

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

THE ERASURE OF MEMORY IN CANADA PARK

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Canada Park, a national park and recreational area in Israel, is a site where landscape and politics intersect. Like all parks, it is a constructed environment meant to balance an experience of nature with the safe confines of culture. It has signage combining maps with textual history, clearly articulated paths, and a staff that mediates the untamed wilds of nature for the urban and suburban visitors that visit looking for a brief period of pastoral calm. This essay will tell the story of this park and the ways in which a seemingly benign green space is actually a highly contentious site of religious and nationalist reckoning. Secondly, I will look at the way that text has acted as a framework to reveal the competing nationalisms that otherwise might remain hidden in Canada Park.

W.J.T. Mitchell has said that, “The face of the Holy Landscape is so scarred by war, excavation and displacement that no illusion of innocent, original nature can be sustained for a moment.”¹ The notion of an innocent, original nature begins in the west with the Garden of Eden. In the interwoven evolution of Western civilization and its mythology, it isn’t until Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge that they are expelled from this place of purity. From then on, the west has looked back with nostalgia to a time and place

FIGURE 1: Canada Park in the area of the former village of Yalu present day.

where nature and divinity were linked. Once the nineteenth century ushered in an urban existence where we were increasingly cut off from our rural roots, representations of nature became our way of envisioning Eden. Even today, when methods of “green” living such as local or slow food, renewable sources of energy and a self-consciousness of our carbon footprint predominate, we are engaged in a mythology of nature that grows out of this history.

Gardens are a representation of this notion of nature as good and wholesome and beautiful² but they are also a way to contain ‘raw’ nature.³ Indeed, gardens are defined by their enclosure, as if to protect the purity of what lies inside. Parks might be thought of as a subset of gardens—larger and more public. In Hebrew a garden is a *gan*, while a park is a *gan tsiburi* (public garden), with *garden/gan* as the root word. Canada Park was built from the symbolic logic of a garden but as we shall see below, its public nature opens it up to some questions. As a subset of a garden, can a park be both private and public? Also, if a park is public does that also imply that there is a shared view of this landscape? In attempting to answer these questions with regard to Canada Park we quickly encounter another paradox related to its public vs. private nature. A park is meant to offer a single vision of purity and shared origin, whether a literal or figurative sense of Eden. In the contentious territory of Israel-Palestine, however, land is the very thing that is subject to multiple competing sovereignties and historical narratives.

In 1967, during the Six Day War between Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Syria, Israeli forces were approaching the Palestinian villages of ‘Imwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba (collectively known as the Latrun villages) just a couple dozen kilometers northwest of Jerusalem. Fearing for

their lives, most of the residents of these villages fled eastward and ended up in refugee camps around Ramallah, East Jerusalem and Jordan. Israeli soldiers expelled the remaining villagers and used bulldozers to raze their homes, leaving only rubble and twisted rebar.⁴

In 1973, Bernard Bloomfield, who was then the President of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) of Canada led a campaign to raise \$15 million from the Canadian Jewish community to establish “Canada Park” on top of the ruins of the destroyed villages Yalu and ‘Imwas. This was in keeping with a long history of afforestation (the large scale systematic planting of trees) that the JNF has conducted in Palestine since its inception. According to the JNF website, the organization was established in 1901 at the behest of Theodore Herzl at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel Switzerland. Its goal was to fund the acquisition of land in Palestine as a way to set out the groundwork for the establishment of a Jewish State. “Upon statehood,” their website states, “JNF-KKL worked on planting forests and reclaiming the land for agricultural purposes, providing employment for thousands of new immigrants.”⁵ Though the JNF had similar quasi-governmental beginnings as the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture, it became a separate organization after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The JNF sought to change the geography of Palestine by “turning deserts into farmland, swamps into gardens, hillsides into forests.”⁶ David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel believed that the JNF should develop lands like the Latrun villages that were abandoned by Palestinians in 1948 or 1967. This was so that they could never be subject to claims by returning refugees because the JNF had an explicit mission to serve only the Jewish people.⁷

Today the 315-acre park, which straddles the Green Line, includes paths for hiking and biking and quaint picnic areas. It is filled with carob, pomegranate, pine and almond trees, a combination of JNF



FIGURE 2: Imwas in 1958.



FIGURE 3: Imwas in 1968.



FIGURE 4: Imwas in 1978.



FIGURE 5: Imwas in 1988. All four photos by Dr. Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh.

plantings and the vestiges of Palestinian orchards that escaped destruction. In the spring, yellow wildflowers and cacti cover the gently rolling hills. Like many parts of Israel/Palestine, there are numerous instances of partial walls or architectural enclosures that fold organically into the landscape. At first notice these ruins appear to be old, as they are made mostly from roughly hewn stones that are stacked rather than held together by mortar. These hills are also terraced, following centuries of farming in the area.⁸ On Israeli Independence day, the park is filled with picnickers to celebrate the holiday by setting up barbecues in between the trees in pockets of open space that have been set aside for such use.

The historical remains in the park include biblical, Roman, Hellenic and Ottoman ruins. Signage in the park erected by the JNF alludes to this fact but does not reference the history of the Palestinian villages once there. The Israeli organization Zochrot identified this lack and through tours and supplemental signage has sought to educate Israeli, Palestinian and international communities about the history of this site. Zochrot ["Remembering" in Hebrew] is a group of Israeli citizens working to raise awareness of the displacement of Palestinians since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Zochrot believes that by bringing the Nakba ["The Catastrophe" in Arabic, as Palestinians refer to the war in 1948] into Hebrew, the language spoken by the Jewish majority in Israel, they can make a qualitative change in the political discourse of this region. Their actions, including lectures, films, exhibitions, publications, tours and legal advocacy, are premised on the notion that "acknowledging the past is the first step in taking responsibility for its consequences."⁹ Zochrot waged a two-year legal battle through the Israeli High Court of Justice to erect signage in Canada Park that would also include this history of the Latrun villages and in 2006 succeeded.



FIGURE 6: 2003 Commemoration of the Latrun villages.

This process began when Zochrot held an event at Canada Park on June 7, 2003 to commemorate the 36th year of occupation. At this event, refugees from the three destroyed villages told the story of the day that they were forced to leave their homes. A Jewish Israeli witness who was a resident of a nearby kibbutz and one of the soldiers who participated in the occupation of the villages also told their stories. At this event Zochrot erected some temporary signs that told of the history of the destroyed Palestinian villages. Later, Zochrot sent a letter to the JNF asking them to place signage around the park alluding to its Palestinian history. The JNF responded saying that they do not deal with "topics having political significance" and a maintenance worker took down the signs.¹⁰ Zochrot then petitioned the Ministry of Justice to erect signs in the park. In July 2005, the JNF responded saying that while they support the need for signs to educate the public about Yalu and 'Imwas "an overabundance of signs would damage its aesthetic character."¹¹ The State Attorney's office



FIGURE 7: Eitan Bronstein, director of Zochrot speaks about Canada Park in front of blackened sign.



FIGURE 8: Removed sign in Canada Park sign.

then intervened, responding to the High Court of Justice on behalf of the Military Commander and the Civil Administration of the Occupied Territories. As a result, instructions were issued on June 27, 2005, by the head of Civil Administration that, as requested, signs be erected stating that the villages of Yalu and 'Imwas existed in the area until 1967. The JNF appealed to the High Court of Justice and a hearing was set for April 4, 2006. A few days before this hearing the signs were erected by the Civil Administration of the Occupied Territories stating "The Villages of 'Imwas and Yalu existed in the area of the park until 1967. 'Imwas had 2,000 inhabitants, who now live in Jordan and in Ramallah. A cemetery is located next to the ruins of the village. Yalu had 1,700 inhabitants, who now live in Jordan and Ramallah. A well and a number of cisterns can be found there."¹² Two weeks after they were installed, one of the signs was uprooted. Two weeks after that, the second sign was painted black.¹³

The legal battle around the language that frames the history of this park raises some questions about the way that space is produced. What role does physical, visual and textual framing play in the definition of a space? Does a space change in relation to actions like the signs that Zochrot posted? Or does this signage merely offer interpretations that act as embellishments to a space that has a fundamentally fixed definition? If so, what is this fixed definition? Is Canada Park a space defined by the found quality of nature or is it a purely constructed fabrication of "natural" space? This question of whether landscape is found or made plays a great role in determining whether we understand the absence of Palestinian history at this site as a product of erosion or willful erasure. In a place like Israel/Palestine where land and history are so interdependent, the stakes are high in any consideration of landscapes that implicitly or explicitly combine religious and nationalist ideologies.

The intensity of debate surrounding the signage that Zochrot argued for raises the question of the relationship between language and space in the park. We have already established the association that gardens have with a beauty defined by goodness and innocence, but we might also consider their association with the sublime—a conception of nature as both beautiful and frightening that was set forth in the 19th century when Zionism first emerged. Like nature itself, the sublime “subverts order, coherence and structured organization.”¹⁴ As Edmund Burke described it, the mind becomes so overpowered with raw beauty when confronting the sublime that it can’t engage with reason.¹⁵ In this sense the sublime in nature is in direct opposition to the logos of language.

One might interpret the relationship between nature and culture in Canada Park much like one does a garden, where nature, a conglomeration of inert physical matter, needs the form of logos to frame and guide our experience of it.¹⁶ In this sense, the meaning of the park would be mutable and dependent on language to structure it. This would be in keeping with the colonialist attitudes of Zionists toward Palestine who have viewed its landscape as wild and untamed. But Canada Park is not raw inert material. Rather, it is physical evidence of layers of cultural history. For Zochrot, the signage that they argued for did not contribute an otherwise absent order to the sublime wilds of Canada park. Rather, they revealed the hidden structures of these destroyed villages, a history that was covered up by both the deceptive pastoral quality of the park and the tours and signage already present that made no mention of any Palestinian history on the site.

Early Zionists famously encouraged policies that would “make the desert bloom.”¹⁷ This mandate had two contradictory aspects. On the

one hand it encouraged a forceful man-made change to the purity of the holy land. While on the other, encouraged by Zionists such as A.D. Gordon, Jews could reveal the true splendor of the land of milk and honey. The labor required of this process would act as a kind of baptism, purifying and renewing both the land and its people.

The policy of a “blooming desert” was not only to make an arid space fertile but also to control the nature of this fertility. Early Zionists saw the land of Israel as a wasteland filled with swamps and disease that needed to be cleaned up and turned back into the green and lush space as described in the Bible. The indigenous Palestinian population was seen in similar terms: wild and untamed.¹⁸ Jewish Zionists from Germany, Russia and Eastern Europe took it upon themselves to bring European methods of development to the holy land and with colonialist benevolence planted forests, gardens and parks. For instance, Moshe Dayan, the famous Israeli military commander, believed that Israel should follow other models of enlightened colonialism claiming that in the Togolese republic of West Africa “people still had good memories of German colonial rule before WWI...the Germans left ‘orchards and culture.’ Israel should follow the example of benevolent colonialism.”¹⁹ Furthermore, the JNF instituted the “Green Belt” policy, which used afforestation as a method to shift political borders by increasing the size of the Jerusalem municipality after its reunification in the 1967 war.²⁰ The JNF planted pine trees in this green belt to prevent Palestinian development of these lands and to reserve them for the future expansion of Jewish settlements. They chose pine because of their fast growth and because of an acidic deposit that their needles leave which prevents the growth of underbrush between the trees, which might have been used by Palestinian shepherds.²¹

The JNF was deeply engaged in a series of conversations prior to the

establishment of the state of Israel that dealt with the perceived problem of Palestinians and Jews living side by side. In 1938 the head of the JNF, Avraham Menahem Ussishkin, advocated for the forced transfer of Palestinians to other Arab nations believing that “there was nothing immoral about transferring 60,000 Arab families.”²² In 1940 Yosef Weitz, the director of the JNF’s lands Department, claimed “it must be clear that there is no room in the country for both peoples...If the Arabs leave it, the country will become wide and spacious for us...The only solution [after the end of WWII] is a Land of Israel, at least a western Land of Israel [i.e. Palestine], without Arabs.”²³ In 1948, during the hostilities of war, Weitz realized that this was a perfect time to begin evicting Palestinian tenant farmers from land that they were working²⁴ and to exploit the fears of Palestinians, encouraging them to leave rather than surrender.²⁵ That same year, Weitz, acting on what he claimed to be Prime Minister David Ben Gurion’s approval, enacted a policy of destroying Palestinian villages to make room for Jewish settlements.²⁶

This attitude toward nature in “the Land of Israel” reveals that Canada Park is a completely fabricated construction and a willful extension of ideology rather than any kind of purely organic outcropping of either foliage or history. The JNF has shown itself to use the seemingly benign activities of greening the landscape as a cover for deeply ideological purposes since its inception. The self-proclaimed censors stole and effaced the signage that admitted to a Palestinian history partially because it polluted the supposed purity of its green space. Their problem with the language of the signs was that it admitted that the space itself embodied an unresolved political tension rather than a universal elixir for all the trials and tribulations of civilization. The language provoked its erasure because it revealed a Palestinian history in Israel and, more specifically, what activist and scholar Ilan Pappé has called the “ethnic cleansing” of Palestine.²⁷

NOTES

- 1 Landscape and Power, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 27.
- 2 Simon Pugh, *Garden, Nature, Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 4 Eitan Bronstein, “Restless Park: On the Latrun Villages and Zochrot,” trans. Charles Kamen, <http://www.zochrot.org/index.php?lang=english> (accessed July, 20 2009).
- 5 Jewish National Fund, “Our History,” <http://www.jnf.org/about-jnf/history/> (accessed July 18, 2011).
- 6 Walter Lehn and Uri Davis, *The National Jewish Fund* (London: Routledge, 1988), 81.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 275.
- 8 Zaphir Rinat, “Out of Sight Maybe, But Not Out of Mind,” *Haaretz*, June 14, 2007, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/out-of-sight-maybe-but-not-out-of-mind-1.222986> (accessed July 18, 2011).
- 9 Zochrot, “Commemorating the Three Lost Villages of Imwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba,” <http://www.zochrot.org/index.php?id=362> (accessed January 20, 2010).
- 10 Bronstein, “Restless Park” (accessed July, 20 2009).
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 132.
- 15 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: And Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 110.
- 16 Pugh, *Garden, Nature, Language*, 55.
- 17 Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt and Alexandra Nocke, *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 215.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 19 Moshe Dayan as paraphrased and quoted in Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso 2007), 120.
- 20 See Shaul Ephraim Cohen, *The Politics of Planting: Israeli-Palestinian Competition for Control of Land in the Jerusalem Periphery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993), 1.
- 21 Weizman, *Hollow Land*, 120.
- 22 Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: a History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881 – 1999* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 26.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 27 Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 129.



FIGURE 7: Canada Bark in the area of the former village of Yalu present day.