Forests of Forgetting, Faces of Erasure:

Slow Violence, Racial Capitalism & Ecological Warfare in North America and Israel/Palestine

by Marlene Ito

This essay examines how whiteness operates as a constructed and materialised orientation that legitimises racial capitalism and settler colonialism through practices of erasure. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's phenomenology of whiteness and Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, it argues that these forms of violence are sustained not only through spectacular acts of force but through attritional, mundane infrastructures that naturalise exclusion across time and space. Through an ethnographically staged encounter with three objects - a Kodak "Shirley Card," a Jewish National Fund (JNF) collection box, and a media excerpt framing Israel as an environmental "startup nation" - the essay traces a shared logic of racialisation that renders black and Indigenous bodies and landscapes as invisible, deficient, or in need of redemption. Across these objects, the essay argues that erasure is not accidental but systemic: a racialised ordering of visibility and belonging that privileges certain bodies while rendering others out of place. This essay concludes by attending to embodied acts of remembrance and resistance, suggesting a slow resistance to counter slow violence. While slow violence is enduring, it is not absolute.

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"Colonialism makes the world 'white', a world 'ready' for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach. Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them."
- Sara Ahmed 2007: 153-4

Whiteness, according to Sara Ahmed (2007, p. 150), is not to be assumed as an 'ontological given', but as that which has been 'received or become given', a consequence of racialisation thus shaping what bodies "can do". Racialisation refers to the process by which racial meaning extends to previously 'racially unclassified relationships, social practices, or groups' – an ongoing project predicated on colonialism, conquest, and enslavement, wherein bodies incur classification to uphold and legitimise domination (Omi and Winant, 1986, p. 13). Indeed, whiteness is experienced as deeply habitual and corporeal; as proximate and intimately felt; as ocular. Whiteness orients how one's body can "sink" into spaces comfortably (Rolland, 2003), determining how liberally bodies can navigate the world. Colonialism, as Ahmed writes, lends itself to malleability, shaping the world to be ready for 'certain kinds of bodies' while rendering others out of place; not 'extending to their shape' (Fanon, 1952; Ahmed, 2006, p. 160). This essay seeks to reckon with how whiteness, as a constructed phenomenology, has been historicised and embedded as veridic, materially occluding black and brown bodies. Specifically, I explore how whiteness is legitimised through two main tropes: erasure and the cultural zeitgeist of the 1940s-1990s in North America evidenced in Kodak's film photography, in tandem with ecological warfare and settler colonialism in Israel/Palestine from the 1900s to the twenty-first century.

The nexus of this essay is "erasure", which I examine through *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) where slow violence is defined as a protracted, attritional form of violence that is "not immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, erupting into instant sensational visibility," but rather a "delayed destruction dispersed across time and space" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). I draw on three "objects" of inquiry: a Kodak "Shirley Card", a Jewish National Fund (JNF) collection box, and a quote borrowed from Claudia Cahalane's (2013) article, positioning Israel as the paragon of environmental innovation. I introduce this essay by situating the reader in a museum setting, presenting an ethnographic dialogue that intends to fold these objects into one another. First, I examine Shirley Cards as racialised calibration tools in North American photography, drawing on Lundy Braun (2014), Lorna Roth (2009), and Shalini Shankar (2020) to explore how they construct whiteness as the standard, isolating and erasing non-white bodies. Next, I analyse the JNF box as another material artifact of erasure, following Irus Braverman (2009) on its role in disseminating settler-colonial narratives. Finally, I turn to Cahalane's (2013) framing of Israel's environmentalism, which reflects how

development discourse obscures histories of displacement. I "implode" these objects, tracing their shared logic of legitimising erasure through subtle yet enduring forms of violence (Dumit, 2014).

Figure 1: Kodak Shirley Card (1978). Courtesy of Hermann Zschiegner.

The sun emits a dry and unforgiving heat, a heat that asks you take refuge in a modest exhibition space nearby. You walk into a room displaying three pieces, first confronted with a large print: a white woman with an arguably gaudy verisimilitude, manicured hair and pearls adorning her neck, looks back at you, smiling. This, according to the placard, is Shirley. Due to the proliferation of photo processing and printing services throughout the mid-twentieth century, Kodak supplied an abundance of labs with printers (McNamee, 2023). However, each Kodak printer needed to be calibrated and standardised to achieve the correct "skin colour balance" (Roth, 2009, p. 112). Thus, Shirley, an employee of Kodak, became the first colour test-strip-card model, widely recognised as the 'skin ideal for most North American photo labs' (Roth, 2009, p.112).

While posited as ideologically neutral, colour photography was never a passive medium bound to "faithfully" capture the natural world; rather, deliberate choices were actively made in the development and production of photographic materials (Winston, 1996). Kodak's calibration practices materialised and oriented the camera to whiteness as the normative centre to which others must orient themselves, rendering non-white skin tones invisible or queerly exposed and represented. Such embedded bias is similarly delineated by Braun, who examines how scientific "truths" embedded in technological innovation—such as spirometry, a lung function test used to measure breathing capacity—were shaped by racialised assumptions. In *Breathing Race into the Machine* (2014) she argues that these assumptions consequently produced new "truths" about black physiology (Braun, 2014, pp. 127-129). Here, just as Kodak calibrated its film stock to encode whiteness as the standard, medical devices like spirometers were designed with

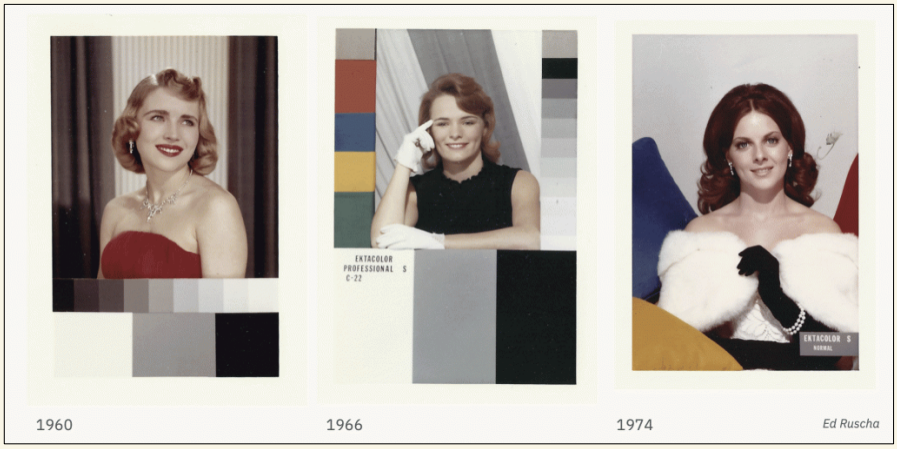

Figure 2. Kodak Shirley Card(s) from 1960, 1966, and 1974. Source: Jim Doty 2023

built-in racial value-laden assumptions. Consequently, quotidian technologies did not simply reflect racial disparities but actively *produced and augmented* them under the guise of scientific objectivity.

Such technological racialisation embedded into seemingly benign infrastructures did not manifest as explosive or spectacular events but instead operated through a more insidious form of attritional violence. As Nixon argues, such acts of slow violence are often obscured by their "drama deficit" (Nixon, 2011, p. 52), unfolding gradually over time, espoused as though it had always been so, "based on science that could not be changed"(Roth, 2009, p. 120). Despite complaints from parents of black schoolchildren,
Kodak continued producing new iterations of Shirley cards (Figure 3), each featuring another

white woman labelled underneath as 'normal' (Roth, 2009; Lewis, 2019; Wessling, 2023). However, it was not until the mid-sixties and seventies, when chocolate manufacturers complained that film stock failed to differentiate between milk and dark chocolate, and furniture companies struggled to discern between different wood stains, that Kodak acknowledged the issue (Roth, 2009, pp.119-120). In response to complaints from Kodak's desired clientele—white consumers—Kodak adjusted its film stock to maintain its market dominance. This aligns with what Shankar (2020) describes as the "ultimate consumer aspiration" in advertising: whiteness as the normative centre around which industries orient their products and marketing. This shift, rather than reflecting genuine care or inclusivity,

Figure 3. Kodak's multiracial Shirley card from 1996. Source: Kodak via Lorna Roth

imbricates neoliberal ventures and logic where care itself is commodified as "bought or sold; […] packaged and advertised," with the sole intention of maintaining capital (Constable, 2009, p. 50).

Here, the lack of acknowledgement or apology of the siloing of non-white bodies in photography emulsion adheres to the 'corporate technique of "never apologising never explaining" (Hirsch, 2014). Kodak did not *intend* to be racist thus, if the intention of erasure and exclusion was not out of malice, something that cannot explicitly be disproven, then a flawed execution should be readily forgiven. It is, to echo Shankar, a sensible 'racial ontologic of diversity" that any offence felt by people is 'their own shortcoming', therefore deflecting corporate responsibility onto those victimised (Shankar, 2020, p. 116). Thus, the Shirley card is emblematic of being solely palatable to white consumers, only fixing erasure and exclusion when their target consumer expresses criticism. Kodak's calibration practices quietly reinforced whiteness as the universal standard, the onus not on the company, but rather on the individual for not matching this standard. This logic of erasure and exclusion – where structures appear neutral but in fact privilege a particular racial order – extends beyond photography. As Kodak sought to amend its hamartia of erasure in response to risks to its capital, it framed technological change as progress and diversification, promoting this shift through a "diverse" Shirley card (Figure 4). This form of embedding racialisation in material culture is not dissimilar to the object that sits placidly on a raised platform in the room beside the Shirley cards: a blue and white collection box (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Left: Mid-20th-century English JNF tin charity box (1950). Source: Menorah Galleries. Right: KKL Photo Archive (2021). JNF's Hebrew name, Keren Kayemet Le'Yisrael, translates to "Perpetual Fund/Capital for Israel."

The following object is also fundamentally implicated in neoliberal ventures and racial capitalism, legitimising whiteness and in conjunction, the white settler, as the most deserving of belonging.

Peeling your eyes away from Shirley's half smile, you move onto the next piece. You are faced with two iterations of a JNF collection box: a money slot sits at the top, imbued with a nationalist blue, representative of Israel. The older iteration frames the Jewish National Fund as "working for a greener Israel" and visually reinforces this claim through a map indicating that donations contribute to "reclaiming the land" (Braverman, 2009, p. 328) and "building a country" (JNF Canada, 2025). The more contemporary iteration claims to "redeem and reclaim the land of Israel", iconographically depicting hands nurturing a pine tree with the word "afforestation" – the process of establishing a forest on land that was not previously forested – resting near the top of the tree (Figure 5). Returning to the language printed on the boxes, the phrase "build a country" implies that no country previously existed, while "reclaim the land" suggests prior dispossession. This word choice insinuates a land either arid and barren or occupied. This is insinuated or rather belligerently stated by Chaim Weizmann (1914),"there is a country which happens to be called Palestine, a country without a people, and, on the other hand, there exists the Jewish people, and it has no country" (Braverman, 2009, p. 340). Analogously, such a narrative is reiterated by Theodor Herzl's (1902) writing:

> Jaffa made a very unpleasant impression . . . the town was in a state of extreme decay . . . the alleys were dirty, neglected, full of vile odors. Everywhere misery in bright Oriental rags. Poor Turks, dirty Arabs, timid Jews lounged about—indolent, beggarly, hopeless. . . .
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> The landscape through which they passed was a picture of desolation. The low-lands were mostly sand and swamp, the lean fields looked as if burnt over. The inhabitants of the blackish Arab villages looked like brigands. Naked children played in the dirty alleys. Over the distant horizon loomed the deforested hills of Judea. The bare slopes and the bleak, rocky valleys showed some traces of present or former cultivation.

Figure 6. Excerpt from Irus Braverman's analysis of Herzl's Altneuland (2009:338)

The semiotics of both Weizmann and Herzl's narratives carry an almost antinomic quality to them, as they establish Palestine as a country that is both desolate, 'mostly sand and swamp', and simultaneously full, constitutive of 'poor Turks, dirty Arabs, timid Jews' (Herzl, 1960; Braverman, 2009, p. 338). It is posited as a virgin country denuded of life; inherently neglected, replete with exposed rock, red dirt and extreme decay that bleeds out into the streets. The 'timid Jews" are present, but they are hopeless and consequently indolent, succumbing to the Arab influence. They await redemption by their modern peoples, the Israeli Jew, there to repudiate the image of the 'submissive and passive diasporic Jew' and create a native subject that is mobile and strong while mending the 'rupture from the ancestral land of Zion'(Braverman, 2009, p. 333). As Herzl propounds, 'much can be done here with afforestation, this country needs nothing but water and shade to have a great future. And who is it to bring water and shade here? The Jews!" (Herzl, 1902; Braverman, 2009, p. 339). Thus, salvation is to be found in the JNF box (Figure 5), a ubiquitous object disseminated to millions of Jewish households across the world (Bar-Gal, 2003, p. 1). JNF, known to be the largest Zionist organisation in the world, facilitates programs for 'tree donations, tree planting, tree mapping, and the legal protection of trees', specifically pine trees, which have led to a fundamental shift of the contemporary Israeli/Palestinian landscape (Braverman, 2009, p. 319). The pine tree has come to be synonymous with JNF, symbolising and embodying the national identity of Israel (Braverman, 2009, p. 318). Yet why pine trees?

Pine trees are known as a "pioneer species", characteristically distinguishable due to their rapid growth and, from the moment of planting, 'become invisible, as if it was always there' ' (Braverman, 2009, pp. 343). Additionally, their needles 'enhance the acidity of the soil, preventing the development of most other forms of vegetation', enabling them to dominate the landscape (Braverman, 2009, pp. 343-5). When the box is full, a sapling is promised, and 'the forest of Zion thickened in happy response' (Schama, 1995, p. 5). The proximate and material

Figure 7. Mahfodah Shtayyeh hugging her olive tree, source: Getty Images and Al Jazeera.

omnipresence in the Jewish home is then a cultural promise that embodies a yearning for the homeland; an infinite reminder of the Jewish responsibility to contribute and work towards the redemption of the Holy Land. It transcends its materiality however, operating as a *lieu de mémoire*, where collective memory crystallises and secretes a nostalgia, which is reinforced and reproduced across generations (Nora, 1989, p. 7).

While there is a vague understanding of what the JNF project gestures to, there seems to be a parochial comprehension of what the planting of pine trees actually entails, 'while we assumed that a pinewood was more beautiful than a hill denuded by grazing flocks of goats and sheep, we were never exactly sure what all the trees were *for*' (Schama, 1995, pp. 5-6). Therefore, the act of donating legitimises Zionist settlement by rendering 'land reclamation'not as a violent political project but rebranding it under the guise of restoring a 'desolate land'. An innocent disposition is adopted here, framed simply as an attempt to aid and cultivate an abandoned landscape. In this sense, a parallel becomes evident between the Shirley cards and the JNF box: both are embedded within ostensibly benign infrastructures that present themselves as neutral, corrective, or even philanthropic while obscuring the racialised violence they sustain. Consequently, opposition to such ostensibly neutral infrastructures and developmental practices, whether through accessible film printing or the cultivation of 'barren' land , becomes recast as irrational resistance to projects framed as socially beneficial.

However, Figure 6 refutes the narrative of innocence and pure intention. The devastating image of Mahfouza illustrates how such erasure is deliberate and has ongoing violent consequences that naturalise settler presence on Indigenous territory. Above, Mahfouza laments the axing of her child, her olive tree. Her arms wrap around its trunk, her face pressed to its bark. In the background, olive trees lie inert on the ground while Israeli settlers watch. Steven Posen, a JNF

Toronto Board Director and North American Jew stated, 'all I know is that it can only be good to plant trees and [that] it will help the country become a more ecological success'(Posen, 2005; Braverman, 2009, p. 320). Yet, pine trees bear no fruit and burgeon rapidly. They negate the existence of olive trees–indigenous to the land, requiring decades to mature, and producing vital sources of food and oil–which have come to symbolise Palestinian national identity and connection to the homeland (Malik, 2023). In doing so, they also conceal the existence of Palestinian villages. To make space for the pine trees, to make this seemingly desolate land an 'ecological success', axes must be taken to the olive tree trunks and branches must be 'shorn of their olives by hands that did not plant them' (Malik, 2023) – they are to be erased, as if they never existed. Again, this resurfaces the settler-colonial narrative that the fields of Palestine lie fallow, and that it is a Jewish duty to make the desert bloom. Yet, this narrative fails to mention that this must come at the cost of uprooting olive trees, and in turn, the Palestinian people.

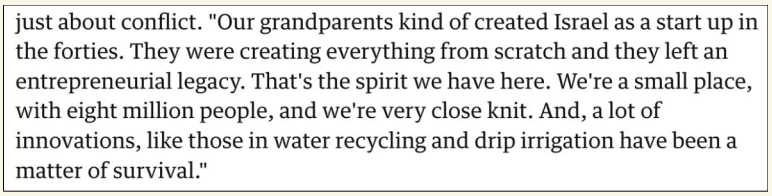
just about conflict. "Our grandparents kind of created Israel as a start up in the forties. They were creating everything from scratch and they left an entrepreneurial legacy. That's the spirit we have here. We're a small place, with eight million people, and we're very close knit. And, a lot of innovations, like those in water recycling and drip irrigation have been a matter of survival."

Figure 8. Screenshot from *Israel's drive for energy independence creating wave of sustainable start-ups* (Cahalane 2013).

An excerpt of a *Guardian* article is framed on the wall of the exhibit, close to the JNF box. It features a quote from Joanna Landau, the founder of Vibe Israel. The placard describes Vibe Israel as an organisation that invites digital influencers with large followings to visit Israel, aiming to shift the country's image from one defined by conflict to one that highlights its ecological innovation and beauty. Such organisations fall under the broader strategy of *hasbara*: a public diplomacy effort aimed at shaping international perceptions of Israel (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015). Landau's description of 'creating Israel from scratch' as a 'startup in the forties' infers to the 1948 *Nakba* (catastrophe), denied by the official Israeli state narrative, wherein at least 750,000 Palestinians were made refugees beyond the borders of the state by the Israeli military. The language deployed here is deeply corporate and neoliberal; framing Israel's creation as a bold economic venture rather than a settler-colonial project, depoliticising and erasing the realities of Palestinian grief and genocide suffered at the hands of this "startup". Such language attempts to pacify news coverage that formulates a critical view of Israel, adducing the Israeli state as a crucial actor in quelling the climate crisis with innovative technologies.

The quote and article reinforce a narrative of Zionist ingenuity that recasts state formation and settler colonialism as an entrepreneurial achievement and national salvation. This narrative mirrors the JNF box, utilising the environment to disguise the violent and attritional implications of what "creating everything from scratch" means. Additionally, Landau speaks of Israel's entrepreneurial nation-building, framing it as an innate spirit predicated on survival, a rhetoric echoed in the JNF's historical role in land cultivation and afforestation. However, this framing obscures the land as already cultivated and inhabited, claiming the land was an untouched, uncultivated and desolate resource, awaiting development. Crucially, these claims racialise Israelis as innovative and caring: tending to the environment to ensure capital profit while also simply "doing a good thing". The antithesis, then, is the Palestinian population, racialised as incapable of cultivating land, portrayed as lazy and lacking innovation, and, as suggested in Cahalane's article, rendered absent altogether.

In conclusion, through the evocation of a museum display this article has sought to examine how racial capitalism and settler-colonialism sustain themselves through erasure – extending not just to people, but also to landscapes. Kodak's photographic calibration practices particularly

rendered black and brown bodies invisible, naturalising whiteness as the default. The JNF's afforestation projects similarly worked to erase Palestinian existence, recasting a landscape already imbued with the Palestinian presence as an empty space awaiting cultivation. Finally, the discursive formation of Israel as a "startup nation" reframes an act of violent dispossession as an economic and ecological triumph. Such forms of erasure are not immediate or spectacular; they unfold in sticky time (Griffiths, 2014), with slow, attritional consequences. As Nixon's *slow violenceV* suggests, these processes do not announce themselves with dramatic rupture, but instead fade into the fabric of daily life, naturalising injustice as though it were inevitable and beneficial (Nixon, 2011, p.2). The Shirley card does not just reflect racial bias, but it encodes it into visual culture. The JNF box is not merely a device of charity, but a tool of settler-colonial expansion. The language of sustainability is not neutral, but is a tool wielded for justifying displacement and violence. Both of these objects reveal how whiteness, as Ahmed describes, shapes the world to accommodate certain bodies while rendering others out of place (Ahmed, 2007, pp.154-8).

However, these acts of erasure are not totalising, as suggested by the image of Mahfouza embracing her olive tree, which foregrounds the persistence of Palestinian attachment to land and memory despite ongoing dispossession. Read through an anti-colonial framework, the photograph can be understood as unsettling settler-colonial narratives of permanence and control by visually asserting continued Palestinian presence and resistance. Violence and fear then take the form of memory, of fabulated nostalgia, of pride of "development". Yet, to critique such forms of racialisation serves as an ode to the ways in which erasure is met with remembrance, and violence is met with resistance. Thus, while the mechanisms of forgetting and erasure are potent, they are not absolute.

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