Resisting Divides:
Assimilation, Multiculturalism, and Place-Based Solidarity in Sápmi and Palestine

Abstract

Like roots reaching for the nourishment of familiar ground, generations of resistance lineages continue to weave a worldwide tapestry of solidarity. These efforts help to disrupt various forms of colonial violence, including under the guise of liberal democracies. One of the multiple mechanisms they target is how people and lands are pitted against one another through adversarial categories of difference. Such efforts are a powerful antidote to colonial fragmentations, mobilizing differences via shared goals based on grounded solidarities. This article seeks to answer how anti-colonial struggles in Palestine and Sápmi engage with three ways of structuring similarities and differences. We thereby utilize Coulthard's (2014) framework of recognition politics, divided into 1) assimilation, 2) multiculturalism, and 3) place-based solidarity. Next to excerpts from local organizers and a speculative dialogue between interviewees, we reference Audre Lorde's work to better understand the relational qualities of differences. Our research shows that the structural dominance of assimilatory and multiculturalist approaches to difference tends to stabilize injustices while normalizing colonial violence, including via Westernized peace politics like the Oslo Accords or state-led reconciliation initiatives. On the other hand, the integrity of place-based solidarity generates reciprocal relationships and interdependent responsibilities, which undermine colonial divide-and-conquer politics. With the help of our interviewees, this article provides a shared analysis to further the solidarity between the struggles of two of colonial modernity's most critical fronts, Sápmi and Palestine.

Keywords: Palestine; Sápmi; Solidarity; Colonialism; Resistance

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INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how anti-colonial struggles in Palestine and Sápmi navigate different frameworks of recognition politics. We utilize empirical evidence and qualitative insights to highlight the stabilizing effect of assimilatory and multiculturalist approaches within colonial structures. This capturing of differences is then contrasted with the transformative potential of place-based solidarity to disrupt colonial power dynamics. The dominance of highly antagonistic compartmentalized renderings of politics becomes particularly evident when looking at communities' resistance and liberatory struggles at the frontline of colonial incursions, such as in Palestine and Sápmi. Israel's Zionist project and Swedish Democracy demonstrate a striking inaptness to reconcile the hierarchies of difference of their colonial grandeurs. The erasure of links with European conquest in the contemporary narration of these nations exemplifies what Sylvia Wynter describes as mistaking "the map for the territory" (Wynter 2005), a prioritizing of theoretical constructs or social constructivist frameworks over the complex and multifaceted socio-ecologies realities. This manifests itself, for example, via "greening" of colonialism (Österlin & Raitio 2020; Sasa 2022) or pink-washing of "intersectional Empire" (Lavato 2021) by depoliticizing events like Pride or Eurovision. As long as liberal humanism remains the barometer for recognition politics, there is a significant risk of downplaying or disregarding complex forms of oppression, especially within colonial contexts (Baaz et al. 2016).

The post-World War II era witnessed significant shifts in the direct colonial rule of European nations, marked by the establishment of global governance institutions such as the UN, IMF, and World Bank. Yet, remnants of direct control mechanisms remain influential under this neocolonial restructuring (Nkrumah, 1965), including trade tariffs, foreign currency regimes, the repercussions of political assassinations, and concessions for resource extraction. Despite a reinforcement of Western dominance after the collapse of the Soviet Union, recent imperialist strides are also made by nations like Russia and China. Wynter and McKittrick (2015) underscore the West's reframing of neocolonial subordination from direct control to extraction on the basis of underdevelopment. We use the terms "West" and "Westernized" to emphasize the dominant institutional drift that impacts conventional "territorial" claims by Western European colonizers over the contemporary colonial realities in Sápmi and Palestine. This outlook acknowledges the strong Euro-colonial legacies on current conditions in Israel-colonized Palestine. Two examples of this are the British occupation of Palestine and the centuries of brutal persecution of Jewish communities in Europe and Russia. The recent joining of Sweden and Finland to NATO further highlights the importance of alignment with Western politics concerning Sápmi. Focusing on similarities in the mobilization of differences as structured by the dominance of the West and Westernized politics also recognizes previous attempts of linking anti-colonial solidarities in settler-colonial contexts (Salih, Zambelli & Weichman, 2021).

Acknowledging insights from previous debates on the impact of settler-colonial structures (Veracini, 2015; Snelgrove, Dhamoon & Corntassel, 2014; Kuokkanen, 2023), the subversive and disruptive potential of the communal organizing practices described by our interviewees pushed us to consider other frameworks. Upon further reviewing of literature and case studies from Palestine and Sápmi, a tensions emerged between the type of recognition politics on the ground and political and research endeavors which pathologize anti-colonial resistance. The latter, for example, tended to simplify the complex relations we witnessed on the ground. Another issue was the victimization of communities via damage-centered perspectives (Tuck, 2009). The idea to produce an academic intervention to counter this tendency emerged in 2022, as we were doing joint work in Palestine. Over several conversations with organizers in the field, we realized that many mechanisms of oppression in Sápmi and Palestine function in highly similar ways. As a result, this article speaks specifically to discussions of intercommunal connections between liberation struggles (Newton, 1972; Narayan, 2019). The final text is based on extended periods of immersive research together with communities in Palestine and Sápmi from research findings between 2018 - 2023.

Our ambition with a co-relational approach to knowledge production included active participation in community activities and organizing efforts. As such, the idea of this text is not to construct an academic counter-narrative or professionalize critical theory through academic knowledge production (Moten & Harney, 2004). Instead, we seek to affirm the diverse knowledges and material realities of anti-colonial struggles across their cultural, mental, and socio-ecological dimensions. Throughout our time in Palestine and Sápmi, each of us joined various activities by groups doing political organizing, being offered a more grounded understanding. Together, we conducted over 80 semi-structured interviews with civil society actors, including people who work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots organizers, Sámi and Palestinian community organizers. The shared understanding upon which we developed this article is based on the exchange of literature, sharing of ethnographic insights, and criss-crossing of interview excerpts and analytical matrixes.

Next to empirical examples of critiques forwarded by Sámi and Palestinian organizers, the paper adopts a non-traditional academic structure based on responses from individual research participants. Since we collected the empirical data through separate research processes, we had to revise a new method that expanded our previous analysis. A key challenge, thereby, was the different codes we used. Our final method addresses this issue by focusing less on the actual codes and instead engaging with the overarching descriptive function of the various codes. This required an in-depth understanding of our data and sharing the code book to engage with the others' initial construction of the codes. As a result, we chose to arrange the statements as a fictional dialogue between activists who are either in Palestine living Israelis or non-Sámi working across Sápmi. By interweaving the responses, we want to give the perception of an exchange between the activists. Our aim is to illustrate how, despite significant differences, the emerging dialogue reveals similarities between experiences with colonial systems of power. Between the lines, these excerpts underline processes by which bodies gain differences and similarities and how collectives come into being. We chose not to edit the dialogues further, highlighting their constructed nature.

Our theoretical understanding builds on Coulthard’s (2014) Fanonian critique of colonial recognition politics in Canada-colonized Turtle Island. The three main explanatory categories to understand the structural functioning of difference are, therefore, a) assimilation, b) multiculturalism, and c) place-based solidarity, varying in the extent to which differences facilitate extractive and generative dynamics. This framework helps us see the links between our empirical data and the contemporary structural legacies of European conquest. One aspect of this is recognizing the shared historical processes that institutionalized the management of differences via the judiciary, liberal humanist framings of collective identity, and the nation-states’ deferral of responsibility via “representative” democracy. We explain these processes by discussing structurally conditioned relations of power and material relations. Coulthard states that failure to change, transform, or transcend colonial relationships is prefigured “where ‘recognition is conceived as something that is ultimately ‘granted’ or ‘accorded’ a subaltern group or entity by a dominant group or entity (Coulthard. 2014, p. 31).” By contextualizing our analysis of assimilation, multiculturalism, and place-based solidarity via the experience of our research participants, we try to trace the organizational dynamics which allow,

> "colonial power to modify itself from a structure that was once primarily reinforced by policies, techniques, and ideologies explicitly oriented around the genocidal exclusion/assimilation double, to one that is now reproduced through a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and institutional practices that emphasize our recognition and accommodation (Coulthard, 2014, p. 69-70)."

Rana Barakat's essay about life in Palestine already hinted at the potential of the generative and extractive related to Audre Lorde's writing (Barakat, 2023). For example, she uses Lorde's understanding to reflect on the Arabic word ghadab (غضب) to show that its meaning through Palestine can be revolutionary when used to resist injustice, yet destructive when turned in on itself. In her words (2023), "Lorde teaches us that both rage (as ghadab) and love are guides, while fear and vulnerability are realities, and silence is sometimes a tool of the wicked." We follow this initiative of Rana Barkat by integrating Lorde's discussion of "differences" in her 1984 essay collection "Sister Outsider." As such, our understanding also critiques the widespread presence of more or less implicit social Darwinist understandings in political organizing, including the dominant ideas of scarcity, "natural" selection, and dysselection (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015).

Despite what our text might suggest, there is no reason to assume that cross-communal relations in place-based solidarity are necessary, should, or must be a prime concern for organizers. As we will highlight in the discussion, various hidden dynamics and obscured structural relations can cause even more trouble and deepen divides within communities close to the harm of colonial violence. As researchers, we want to be clear that we do not speak on behalf of the research participants nor the mentioned communities. Their work is what enables our understanding. If anything, our research manifests that place-based solidarity efforts are not without tensions either. We hope that our text and transparency can be helpful for similarly concerned people, including the many people within state organs, institutions, and NGOs.

Assimilatory mechanisms of colonial systems seek to encode adversarial categories of difference through a biological deterministic rendering of genders like race, sex, or nationality. There is ample historical evidence about how colonial powers use the generation of antagonistic categories to fracture the affinity and solidarity between different communities. State-imposed scarcity via the enclosure of drinking water or livelihoods, for example, enforces divisionary realities that further fuel differences over shared needs. As community-based allocation procedures become disrupted to the point of dysfunction, a surrender to the state's managerial intervention via assimilation is deemed inevitable. In other words, colonial extraction reproduces its institutional power via the controlled instigation of tensions and conflicts between people and lands. This shows that the construction of difference through oppressive systems is, in fact, not arbitrary, nor is it the manifestation of destiny. It is a precise logic that reacts to the solidarity and affinity emerging from the diversity and shared needs of every human being.

Most contemporary theories of multiculturalism mobilize differences through an empirical foundation based on what Benhabib (2002, p. 4) terms a “reductionist sociology of culture." She references Terrance Turner (1993) to emphasize that proponents of this type of multiculturalism frequently impose simplistic and externally defined understandings of cultural identities. Public policy, exotified narratives, and dominant NGOs' political agendas aid in essentializing socio-ecological realities, making them more accessible for institutions. This aspect is where Fanon (1967) highlights being human via ontogeny/sociogeny (Wynter, 2015a). However, multiculturalist understandings tend to treat identity as if constituted as a clearly defined static property that can be isolated and, therefore, patented and individualized. An excessive emphasis on cultural separateness further reinforces the idea of the internal uniformity of cultures. This process normalizes oppressive demands of conformity imposed on communities, forcing their diversity into a monochromatic shadow of itself. Cultures are treated as symbols of a fixed group identity and often become idolized or over-represented versions that foreclose critical examination, even within the internal dynamics of that community.

From the food we eat to the ways we love and grieve, differences are a vital part of any relationship with people, places, and times. We read place-based solidarity (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016) emphasizing positionally conditioned relations through collective agency beyond the dominant spectrum of extractive or generative differences. To “the defined self,” as Audre Lorde (1984, p. 35) states, positionally conditioned relations can be “enriching rather than threatening.” This research shows how institutionalized forms of extraction (re)generate colonial systems. Against the dominance of such structures, Lorde argues that the shared goal of solidarity practices against “divide and conquer must become define and empower (Lorde, 1984, p. 105).” Embracing the complexities of positionally conditioned relations and recognizing the potential for collective empowerment, this text highlights an analysis that can help to dismantle oppressive structures and foster solidarity across diverse communities. Rather than further compartmentalizing identities, grief, and joy, this text shows the importance of cherishing differences within ourselves as part of a collective multitude.

NEOCOLONIAL ASSIMILATION

Since WWII, Western influences on social organizations have taken a new shape in the form of international institutions like the IMF or World Bank. In response to the strengthened anti-colonial movements of the time, these institutions helped to construct neocolonial (Nkrumah, 1965) relations by, for example, imposing European currencies and concessions over resource access on former colonies, structural adjustment programs, an imperialist arms race, and the construction of universally recognized individual human rights. Outliers to the supposed triumph of the Western development paradigm tend to be brushed aside through explanations built on discriminatory practices, like social-Darwinist and racist political economies (Wynter, 2015a). Lorde underlines that most common approaches to difference, especially assimilationist ones, function “in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it, if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate” (Lorde, 1984, p. 77). Rather than the typical considerations of coalitional politics, which looks at dynamics between actors in a movement, this quote begs the question of the kind of politics that condition such relations. In our attempt to look at this question, we discuss the Oslo Accords’ People-to-People initiatives and the Swedish state's position in response to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in a 2020 investigation of Sámi rights violations (CERD). In each example, massive mobilizations of resources and the reliance on power asymmetries take form according to a matrix of differences inherent in the dominant institutionalized order.

From a liberal perspective of international relations, the primary colonizers of the Sámi are the nation-states of contemporary Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Russia. They all have a well-proven track record of often violent attempts to assimilate Sámi into the respective dominant ethno-national society (Helander-Renvall, Valkonen & Valkonen, 2016; Junka-Aikio, 2021). Similarly, many studies on Israel-Palestine show how dominant institutional arrangements favor assimilation into existing structures through a peace-making discourse (Emmett, 2003; Gawerc, 2012; Tov, 2014). Most of these analyses disregarded the colonial implications shaping Historic Palestine. Even with the inclusion of internal colonization as a factor, both contexts are rarely discussed with consideration of the global interdependencies of neo-colonialism, for example, the mentioned Euro-colonial legacies in Palestine, international extraction politics in Sápmi, and imperialist influences of the U.S. These international links are facilitated through global finance, multi-national corporations, and international policy frameworks. Rauna Kuokkanen, an author who rigorously highlights the links between Sápmi and broader international structures, states.

> “One of the characteristics of assimilation is difference-blind liberalism that treats indigenous people like any other members of the mainstream society. The ideologies of individualism and social equality, which translate into sameness, have been very powerful driving forces in the Nordic society for the past several

> decades without prevailing counter-discourses to make a strong case for a collective indigenous difference of the Sámi (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 60).”

The repression of collective rights is intricately entangled with the claim over a prerogative of defining identities, as in the case of Indigenous rights. This construction of difference invisibalizes the impacts of forced dislocation through colonial border regimes and national modes of belonging, like citizenship. For example, many reconciliation projects attempt to create the perception of equal representation in response to this newly created asymmetry, as if that action alone would automatically generate equality. On this basis, consultations with Sámi are often used as a smoke screen to legitimize further colonial exploitation, ignoring fundamental rights to free, prior, and informed consent. Dominant institutional frameworks frequently undermine the self-determination of colonized communities via assimilation. For example, Finland's most recent governments and state institutions have eroded Sámi self-determination, claiming authority over the terms that define who is and who is not considered Sámi (Laiti, 2023). A research participant who regularly joins and facilitates consultations between Sámi and state or corporate representatives explains the issue of this positional asymmetry:

> “The whole deliberative theory is kind of the force of the better argument. And you know sometimes it's not force of the better argument, it is the force of who has the right to decide…As if there was a universalist best argument. Whereas from a rights perspective it matters who says it.”

People-to-people programs were purposely structured to normalize relationships between Israelis and Palestinians without touching the main source of the problem: colonization. By design, the structural dynamics emerging from such initiatives tend to favor people further separated from the frontlines and those who share carefully positioned commonalities. Formally part of the Oslo Accords, these initiatives provide an example of understanding the mobilization of differences through an assimilationist framework (Golan & Kamal, 2005; Naser-Najjab & Pappe, 2019). A liberal understanding of contemporary Palestine allowed the initiators of these initiatives to reshape colonization as a mere “conflict.” Structurally conditioned organizational hierarchies constructed a strongly controlled perception of symmetry between groups of Israeli-Jews and Palestinians, all the while fostering the image of “bottom-up” peace talks.

A common strategy of Western or Westernized politics is to flatten inequalities by constructing seemingly heterogeneous communities based on identity markers in the state's image. The implementation of neoliberal policies, including via the Palestinian

Authority (PA), is one such example of creating additional divisionary dynamics among Palestinian communities (Dana, 2020). The initiatives of the people-to-people framework were held in English, promoting precisely such classist division of participants in favor of Palestinians with access to English courses, which are often private. As a result, participants in the people-to-people initiatives over-represented middle-class interests while missing insights from disenfranchised communities who face constant violence from settlers and the IDF. There remain critical differences between the Palestinian and Israeli middle classes. Under colonial pressures, capitalist restructuring of livelihoods and communal means of reproduction relies on extractive rather than generative relationships to the lands. Israel's apartheid system creates substantial barriers to further separate Palestinian communities. Many people who live in Area A and Area B, are deliberately removed from the experience of collective agency in South Hebron Hills, located in Area C. Many organizers from this context that we spoke with engage in place-based politics, such as protecting shepherds from settler attacks. This shows how ascension within capitalist structures is expanded as a false indicator to argue that racist, colonial, or patriarchal discrimination declined.

The security apparatus of Israel plays a critical part in the colonial dominance, disproportionately criminalizing and incarcerating Palestinians. The people-to-people programs exhibited this bias, forclosing equitable participation by selectively excluding Palestinian civil society members with criminal records. Any public display of political dissent, including critical cultural production, community organizing, or participation in a non-violent demonstration, bears a significant risk of detention, imprisonment, or death. Deliberate arbitrariness through Israeli military interventions across Palestine maintains a fear of uncertainty and sows distrust among communities. Military attacks also target media, including the international press. One tragic example of this that had hardly any repercussions for Israel was the 2022 assassination of American-Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by Israeli military forces. A Palestinian organizer described the discursive discreditation strategies of repression efforts whereby any supporter of Palestinian communities, whether Israeli or international, is "Palestine-ized." This othering trope of the good and law-abiding Palestinian within cases like the Oslo Accords fulfills the function of further assimilating people.

Most people-to-people initiatives failed at the end of the Second Intifada in 2006. Their limitations were partially related to the internal arrangements and structures and an external environment created by the Oslo Agreement (Naser-Najjab & Pappe, 2009). The concrete danger of imposing prefabricated pace-building strategies became evident once the Israeli government started the construction of the Separation- or Apartheid-wall. As a result, most Palestinians who participated in these initiatives felt betrayed and fooled (B’Tselem, 2010). A consequence of this is the ongoing reservation or refusal to continue work in cross-communal partnerships or initiatives led by state actors. These dynamics continue to raise specific demands for collaborations, particularly over organizational integrity, activities, content, and equality within organizational structures.

Another example of colonial assimilation approaches to differences is an evaluation by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that evaluated the Swedish state's position towards an industrial mining project on the lands of the Vapsten Sámi reindeer herding community (CERD, 2020). The committee report highlights how state-sanctioned consultation processes in Sweden create a perception of choice while reducing fundamental rights to mere economic interests. For example, consultations only allow for changes within a project but not an outright rejection. Sámi inclusion tends to be confined to somewhat gloss over the project with a reindeer herding perspective. As the Swedish state had claimed in the report,

> “… under the law, individuals can be compensated for the violation of their fundamental rights, and that legal provisions exist against discrimination whereby no unfavorable treatment of anyone belonging to a minority group by reason of ethnic origin, color, or other similar circumstances is permissible (CERD, 2020, p. 3).“

The Swedish government upholds its commitment to human rights by claiming to treat every citizen equally. They argue that any accusation of state discrimination against Sámi, at least for those with Swedish citizenship, is unwarranted. However, the Sámi petitioners emphasized that non-discrimination is only valid as a concern for equal treatment when similar circumstances exist. The Swedish state's claim displays an utter disregard for its own historical and ongoing involvement in reproducing colonial systems of oppression, exemplified by its refusal to ratify the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Furthermore, non-discrimination is also evaluated based on “differential treatment of those that are culturally different compared with the majority population” (CERD, 2020, p. 8). As highlighted by rulings from the European Court of Human Rights, “laws that in themselves do not involve impermissible discrimination but which nonetheless disproportionally and adversely affect members of a particular group, are discriminatory” (CERD, 2020, 8). Consequently, the UN committee ended up declaring the mining activity discussed in its report as acts of racial discrimination on several accounts.

The supposed success story of Western modernity weaponizes universalist understandings of human rights and its scope of dignity, relying on the eradicating forces of assimilation as the barometer of justice. The perception that colonial divides between people and lands are conflicts rather than violations of fundamental rights fulfills the function of further assimilation. As the above examples showed, the assimilation of differences through the institutional ordering of colonial politics allows states more control over their own reproduction. A common mechanism of oppression is precisely to extract and isolate people into state-generated groups, like citizens, class or cultural identities.

MULTICULTURAL INTEGRATION

The second mode of structuring differences reflects a more managerial approach. With the rise of neoliberalism, categorical fragmentations were reformed to fit a wider neoliberal field. Multiculturalism maintains the dominant material structures and cultural hierarchies while expanding differences to some extent. Since the treatment of specific collectives and groups is reduced to issues of individual human rights, issues like racial profiling by police are portrayed as an unfortunate byproduct that needs to be balanced out rather than a structural issue within racially constructed judiciaries (Harris, 1993; Ferreira da Silva, 2009). In colonial contexts, multicultural integration aids in stabilizing the positionality of settlers, for example, by defining settler identity as simply one under many different groups of people (Belcourt, 2014, p. 2). While assimilation denies intersectional differences, multiculturalism captures those differences subordinated to similarly functioning legislative, economic, and political frameworks (Táíwò, 2022). As such, the demands for structural transformation by abolitionists, restorative justice advocates, and Indigenous-led decolonization initiatives like Land Back are rendered impossible. Moreover, the multicultural state boasts its benevolent self-image through recognition and attendance of marginalized groups' need, including via cultural programs and welfarism. As such, demands for structural transformation are portrayed as unnecessary or even unjust. Multiculturalism might have produced more nuanced categorical differences, but they are still pre-determined based on an institutional reference frame based on colonial divisions. For example, to grant Sámi parliaments self-determination over aspects like culture and language but no substantial rights over material distributions within Sápmi. A research participant who has long worked alongside Sámi communities highlighted the deep seated disregard for the structural dominance of colonial worldviews:

> “...we haven't been discussing, in the Nordic Countries, the trauma of being colonizers on Sámi. We don't even know that we are colonizers.”

This part of the text highlights the risk of NGOs utilizing multicultural integration to the effect of co-opting community-led struggles. Given the large variety of NGOs and their practices, we hope our text helps discern why, when, and how multicultural integration through NGOs can become problematic. We do not argue that NGOs are the only ones who should address systemic issues, nor do we believe they offer exceptionally advantageous organizational forms worth contending with either way. Yet, as NGOs emerged from neoliberal reforms, their positionality as benefactors of neo-colonial structures often functions in a critical position of power as gatekeepers or door-openers between civil society and institutional actors. The proximity to such asymmetrically positioned political groups adds to the difficult positionality of NGOs. As the interviewees reported, this is especially tricky for civil society actors in communities confronted by organizing environments dominated by NGOs. Therefore, it is crucial to encourage the interrogation of how NGOs might risk reproducing colonial differentiation through multicultural inclusion politics.

In Palestine and Sápmi, as our experience on the ground revealed, dozens of unaccounted examples of problematic NGO practices exist. They range from a refusal to critically engage with positionality, the imposition of Eurocentric agendas, to financial extraction by being in proximity to marginalized communities. As part of multicultural approaches to differences, a utilitarian maxim is often used as a pretense of maintaining the dominance of a specific group. Utilitarianism reflects the idea of creating the best outcome for the greatest number of people. However, such quantitive values depend highly on who is counted within this idea of an all-inclusive “people.” Utilitarian understandings often result in self-righteous arguments on behalf of dominant institutions, like the idea that Sámi with Swedish citizenship will ultimately benefit from replacing Sámi livelihoods with extractive industries. After all, this is for the greater good of the Swedish nation, including Sámi people. This logic only works because colonially created inequality seeks to integrate the collective rights of Sámi within a subordinated position to the Swedish ethno-national project. A research participant explained this problematic power dynamics observed in several years of experience with collaborations between Sámi and NGOs:

> “If Sámi would be strategic and utilitarian, it is totally different than an NGO-person being strategic. They have totally different moral grounds for being

> utilitarian…Sámi basic human rights to self-determination are not an interest. They are a right.“

This outlook manifests not only existing structural inequity but also reflects Eurocentric theories of change, for example, the belief that anti-colonial transformation is just another social justice complaint achievable by institutional reform. Another example is when NGOs maintain damage-centered views as “... a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community” (Tuck, 2009, p. 413).

NGOs often occupy the role of a bridge between dominant political institutions and the broader society. They often function by mobilizing a representative power or social capital, extended by their membership, donors, and the mobilization of scientific authority. As scholars, we are not in the business of judging intentions. However, it is clear that NGOs have been shaped and have given shape to structural inequity. For example, Turner’s (2010) research indicates how exclusive and elitist structures are a dominant characteristic of many NGOs. As he outlines, the increase of NGOs over the last 50 years reflects demographic-structural mechanisms as a by-product of intraelite competition. Joy James discussed this tendency through the co-option of radical movements by the “talented tenth” (James, 1997). Some NGOs have ramped up significant resources, including finances, networks, and knowledge over the years. This power allows them to dictate political agendas, including towards marginalized communities. NGOs have a history of reinforcing dominant power hierarchies. For example, Western ideas of environmental politics have historical roots in violating Indigenous rights via conservation. Here, differentiation works through environmental agendas, reflecting a remarkable similarity between the industrialization of water bodies for energy production in Turtle Island, Palestine, and Sápmi (Estes, 2019).

The universality of human rights as individual rights allows a sleight of hand in which multiculturalism helps to facilitate assimilation into a reformed, yet still neo-colonial, political order (Simpson, Jame & Mack, 2011). In negotiations between NGOs and civil society, dynamics similar to those described in the state-led flattening of differences are present. However, this flattening process here tends to be disguised by emphasizing affective identities or overlapping thematic interests (Jad, 2017). To align political campaigns with the regulatory categories set by national legislation is an additional domain where communities are expected to sacrifice their integrity to accommodate the objectives of NGOs (Hammami, 2000). A critical interpretation of multicultural inclusion politics challenges the mere approximation of an intersectional discourse. Without a shift in practice, this language might give the false impression of greater connection between the state and civil society. For example, without a systemic contextualization via grounded relations, campaigns focusing on a specific issue tend to disregard political rebound. Once the attention of that NGO seeps towards other places or issues. There is a risk that vastly more resourced actors like states or companies utilize such NGO campaigns to drain staff and civil society while extraction projects divert to the next sacrifice zone. This shifts the burden to communities which tend to be left with less possibilities to mobilize resistance as they inherit the structural repercussions of previous struggles. A non-Sámi collaborator who has long worked with Sámi initiatives explained some of the more often occurring problems tied to working with NGOs:

> “If you are employed by a big NGO, most people have a job description, they have an agenda, they have things that they need to get from these communities, and that's why it doesn't work. Because, even if they try to do everything to be an ally, they still have that agenda that they need to fulfill, and then it doesn't work!”

NGOs have responsibilities toward donors and supporters, who tend to come from the dominant society. To safeguard their operation and reproduce their organization, an NGO might take a strategic position or agree to political compromises, even if this puts communities on the ground in harm's way. Such collaborations must contend with the fact that involved parties might have a shared cause but not a shared goal. Pragmatist strategies might be tolerated even if they are not ideal, like when aligning political positions with the colonial judiciary. As many research participants describe, NGOs tend to lack awareness for their own role in pushing for such compromises. Partnerships with organizations that reflect the dominant society are often necessitated by a lack of engagement without a compromise. As such, pragmatism can end up strengthening or toning-down the dominance of colonial institutions - possibly because this constitutes a, for the moment, lesser evil. Lorde reminds us that coalitions signify that, for one or both parties of a coalition, it is no longer possible to only struggle independently. This position reflects a substantial asymmetry concerning civil society’s power to influence the agenda of NGOs, including as a means to impact foreign policy (Paragi, 2016). It is important recognize “that coalition, like unity, means the coming together of whole, self-actualized human beings, focused and believing, not fragmented automatons marching to a prescribed step. It means fighting despair” (Lorde, 1984, p. 157).

An unequal distribution of power and resources sets a repressive type of limit to the collective means that could support self-determination and anti-colonial resistance. Relationships between NGOs and civil society risk normalizing a state of dependence on semi-state structures, like aid distribution. As such, there is a significant risk that NGO activities can become a problem, sometimes even counteracting the very issues they had set out to address. A self-centered agenda based on asymmetric relations also remains problematic when pursued by NGO professionals. Examining peace NGOs in Historical Palestine, a Palestinian organizer with extensive experience in NGOs highlights the issue of selective engagement. Being proficient in one domain does not excuse unprofessional conduct in another domain within the same context.

> “Many NGOs come only with a goodwill, but without the professional capacity. But good intentions can lead to hell. And I've seen some encounters in which kids came from the encounter saying I used to hate Arabs. Now I know why. Or, I used to hate Jews. Now I know why.”

Palestinian scholars have extensively underlined the limits and the side effects of the work of NGOs, for example, in pushing for the Oslo Accords, which granted Palestinians a semi-state structure. In addition to the issues discussed above, this reform process tended to either co-opt or repress all autonomous political formations, including women’s organizations (Stagni, 2024). At the same time, NGO-ization locked many grassroots organizations and movements that emerged during the First Intifada into a spiral of fund-raising, having to appease Western “development” standards. Many initiatives from communities on the ground got co-opted through this process. Vested interest within dominant power structures, including anticipated forms of opposition, are recurrent issues that inhibit the potential of generating stronger solidarity.

Across the world, capitalist and individualistic values have increasingly captured organizing spaces, reinforcing colonial discourses, identities, and organizing practices (Hilal, 2015). The fragmentation of civil society through multiculturalism emphasizes a type of pragmatism that limits solidarities to extend beyond dominant societies, weakening the potential of collective resistance (Alissa, 2007). In this part, we showed that NGO’s structuring of differences tends to become extractive as they push marginalized communities towards compromises between, for example, fundamental rights and economic interests. In these instances, multiculturalism promotes a deconstructive approach to differences as a mere social phenomenon, reinforcing the materiality enacted gravitational pull on behalf of colonial extraction. If NGOs supported efforts to shift their positionality and power in meaningful ways for marginalized communities, they could be critical for a structural diversion of resources from the dominant society. This change in practice would significantly help to disrupt myths that reproduce neo-colonial assimilation and multiculturalism. Consequently, NGOs could contribute to generative practices between civil society actors, supporting efforts to unleash the creative potential of differences.

PLACE-BASED SOLIDARITIES

Place-based solidarity mobilizes differences to nurture similarity via collective empowerment based on shared goals, non-dominating relationships, and responsibilities with the lands. This emphasizes the entanglement of material with cultural aspects, similar to Indigenous knowledges, which “reflect land-based worldviews founded on active recognition of kinship relations that extend beyond the human domain (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 219).” As such, place-based solidarity grounds different people based on shared needs like shelter, clean water, or healthcare (Rodney, 1969; Combahee River Collective, 1977).

In conversation with the community organizers featured in this article, hey frequently emphasize their efforts to share territorial responsibilities and nurture cultural relationships. As an approach to community organizing, the teachings of the land as a system that mediates our needs find greater recognition (Coulthard, 2014, p. 13). A better understanding of these relations has wide-ranging discursive and material implications for social movements (Jenkins, 1983). For example, the material conditions of gatherings can tell us a lot about how people steward the power of collective agency. Place-based solidarities also speak to who, why, and how people are brought together with greater intentionality. To hold the different positionalities within a collective with care is vital,

> “Without community, there is no liberation…But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist (Lorde, 1984, p. 105).”

An Israeli activist outlined the generative power of relationships, sharing how, after almost twenty years of joining collective action with the same Palestinian communities in the South Hebron Hills, they developed a strong sense of belonging with their Palestinian friends while feeling alienated in Israel. Note that this interviewee expresses a strong sense of belonging but does not claim they are “from” South Hebron. Rather than effecting the achievement of shared goals by sowing further divisions, differences are embodied and mobilized as a source of affect.

Junka-Aikio's (2018) description of Suohpanterror, an anonymous Sámi artist and artivists (Sandström 2017), indicates how such affectionate differences can be nurtured.

In this case, a political “us” is performed by generating a communal sense of belonging through “... experiences of a shared community of knowledge, and of collective laughter” (Junka-Aikio, 2018, p. 1). Such a redefined “us” allows organizers to address redistribution beyond the term's pecuniary sense. Here, collective agency is reshaped, similar to the “diversion of power” through place-based solidarities. Research participants often refer to this diversion as a return of stolen resources, reminiscent of debates on reparations, procedural justice, or mutual aid. As they emphasize, the anticolonial efforts of collective action must follow and support the guidance of communities who are closest to harm. Acknowledged and practiced equality significantly alter the meaning and evaluation of differences (Collins, 1986). In the process, such a generation of relations forms powerful collective ways of being.

> “Within the interdependence of mutual (non-dominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being (Lorde, 1984, p. 104).”

An (a) Israeli activist working in Palestine and a (b) long-time collaborator with Sámi grassroots initiatives working in Finland and Sweden share how such interactions usually begin and how they have changed over recent years:

a) We have meetings with certain marginalized communities in a particular area to hear from them what they need, what they want from us, what their priorities are, and how they want to manage our partnership…

b) When you are doing a project where you are trying to be an ally,
have a great idea and then get in touch with Sámi,
and then try and help them do it…
maybe what you are doing is making them even more tired,
and making them burn out,
which is one of the mistakes
I felt that I had made…

a) Before, Israelis went in the Territories with very clear ideas on how to do things: how to be an activist. We realized we were wrong. Sometimes too late,

and this destroyed relations.
But now they lead, and we follow.

b) I am trying to learn from my mistakes.
I am trying to say: okay, we want to do this?
Let's find ways to do it before we burn everybody out.

The above exchange shows how communitarian practices emerge through the redefinition of relationships based on a place-based differentiation of collective agency. Together, the participants reflect on how colonialist pressures impact the materialization of their relationships. Positionally conditioned definitions of collective agency, even with good intentions, are ridden by mistrust due to an institutionally repressive tendency based on a “sociogenically encoded truth of solidarity” (Rorty, 1984, referenced in Wynter & McKittrick 2015). Many organizers from the dominant society we talked with reported periods of social, mental, and/or physical abuse, as their practices inevitably resulted in a confrontation with the way privilege had naturalized the specificity of their experience of differences. Consequently, nurturing new collectivities can be subversive and disruptive to auto-institutionally produced differences (Wynter, 2015a). One organizer (c) from the dominant society in Swedish-colonized Sápmi and an Israeli organizer (d) working alongside Palestinian communities explain how a positional shift reshaped their understanding:

d) For Israelis to go to the West Bank is extremely, extremely strange, weird, sometimes even unsafe.

c) We often think that racism is an issue for people of color,
so they should have workshops about racism.
And people with special needs go to workshops about
how to improve their condition in society.
And sexual minorities have their own things.
So, the Indigenous issues are an issue for the Indigenous people.

d) We really need to remind ourselves to explain these people [Israeli’s who join activism] what does it mean to be here as colonizers.

c) What we miss in all of this is
that all of those people are affected and have a problem

because of us in the majority society. We are the problem.

d) They [Israeli participants] are part of the oppressive system.
This is essential because this is the only way,
we keep the trust that we have.

c) How come that we are not going to these workshops and
to these seminars and learning about these issues?
We kind of think in a funny way that they don't concern us…
what we need to understand is that, decolonizing is changing that relationship.

d) And it is done through a lot of teaching [to Israelis],
and not take anything for granted.

c) It means that we change ourselves.
Do we want to be that oppressor?
I don't think so.

Place-based solidarity includes a literal and metaphorical shift of the ground that informs one's organizing practices. It requires being attuned to the different norms of a place, considering carefully where and how communities arrived in this position and where and how their practices are guided. Our interviewees described different starting points to show up as non-dominant contributors. On this basis, a thriving collective agency allows communities to organize not because of colonial systems but despite them. One Palestinian research participant explained the difficulty of forming trusting relationships under colonial rule,

> “We were used to seeing only settlers and IDF (soldiers). Then, once, these Israelis came and told us, ‘We want to help you rebuild your houses.’ We did not know what to say. We did not trust them. We thought they were spies. It took time, but you eventually trust them when you see them come to the same demonstrations, get arrested, and be beaten up with you. A different thing, a harder thing, was to convince the rest of the community.”

As a consequence, some of the organizers we talked recognized the importance of having learned Arabic, to show up consistently and support the community outside of the conventional scope of politics.

One key relational element that distinguishes the stewardship of power through place-based solidarity is the importance of consensuality. Here, we want to highlight Ellos Deatnu! (Long Live Deatnu), an Indigenous resistance and resurgence movement, camp, and moratorium in Sápmi (Kuokkanen, 2020). Structured in recognition of land-body ecologies, they practice deliberate engagement in "alternative" modes of organizing beyond the state. As such, they also oppose the violence of settler colonialism and its concomitant heteropatriarchy, described by Kuokkanen (2020) as "post-state Indigenous feminist sovereignty." In a 2022 video from Ellos Deatnu!, they refer to the Northern Sámi word “bivdit” to highlight the importance of consent for Sámi rights holders. As they state,

> “The word 'bivdit' is the act of fishing or hunting, but bivdit also means to ask for, to request something from someone. Traditionally we have asked with humbleness a permission from nature...Let's ask salmon to return to the river again (Ellos Deatnu!, 2022) .”

This quote shows the importance of recognizing consensuality as a supportive gesture that may or may not be accepted. In this case, a consequence of place-based solidarities is to adapt ones political organzing as part of the place, rather than following only anthropocentric needs. As such, collective empowerment and responsibility emerge alongside the land by mobilizing differences through grounded and shared goals, understanding the river for providing livelihoods and homes. In the moratorium called out by Ellos Deatnu! (2022), we find an important consequence of this approach as the main responsibility is not to the colonial states and their fishing policies, but the reciprocal relations with Deatnu. The flow of rivers provides an important rupture of liberal recognition politics, for example, how national agendas can function even at the expense of downstream impacts. As politics shift to a focus on the nurturing of kinship, including beyond a human domain, the inherent entanglement of material and cultural aspects manifests as place-based solidarities.

One conclusion from this discussion of place-based solidarities is the importance of disrupting how settler colonialism and other modes of domination are reified and possibly replicated. Moreover, such a relational approach to the diversion of power is not limited to the conditions and contingencies of settler colonialism as the main point of reference. Place-based solidarities also help to create the conditions to collectively balance the need for construction, meaning the desire to create unity across differences. As such, another consequence of orienting political organizing towards "place-based solidarities" is to build structures that do not require groups to adapt to funders, election cycles, or the identity check-boxes of colonial states. By fostering consensual relationships, this shift helps to reshape collective agency and disrupts auto-institutionally produced differences. New collectivities are being nurtured by redefining and reevaluating positionalities within the broader socio-ecology of a specific context, with kinship relations beyond the human domain. Place-based solidarities, then, are a subversive and transformative force, offering a pathway toward different ways of being human.

CONCLUSIONS

Through our experiences in Sápmi and Palestine, we learned together with communities who intentionally nurture the potential of nurturing relationships differently. Deconstructive approaches have to be cautious about rendering Euro-colonial legacies to “a time and space of the ‘post’” (King, 2015, p. 114), exemplified by uncritical favoritism towards “a greater plurality of voices and vehicles for participation in postconflict governance” (Pierson & Thomson, 2018, p. 109). To paraphrase Kwame Ture, a key flaw in Westernized politics is to equate peaceful situations with the absence of injustices. Under such conditions, multiculturalist approaches risk turning into yet another form of assimilation. A non-alignment with assimilationist and multicultural integration approaches showcases the collective integrity within the generative power of place-based solidarity. This perspective adds to research on plural understandings of relationality, including non-anthropocentric cosmologies of community organizing (Belcourt, 2014; Laiti & Carl, 2022) and “relational variance” within social movements (Stagni, 2023). As seen throughout the text, neocolonial assimilationist and multi-culturalism approaches to difference insert mediating factors as proxies for communal relationships. They often function to reconcile colonial domination via narratives of national unity or the celebration of essentialized versions of ethnic diversity. In Palestine and Sápmi, these dynamics help preserve the colonial enterprise through a softening of institutionalized violence by, for example, supposedly impartial courts, pink-washed militaries, or police forces that safeguard corporate interests. As Joy James (2022, p. 127) writes: “Even if we’re pacifist, the state is not.”

On the surface, multicultural integration tends to be perceived as oppositional to neocolonial assimilationist approaches. We are not saying that it never could or does not have any disruptive potential in contrast to assimilation. However, without a diversion of power and resources, multicultural integration stabilizes dominant institutions and colonial states. As a result, the type of multiculturalism that tends to structure practices today functions to depoliticize the assimilatory impacts of neocolonialism. Focusing on the operationalization of differences helps strip away the disguise of coloniality provided by an armor of neutrality. Forced dislocations, the erasure of cultural heritages, and the creation of capitalist dependencies to replace a community-centered provisioning of shared needs like food, education, medicine, and shelter. To gain a sharper understanding of these dynamics, various questions need to be considered. For example, who guides the hands that normalize forced dislocation? In whose interest are traditional livelihoods coerced into capitalist logic? How does the creation of exotic outliers through multicultural integration help to legitimize neo-colonial politics? As Lorde (1984, p. 77) writes,

> "... it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation."

No amount of propaganda, no good intentions, and no reformist scheme will change the legacies of differences enforced by the material reality of colonial conquest. Despite the neo-liberal fantasy of societies comprised of rational self-maximizing agents, individual relationships are no replacement for community. Those of us in colonizing institutions are well advised to account both for how our work could be meaningful for implicated communities or at least not push those people in harm's way. This lesson is relevant not only for NGOs but also for researchers like us. After many years of experience, research participants know which groups are likely to withdraw their solidarity right when it matters most - mainly when it means giving up their dominant positionality and power. In Westernized contexts, including in many political organizing spaces across Europe, much work remains to be done toward the potential of offering solidarity with genuine communal integrity. However, there is much to learn from liberatory practices, as the ones strived for by our research participants, particularly about the generative capacity of reciprocity, anti-oppression, and restorative justice.

We are all part of and connected to a multitude of communities. Nurturing ways to address our differences across and within those communities allows us to show up with more integrity, especially in the effort to link various struggles. A sharper understanding of the divisiveness of colonial conquest through approaches that mobilize differences provides a critical starting point to inform further research, for example, to tease out links between colonial difference regimes and the latest intensification by fascist forces, the accelerating climate crisis, and patriarchy. In these instances, place-based solidarity organizing has a substantial disruptive and generative potential.

Analysis on this basis can provide both critiques and hints for the creative power of crossing movement lineages towards collective liberation.

Place-based solidarities erode the illusory sense of benevolence assumed by assimilationist and liberal multiculturalist approaches to difference. As long as we conceive of our relationships through auto-institutional mechanisms, we surrender our positionality to those promoting business as usual. Colonial institutions maintain the myth of saving societies from the alleged savagery of those without Westernized state constructs. By extending Coulthard’s (2014) framework of recognition politics, our discussion helps to contextualize and analyze the broader structural issues shared by our research participants. Their insights should alert us of performative solidarities enacted to suit the colonial gaze. Our discussion highlights the dissonances integral to the organizing practices of many dominant actors who would rather contribute to the reproduction of idealized Western values over a diversion of their power through place-based solidarities.

We want to conclude with three key lessons that emerged from this article’s engagement with community organizers. First, decentring dominant colonial ideas of difference requires a cultural and material shift. Through these processes, different communities can demonstrate integrity as they define the terms of engagement through their own generative power rather than the identity imposed by external actors. Second, a commitment to collective resistance disrupts and redefines relationality (Baaz et al., 2016). Institutional structures no longer mediate myths about differences, which typically construct exotifying representations of communities along a spectrum of victimhood or superiority. Place-based solidarity helps to ground efforts within the material realities, allowing for what we call “stewardship of power.” Third, recognizing our shared responsibility for the thriving of life can neither deny (assimilationist) nor absolve (multiculturalist) the enriching creative force of differences between human beings. Establishing consensual boundaries is a critical way to honor collective responsibilities, despite the fact that separatist organizing tends to be hastily brushed aside for hindering the creation of collective agency via collaboration or coalition. However, discussing a "Palestinian" or "Sámi" question tends to serve as a distraction from the dominant function of differences under the control of colonial states. Redefining collective agency through place-based solidarity is a key part of reworking the structures that currently uphold a "naturalization" of social differences rooted in Euro-colonial ideals. Moreover, as our research participants indicate, the creative potential that might spring from merging these efforts with shared goals can alter both the conditions and horizon for co-liberation.

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