inevitably leads us to the dates 1848, when the current U.S.-Mexico border was established, and 1948, when Palestinians were expelled from their land. This is a critical understanding for linking the roots of the problems to the present-day situation of the walls. I conclude this historical lesson with a return to the words we examined at the beginning of the unit to see if students' ideas about those words have changed at all. I continue to do this throughout the rest of the unit.

Whose Safety? Whose Security?

Now I'm ready to introduce the subject of the separation walls in Palestine and along the US-Mexico border. Before I get to the heart of the matter, I ask students to think about the meaning of two additional words: safety and security. I ask them:

- How do you make someone safe?
- How do you make a community feel secure?

I try to get students to think about this on a personal level, (e.g., how does a parent make a child feel safe?) and on a community level (e.g., how does a government make a group of people feel safe?).

Through this process we unearth motivations from love (parents) to control (governments). This is when my students' narratives of ICE raids link to the class material. I remind the students what both the US and Israeli governments state as their primary reason for their walls: to make their citizens safe and secure. I ask students:

What do you think about this? (My students in Idaho were near the Canadian border where no such wall exists)

What do the walls mean for families who live on both sides of the wall? Are they feeling more safe and secure as a result of the walls?

I project photographs of the two walls, as well as images of the people living on both sides. Then we watch two episodes of Al Jazeera's *Walls of Shame*, a documentary that includes 30-minute segments on each of these walls (Ireland and Spain/Morocco are the other two contexts in the series). When I am pressed for time, I assign *Walls of Shame* as homework and we discuss the film in class.

In addition to *Walls of Shame,* I use poetry, hip hop, and visual art to explore how these walls are represented and connected. We explore the album *Free the P,* which includes several raps illustrating the connections between Palestine and the United States, though not always specifically tied to the walls. This is one of the most successful texts I have used to illustrate the relationship between settler colonialism in the Americas and Palestine because students love the music and listen to it enough that the ideas begin to enter their consciousness in ways that no other assignment does.

I begin with a spoken-word poem on the album, "In America," by Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad, that begins:

> Right now you are standing on stolen land
> No matter where you are hearing this poem
> Below you is stolen land.

Hammad continues by naming various First Nations tribes without ever talking in detail about her own context. The images of stolen land historically and currently in the Americas stand as images that apply to any parallel colonial context. I ask students to connect the images and words of Hammad's poem to *Walls of Shame*. Then we look at graphic artist Melanie Cervantes' posters on Palestine, and watch a TED talk performance piece by Muslim Chicano poet Mark Gonzales in Ramallah. When I have additional time, I give students links to Hammad's poetry, Gonzales' performance poems, and historical posters archived at the Palestine Poster Project. I ask the students to compare the images and messages, and share those they find most powerful and why with the class. .

From Understanding to Activism

Then we begin work on the final project of the unit. Depending on the age group or learning outcome, there are a few ways to move forward, all of which work well at this juncture. The first is a traditional research project on the two walls so that students are able to discover commonalities, like the Israeli company Elbit that is responsible for construction of both walls. A chapter from Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* can be a starting point for older students to think more deeply about the historical and global strategies that underlie the walls. I use Klein's work to ask students to consider larger economic and political questions, including why Israel would be invested in building a wall in the United States. A second option is to ask students to analyze the International Court of Justice's 2004 ruling on the apartheid wall in Palestine and Bush's 2006 Secure Fence Act.

Finally, there are performative options that this topic feeds into nicely. The most recent time I taught this course, my students chose to create a street theatre performance. Once they began to understand that these walls and their own histories are tied together, they felt compelled to educate others. One thing that pushed them to make this choice was the refrain at the end of Hammad's poem: "start by saying something." Three groups of students created projects to perform outside, in the center of campus. (Although my students took on this idea as a kind of direct action, these same sorts of activities can be conducted inside the classroom, albeit with a more limited effect.)

The first performance was a scene near the US-Mexico border. My students divided themselves into characters who were crossing, paramilitary Minute Men, and ICE officials. They built a wall and acted out a scene in which some of them were caught and arrested and others were shot. Students involved passersby on campus by asking to see their identification cards. A second set of students erected an "Israeli security wall" nearby and enacted a similar scene not long afterwards, illustrating the similarity of the two walls and the methods used to arrest, detain, and deport people off land that belongs to them.

One of the most powerful scenes depicted by my students in their role play was of a Palestinian mother forced to give birth at a checkpoint. As had students learned, checkpoints are a feature of Palestinian life that reinforce the "security" apparatus of the

separation wall. There are many reports of Palestinian women forced to give birth to their children at checkpoints. My students imagined a militant response:

> **Palestinian Woman**: I need to go to the hospital. I am bleeding into my shoes! (*Wailing*).
>
> **Israeli Soldier**: Wait right there. You cannot go through now.
>
> **Palestinian Woman**: Please! I'm bleeding!
>
> **Israeli Soldier**: Okay, you can go, but only you. Lift your skirt and let me see if you have a bomb underneath.
>
> **Palestinian Woman**: But I need my daughter to come with me. (*Lifting up her skirt*) This is so humiliating.
>
> **Israeli Soldier**: No. Just you. Your daughter goes home. Now go before I change my mind!
>
> (*The child breaks away from the Israeli soldier. She runs to pick up a stone on the ground and launches it at the soldier and screams "free Palestine."*)
> (*Other people, encouraged by her determination and defiance pick up her chant and repeat it ten times.*)

The possibilities of teaching the relationship between the two walls and their historical contexts are limitless. Asking students to understand the reasons why a state would build such walls and the irony surrounding whose "security" is safeguarded quickly come to the surface through historical materials, legal documents, maps, films, and other cultural texts. The unit can easily be expanded to include other walls, including Iraq's Green Zone, prison walls, walls being built in New Orleans and Afghanistan, or even walls around subdivisions and gated communities.

My hope is that teaching about these walls opens up conversations that lead to activism on the ground and linking struggles. In the United States that can mean fighting Trump's anti-immigrant legislation and stepped up ICE raids. The Palestinian movement for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against the Israel occupation is another way for students to get involved. For teachers who have the freedom to discuss political action, students can explore the tactics being used. Regardless of

whether or not the activist options get articulated by the teacher, there will be students who will understand the injustice and who will search for ways to get involved.

Marcy Newman (marcynewman@gmail.com (mailto:marcynewman@gmail.com)) is a teacher, writer, and activist. She has taught in the Arab world, Ghana, and the United States at the university and high school level. She is the author of *The Politics of Teaching Palestine to Americans: Addressing Pedagogical Strategies*.

Resources

Salman Abu Sitta's Nakba map (http://www.plands.org/) and additional resources available here.

For maps illustrating Indigenous lands in the Americas see: Nabokov, Peter. ***Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492–2000.*** Penguin, 1999; and Wright, Ronald. ***Stolen Continents: 500 Years of Conquest and Resistance in the Americas.*** Mariner Books, 2005.

Additional maps illustrating historical changes available here. (https://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/)

For 9th graders and above: Peoples Press Palestine Book Project. ***Our Roots Are Still Alive: The Story of the Palestinian People*** (https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/our-roots-are-still-alive-the-story-of-the-palestinian-people-cover). Institute for Independent Social Journalism, 1977.

For high school readers: Stefoff, Rebecca, and Zinn, Howard. ***A Young People's History of the United States: Volumes 1 and II.*** Seven Stories Press, 2007.

For older readers: Zinn, Howard. ***A People's History of the United States.*** Harper Perennial, 2010; Zinn, Howard and Arnove, Anthony. ***Voices of a People's History of the United States***. Seven Stories Press, 2009; Acuña, Rudolfo. ***Occupied America: A History of Chicanos***. Prentice Hall, 2010.

Al-Jazeera. ***Walls of Shame.*** (http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/general/2007/11/200852518401148870 6.html)

Klein, Naomi. ***The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism***. Picador, 2008.

Melanie Cervantes' posters (https://www.palestineposterproject.org/special-collection/melanie-cervantes) about Palestine.

Mark Gonzales' Ramallah TED talk (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRt9nzgzm54) spoken word on walls. More of his work available here. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRt9nzgzm54)

Palestine Poster Project (http://www.palestineposterproject.org/) (including archive of history posters and curriculum).

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