The Politics of Earth Day: Gaza and the Genocide-Ecocide Nexus

T.J. Demos, History of Art and Visual Culture, UC Santa Cruz
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Transcript from the recording's auto-generated captions, lightly corrected for names and terms.

Hi everyone. I'm T.J. Demos and I teach in the History of Art and Visual Culture department here at UCSC, and I'm trained as an artist and someone who specializes in visual culture and politics and ecology. I also have a research interest in the Middle East and in Palestine. So this is something that I've, I've followed and written about and published on for for a while now, maybe about 20 years. So I would like to present today on Why Center Gaza on Earth Day as a partly like a research presentation, but also in the vein of like an activist engagement, which is slightly more political than a typical academic presentation. So I'm going to talk about this over about 20 minutes or in 20 minutes. So I want to start out just with some brief background on Earth Day, which has a really interesting and important political history, and there's a lot of complexity to it. It was never simply a consensual development.

There was some antagonism and political differences when Earth Day was kicked off in 1970. Here are a couple examples of of the kind of teachings and workshops that happen in the. During the time around the time of the first Earth Day. You see on the on the left. This is a an ad in the Michigan Daily newspaper that advertises a number of people who are speaking at this kickoff rally teach-in on the environment again, 1970, among them Senator Gaylord Nelson. He's the guy who really conceptualized and kicked off Earth Day and began the annual tradition. Other people like Barry Commoner, who's now a well-known environmentalist and who has written a lot, participated in this. The folk singer Gordon Lightfoot. Other people there was the cast of Hair, the musical Let the Sunshine In, speaking in this. And then at 12 noon, you see, there was a car trial. So that was part of the more activist dimension of this.

They actually put a car, an automobile, on trial for crimes against the Earth and found it guilty of pollution. Pollution was really at the center of Earth Day from the very beginning. On the right you see another example of this, this, this one at San Jose State in our region, where students and activists decided to to acquire a car and then bury it in their Survival Faire. And they did that, as you see. Here's a couple more details of those activities on the left. They're actually burying the car. So they bought a car and buried it. And on the right this was part of the sentence, the car that was put on trial, it was sentenced to destruction. And so there you see some a couple guys smashing the car with sledgehammers to enact the sentence, sentenced to destruction, 1970. But around the same time, there were people and activists and political writers and theorists and students and activists and professors who were objecting to this formation of a new kind of politics, a green politics, an Earth Day politics.

This is just one example, the Third World Liberation Front saying, you know, end your racist war. They were writing and acting and thinking about the war, the US war in, in Vietnam. And that was really in many ways at the center of other people's idea of what politics needed and should be about at this time. So the focus on on ecology, on environmentalism, on saving. The wilderness or, or

defending animals or fighting pollution was seen at the time, according to some, is a kind of soft politics, even as a withdrawal from real political convictions and activities. For instance, Ramparts magazine, which was exemplary of the New Left based in Menlo Park in the Bay area, published this, this, this magazine called this, this is their ecology special with with a photo of the Bank of America in San Diego on fire. This had been set alight by people doing direct action and opposing the bank. They were warning the editors of Ramparts were warning that Earth Day's what they call co-optive potential of ecology, was part of a growing environmentalism that they worried would displace anti-imperialist struggles.

And they said ecology will replace Vietnam as the major issue, cautioning against the what they saw as the pacification of political dissent. So what they wanted to focus on was instead, instead of the Survival Faire, and these people who were burying and destroying cars or attacking symbols of consumption, they wanted to focus on confronting the US war machine, confronting systemic racism and imperial capitalist violence as they wrote about it in their editorial. To this to this issue. Other groups were thinking along similar lines, thinking that ecology was a distraction, or a soft politics, or a way to mute a more forceful intervention in conditions of racial colonial capitalism and state violence. Including among them were the Black Panthers and their issue from. From around the same time as this, the early 70s, where you see a photograph from their newspaper, the Black Panther, you see a photograph of their headquarters in New York on fire.

It had been firebombed by likely the CIA. They were concerned that environmentalism ignored human and especially racial forms of inequality in its politics of privilege. There's a kind of ecology, ecological politics of privilege. What was needed instead, instead was not Earth Day, so-called interdependence, like multi-species interdependence, but rather for Huey Newton, one of the leaders of the Black Panthers. What was and someone who got his PhD at UC Santa Cruz, by the way. But what was needed was what he called revolutionary. A third world anti-imperialism to directly challenge capital. And it's what he called its reactionary distortion of the change of nature. That was in an essay called The Dialectics of Nature from 1974. On the on the newspaper. You can you can barely read the red all caps. Caption says, this is this fire that you're looking at this burning. The state violence enacted on the Black Panthers headquarters in New York.

This is but an aspect of the unfolding picture of American fascism. So with this in mind, I think it's crucial. And I've tried to develop this in my work, in my research, a methodological approach to ecology that avoids the kind of separateness of looking at nature on the one hand and say, anti-imperialist politics on the other hand. How can we bring all these different strands together within what we might call in ecology of entanglement or an intersectional ecology? I think that's really important today, and it sets up the premise of why we need to keep our eyes focused on ongoing warfare and militarism, if we're going to take seriously any kind of real environmentalist politics today, that means thinking about what's happening in Gaza, in the Middle East more broadly and what continues to be US military aggression and warfare in those areas. There's a number of different there's lots of research that's emerging that's focusing on this and making a similar argument.

For instance, the work of Forensic Architecture, a very important group in based in London that is going and attempting to investigate forms of state and corporate human rights violations and also environmental violations. So one member of this charity wrote this book that came out recently called Environmental Warfare in Gaza. Another one is the leader of that organization or the the the director

of Forensic Architecture, Eyal Weizman, whose recent book is called Ungrounded The Architecture of Genocide. He's investigating spatial politics, thinking about also human rights abuses and the environmental impacts. And then there's Andreas Malm, another important reference for me and his book that is titled, in a very blunt way, the destruction of Palestine is the destruction of the Earth. So I think if we're thinking about Earth Day politics like this is really what I would say is crucial to, to focus on.

So Palestine is a climate justice issue. It's a it's an issue that raises lots of different things. Certainly it's it's a site recently of genocide in Gaza, enormous human rights violations and war crimes. It's a long part of a long, complicated history. Right. It has to do with a long standing and ongoing settler colonialism. But this idea that Palestine is a climate justice issue is part of all of this. It's inextricably connected to all of it, I would argue, and I'm not alone. This is there's lots of people who see this and including people who are researching this prior to 2023 and the most recent, the this most recent aggression that Israel and the US supported Israeli Defense Forces have enacted in Gaza. So this is a piece that appeared in Al Jazeera in 2019 that outlines why Palestine is a climate justice issue. And that has to do with the fact that environmental conditions, owing to the siege and control and occupation of this, of this small strip of land, has brought about tremendous environmental violence, including the destruction of agricultural areas of clean water sources and arable land, and the way that that imports, including essential goods are extreme, have been extremely restricted prior to again, 2023 2023 really has represented a scene of tremendous, unbelievable violence.

And as you're seeing in videos like this and lots of visual culture that has come out of this, the focus has largely and rightly been on the loss, the tremendous loss of human lives and especially the genocidal conditions. And that's something that a broad array of international independent researchers have come to the conclusion that, indeed, this has been the scene of an ongoing genocide. And as you know, there's lots of evidence for this. I'm not going to spend time on that. But I do want to point out that this is not just that, it's also an ecocide. It's also about the systematic destruction of conditions, of nature, of the natural environment in in Gaza. And when we look into this more and do and think about this and research it really these these terms can't ultimately be picked apart. You can't separate genocide from ecocide. And I want to explain why for the rest of the presentation that I'll offer.

So I'm going quickly through this. But this is just the briefest introduction. There's lots of research and you can follow up on any of this if you haven't already. There's of course, you can still do. So. We know one thing that's really alarming about what's been happening is the automation of death in Gaza through the use of computerized systems, including AI, to develop what's what are called the kill lists, the way that people are assigned and targeted identification. And, and then that's carried out through potentially further automated or drone based means of bombing and various other ways of inflicting violence. The magazine +972 has done a lot of research on this, including on how US tech corporations have participated in and been complicit in the development of AI systems to automate kill lists. So this is kill lists are based on pattern. What's called pattern of life analyzes. So that means computers and algorithms are putting lots of data, massive amounts of data together to decide who is likeliest to be consistent with a terrorist type profile.

This is, of course, completely speculative. It's statistical. It's not based on human analysis. It's it's automated. And that has led to basically the automation of genocide. It's the first techno-genocide.

And this is one way that is the first techno-genocide, according to people like Andreas Malm. So this is also carrying out a larger ideological project of dehumanization that is consistent with the racialized biopolitics of of settler colonialism. And we know that is within Israeli political discourse, which is reached fascist proportions, that Palestinians are regularly and systematically dehumanized as so-called human animals, as terrorists. This is part of the long standing Nakba, or or catastrophe, this part of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. And there's all these. There's this a network of new terminology that's very dark, that has come out of what's been happening. Baruch Kimmerling talks about politicide.

Andreas Malm talks about techno-genocide. We could talk about scholasticide, the systematic destruction of universities, professors and students as well, that that has been an important part of what's happening, but is not just the destruction of people, although that is clearly crucial and should be foregrounded, but it also includes the destruction, the systematic destruction of nature, including what some called the tree wars that have been happening in Israel and Palestine over more than 100 years now. So here's a scene. Here's a photographic documentary image of a Palestinian farmer who's crying as she hugs one of her olive trees that has been just recently destroyed as an IDF vehicle with soldiers. And it looks from the background and that just that, that this is a very moving, amazing image that shows just the deep connection between indigenous people to the land and their connection to the land.

And if we looked into this further, we could we could define indigeneity by the fact that people who are indigenous say we are where we are. Right? The equation between identity and location is why, for so many, including in in the Americas, so many indigenous people are are deeply connected to a land based politics that's similar. That's the same thing that you get in Palestine. But this destruction of a tree is not accidental, right? This is part of a concerted, systematic, statewide effort to destroy Palestinian botanical existence. And so trees have been targeted. They've been in the history of Israel, replaced with pine forests, coming out of a Zionist identification with that form of tree to uproot Palestinian relations to olive trees and orange orchards. And there's a lot of research and writing about that. Again, it's called the tree Wars. In in relation to the discourse, Forensic Architecture has done studies of this over the last couple of years.

This is one called No Traces of Life Israel's Ecocide in Gaza, 2023-24, where they write about how the destruction of agricultural land and infrastructure in Gaza is a deliberate act of ecocide and a critical dimension of Israel's genocidal campaign. Over, over that time, we see it's hard to maybe read this very quickly, but you see the proliferation of these red dots, these are the targeted areas of greenhouses, of agricultural fields, of lands. We also can people have researched the the systematic destruction of animals as well? Basically, this is not just about killing Palestinians to remove them from the land, but also to destroy the conditions of livability so that no one can occupy the land. No one. You can't no one can actually exist on, on, on, on these lands. So forms of Palestinian reproduction have been targeted. So we see the evidence of the destruction of olive trees in Gaza, more than a million over the last couple of years, as we go from, you know, situations like this to like there's numerous ways to look at before and after images.

So I have I have just a couple more minutes. I want to talk about how very briefly, I'll just flip through this very briefly. But if you look at the history of, of this region. This is a very petro-capitalist intensive geography. And that goes way back to and it helps to explain some of the British colonial interest in

this area from the early 20th century. This was part of the development of of infrastructure related to petro-capitalism and bringing oil, for instance, from Iraq through the Kirkuk Haifa pipeline to Haifa refineries. And that continues today. During the Gaza genocide, Israel has actually become a net exporter of fossil fuels because it has developed offshore oil and gas reserves that you see in maps like this at the top right, including reserves that are based off of Gaza and within Palestinian historical territory. So this is a further element of settler colonial land theft, basically a kind of resource theft.

That has meant that Gaza's destruction is also equal to the Earth's destruction. It's important, as I wrap up now, to, to focus on, to focus on the US military, because there's so much destructiveness in terms of what the US and also the component Israeli military have been doing, just in terms of waging a genocidal war. We know that this has been absolutely disastrous for the climate in terms of the release of carbon emissions and the production of a basically a toxic postwar geography within Gaza. This is at the same time part of a massive corporate investment opportunity to develop the, the, the warfare instruments of destruction, the weaponry, the bombs, the munitions, as well as the AI surveillance and technology elements. To this, the fact that this is a web based, partly automated AI techno-genocide and that has just been represented an enormous carbon bomb in relationship to the area.

And there's lots of measurements that keep coming out about the carbon footprint of the war. And now it's being expanded not only to Lebanon and Yemen and Syria, but also to Iran in terms of what's happening right now. So, yeah, the US military industrial complex and its pollution is typically not included in the UN climate summits. Right. This is a matter of US security. So it's it's it's it's not represented within the the studies of carbon emissions that countries commit to. So the, the long standing UN COP meetings, the annual climate summits, they talk a lot about climate emissions, carbon emissions, but they never and don't include generally and internationally military emissions. But that is really one of like we know that the US military is the largest institutional emitter of of carbon gases, greenhouse gases in the world. Right. So this is this is something that really it returns to that Black Panther concern.

Why are we focusing on, for instance, individual consumerism and recycling when we're not talking about US military contributions, which is absolutely catastrophic? I'm going to if I if I have just a couple minutes, I'll finish up, I promise. If you're if you want more resources on this, Brown University has this project called The Cost of War. They look at the human but also the environmental costs of war, which is really useful and helpful. Since the war on terror began in after 9/11 for the for over the over the last 20 years, the US has spent roughly $8 trillion on the military budget. This is absolutely astounding and astronomical. And I just added a little picture on the left in terms of analyzing what that money could have been spent on, what another world could look like if we didn't pour our resources into the military, or whether it's into ICE and policing as well, from an abolitionist point of view.

So finally, climate justice, what is climate justice look like? It looks like decolonization and divestment. And that has been the focus of artistic projects, including within Palestine. Vivien Sansour is a really important Palestinian artist who does this project, called the Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library, where she collects Palestinian botanical seeds that are traditional seeds, heirloom varieties, and shares them and collects them against the control and oppression of Israeli attempts to to illegalize and banish the this kind of agricultural work. And then she makes she does a traveling kitchen where

she grows food from the seeds and shares it within these meals where people can talk about experience. There's plans to bring Vivien Sansour in May to UCSC, and she's going to do one of these traveling kitchen events here. From what I hear, I don't think it's been announced yet, but please, if you're interested in this, look out for that.

It's a chance to participate in one of these events and that will be advertised, I'm sure, within coming weeks. So this is a kind of survival media. It's also what's happened in Gaza. There's lots of people, including farmers, including amateur growers, who are growing whatever they can, wherever they can, and sharing it as a matter of survival. So this has been happening even under the most. Extreme conditions of duress, under genocide and an engineered famine within Gaza. Finally, the divestment movement, you see, has been involved in this. Some, maybe some people here have been involved in divestment in the divestment campaign. How can UC divest its own investments from militarism and from the genocide in Gaza? How can the UC, which has a massive portfolio and a big investment concern, how can we put pressure on those funds, like, for instance, invest the fact that UC invests in Blackrock, which we know invests billions of dollars within the weapons industry.

How is it that our university here in Santa Cruz, as part of the the the statewide UC network of campuses, how is it that we invest in genocide and this the technology of death in order to fund our university? What kind of contradictions are involved there and how can we contest it and interrupt it? There's lots of people who are working on this, not just within the UC system, but nationwide. For instance, at MIT. MIT against genocide is a really another important thing. And students, faculty for Justice in Palestine, SJP, other organizations, DSA are involved in this. It's really important. I think this is where people power can transform institutions in order to take back our resources so that they go into other things, then warfare like education, like health care, like sustainable ecologies, like a different way of environmentally living on this fragile planet that we occupy. Sorry for going over.

Thank you for your attention.