# **2024-25 AKC Autumn Lecture 8:**

# ***Colonial Cartography in Palestine and the Decolonising Potential of Counter Maps***

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My talk today is called Colonial Cartography in Palestine and the Decolonizing Potential of Counter maps. So, over the next sort of 40 minutes, I'll be assessing the geographical imaginaries of mapping and remapping practices in and of Palestine, starting with the British looking later at Zionist and then Israeli mapping, as well as Palestinian and anti-Zionist countermapping. I've got two main objectives in my talk today. The first to analyse the relationship between mapping and power in Palestine and second to assess the power and potential of countermapping in a project of decolonization. And my hope is that this research will address current gaps in the knowledge of maps, colonialism and decolonization in Palestine.

I should say I focus less on how maps are made and the processes that go into them or what different groups do with them and much more on how they build on, intersect with and influence one another over time to produce different understandings of space, and in this case of Palestine. Before I continue, I do want to acknowledge that I'm talking to you in the context of 14 months of genocide, and that the Palestinian people in the besieged Gaza Strip, as well as attacks on surrounding populations in the West Bank, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria, have been devastating. The death toll in Gaza is estimated at 44,000, and we believe that to be conservative. Lancet has estimated it's upwards of 186 [thousand] when all is said and done. And actually, I find talking about this subject in this context very difficult.

And so, I wanted to just pause and actually begin with this quote, which for me has kind of sums up where we are, which says,

"one common refrain is that words are meaningless, and that language is inadequate and incomplete. 'No words' people keep saying. This is a moment of crisis and the collapse of language, it is said. What does this even mean? How can there be a collapse in language at the same time that it overflows? Herein is the paradox. An influx of images, articles, podcasts, conferences, protests, and news reports circulating endlessly since October 7th, yet the genocide barrels on undeterred. This moment is an endless stream of visuals and testimonials. As such, it is a moment of abundance rather than scarcity of expression."

So, Alia and Amany's article, which came out last month, is really excellent, and I just want to kind of begin in the spirit of that before I go on to talking about what it is want to talk about. So let's begin by asking: why maps? The relationship between professional geography, cartography and colonialism is widely recognized and the maps of today are still very much colonial and nationalist enterprises which reflect predominantly western acquisition and control of territory. In culture and imperialism, Edward Said explains the struggle over geography as one quote, "not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings." End quote. Map makers were and in many ways still are presumed to be engaged in an objective or scientific project of knowledge creation. From this perspective, maps are perfect scaled representations of the world based upon unbiased factual information and accurate measurements.

This tradition of scientific positivism can be traced directly to the enlightenment. Empiricism, which is the hallmark of enlightenment thought, dictates that knowledge is derived from direct observation and logical or mathematical proof. Such precision enabled the map to provide a transparent window onto the world and entrenched the notion that a good map was an accurate map. This new approach to map making based on grids and mathematics was totally at odds with maps up until this point, which were often bedecked with religious iconography, pictorial signs, signs of the monarchy or the religious order that endowed them. In fact, this is a pre-modern European map of Palestine from, I believe, 1745, and it's fantastical. There's even a sea creature floating in the Mediterranean. None of it makes any sense as how we would understand it, but this was how the space was conceived. There was also a wholesale disinterest in geographical accuracy.

For instance, historical maps used to situate Jerusalem in the capital, so here you have Jerusalem in the center of the map. This map is presumed to be from 1475. or else it shows the 12 tribes of Israel alongside contemporary Palestinian towns and villages. But this idea of positivism has given the perception that maps are detached, that they are objective, that they're neutral, that they're above all else accurate graphic representations of space. They're regarded as mirrors of their subject matter and I think this quote, I'm not going to go into the literature because it's vast, but this quote kind of sums up this perspective.

"'mirror', 'window', 'objective', 'accurate', 'transparent', 'neutral', all conspire to disguise the map as a reproduction of the world, disabling us from recognising it for social construction. Is any myth among cartographers more cherished than that of the map's dispassionate neutrality?"

Maps represent more than just a physical image of space. They possess agency. The critical cartographer J.B. Harley writes that maps should be seen as texts. They are texts in the same way that paintings, prints, theatre, film, tv, music etc are texts. Decisions as to whether to privilege area, distance, compass direction, shape, they all contribute to how we understand a place. Also, the borders that are plotted on the map, the detailed presentation or omission of certain features, certain places, the relative size of places, the use of certain names and toponyms, All of these conspire to create a certain vocabulary of a map and it's in this literature that the map is written.

In fact, one of the biggest takeaways of my archival research, which I can talk about more in the Q&A if there's interest, is just how much a map can tell you without needing to have any context whatsoever. In this way, conclusions from the maps don't just come from the intrinsic quality of the map, but also the reader, the reader's objectives and their research methods, their lived experiences, and how they understand the place that they are looking at on the map. Relatedly, the modern scientific map is a development that coincides directly with European encroachment onto other people's lands and indigenous people's struggle. European conceptions of territory are used to exert control and create this myth of empty space which is ready for the taking. The blank space on European maps of Asia, Africa and the Americas drove explorers, soldiers, scholars and capitalists to discover them and propel modern European knowledge and management systems onto a global scale.

The British in particular were masters of this, in fact they made mapping the cornerstone of their dominion throughout their empire. One of the earliest instances of this, of sort of official colonial mapping, was in Ireland. This map was from 1653 and it was intended to dispossess the sort of rebellious Irish population and distribute them amongst British soldiers and settlers. In fact, the title of this map is 'Ireland according to the Act of Settlement and Subsequent Orders' and it outlines British land grabs including collateral so you can see sort of Irish transfers over there and they're very sort of front and centre about their colonial ambitions. And since this time the surveyor has walked alongside the British officer and has sometimes gone before him so this project of, of mapping the empire as well as dominating it militarily goes hand in hand. In the case of Palestine, the latter half of the 19th century saw a flurry of orientalist exploration of Palestine by Europeans, mainly British and Germans. And they were obsessed with historical, linguistic, geographic and archeological studies and surveys, especially in areas of biblical significance and religious importance.

I want to spend a bit of time talking about this, which is the Palestine Exploration Fund's Survey of Western Palestine, which was conducted from 1871 to 1877. It produced by far the most comprehensive survey of Palestine to date. It was ostensibly to age religious pilgrims, but in reality, it paved the way for British, for the British to assume control in Palestine 50 years later, and this is actually evidenced by the fact that these maps were used during the British campaign in Palestine during the First World War, and also to defray the cost of publishing the survey. They used original zinc printing, sorry, they allowed the zinc prints to be used by the military and that was subsidized by it. And the scope of this, and you can see this from this map over here, is how we understand Palestine today or the modern understanding of historic Palestine, which is from the river to the Mediterranean Sea, which became the British Mandate 50 years later.

So, although this was conducted during the Ottoman Empire, it nonetheless had a proprietary, acquisitive relationship between the map audiences and the places being mapped. This was actually, I went to that, the PEF still exists, its office is in Greenwich, and I went to that archive and this was, I only photographed this because it was my village, but it was interesting that so much of it was also hand-drawn and had real sort of attention to detail that was done by the cartographers themselves rather than just the finished product. And since then, actually, the Palestine Exploration Fund has produced a series of memoirs, volumes of explanatory notes on what each sheet of the map is, special volumes dedicated to place names, the city of Jerusalem, the flora and fauna, et cetera. These were sketches that were found in the archives.

And all of this sort of allowed colonial mapping, particularly of Palestine in this period, to create this biblical importance onto it and emphasize this mathematical accuracy combined and married with religious and biblical importance. And crucially, the PEF wasn't just this abstraction that some military generals in the future relied upon, it was actually used to instill British connection to Palestine itself. The PEF allowed Palestine to be claimed for England. This quote from the Archbishop of York was actually, he said this at the inaugural meeting of the PEF.

"This country of Palestine belongs to you and me. It is essentially ours. It was given to the father of Israel in the words, 'walk the lands in the length and breadth of it, and for I will give it unto thee.' We mean to walk through Palestine in the length and in the breadth of it because the land has been given unto us."

So, the British mandate, which operated from 1918 to 1948, extended the work of the PEF 50 years prior and basically controlled Palestine up until the creation of the Israeli state in 1948. I want to show you just some examples of British maps during this era. We won't dwell too long on it, but I think it's important to see just exactly how this manifested cartographically. So, these two maps here, the one, the more colourful one on your left is, was actually a McNally, sorry, a Rand McNally map, which was an American cartographer, which still prints surveys and atlases today. And this was from 1920. The only reason I included it is you can see just how drastic and arbitrary these borders were. So, this was before the finalization of what became the border. And you see administration of the Arabs, British administration, actually none of the Arabs, didn't end up administering anything, the French and the British partitioned this, initially in Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1917, but it wasn't really instilled until the early 20s.

And so, this map really reflects just the arbitrary nature of colonialism during this period. And the only thing to note about it is you see just how thick the red lines that operate are. And that is all going to span several hundreds of meters, which creates these contested territories between countries and why you see so many post-colonial conflicts as a consequence of arbitrary border separation. This over here is actually what the map ended up looking like. Each of these are districts and sub-districts that the British controlled. There were 14 in total. Some of them still hold, many of them no longer exist in this way. But you have Jaffa, Nablus, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Tiberias in the north, Akka in the north, on the border with Lebanon, Safed, and so on. These two maps were part of this, two of eight. This is from the Survey of Palestine in 1937.

So, the British did these very, as I said, comprehensive surveys of Palestine at this time, sometimes on huge scale, sometimes on small scale. So, this survey actually tried to document, each of these were themed maps. So, the one on your left says 'land settlement' and the one on your right says 'Jewish owned lands.' Land settlement, contrary to what you might think, isn't just where people live, it's actually how much of the land had been surveyed by the British. And what that means is had they, this is the topic for another talk and we can maybe talk about it in the Q&A, but a large part of the money that funds empire comes from the natives themselves. And to do that, you must map the place so that you can tax it.

And so, this was part of the topo-cadastral mapping that went into it. But you see how closely it mirrors Jewish purchase of Palestinian land during this time. And this pattern is important to note. So, if we look at the Jewish owned land at this time, you see it goes across, well, they called it the Jezreel Valley, but from the Sea of Galilee across to Haifa and then down the coast towards sort of south of Jaffa towards north of the modern day of the district. And so in this way, you understand that the British, so this was the land that the Jewish organizations and individuals were purchasing, and the British started there in terms of understanding what was being mapped and how. And I include this, this was also, this is more representative of the style of British mapping.

Anyone who studied empire or the British empire will recognize this aesthetic. It's an aesthetic that the British used across different ordinance survey maps across the empire. This was part of two sheets. This was the northern sheet. And this was, I think, from the late 40s. If I recall, it's 46, but I might be mistaken. But in addition to these maps, they also created these really complex ledgers and indexes of population size, land holdings, ethnic and religious breakdown. So this is the Tiberius one. You probably can't read it too closely, but it has every single village. And at the top it says Muslim, Jews, Christians, other, total, just to give you a sense of who lives where and how. The last thing I want to say on the British colonial mapping endeavour is the first time that the partition of Palestine was ever suggested was 1937.

Now I think in this current historical moment, you might think that partition has always been inevitable, that whether it's a one state solution, two state solution, no state solution, whatever, that the land has to be in some way partitioned or fragmented. This is actually quite a recent idea. The first time that it was ever suggested that we split Palestine into different entities or countries was during the British Empire in 1937. And this was called the Peel Commission. So, during the Great Revolt, which I think was from 1935, well, 1936 till 39, I believe, the British sort of freaked and they sent Lord Peel to go and assess what to do. and his findings were, you must partition. And so actually, I include these only because we understand what the partition to be, to look in a particular way. But again, you see this totally arbitrary push towards how to partition.

So here you have Jewish on the one on the left, Jewish state, Arab state, Arab state, and then they change their mind and they say, no, the Galilee's separate, then it's the Jewish state, then it's the Arab state, then it's international, then it's the Arab state, and then the next one says, oh well, no, then you need Northern mandated territory, then the Arab state, then the Arab state, then the Northern territory. So, it was completely arbitrary. I think this is really the point I want to get across with this. I don't want to dwell too much on the substance, particularly because it never came to pass. This is what they ended up recommending in the end. Within the red line is what a Jewish state would be in it. If you remember what I pointed out earlier, that pattern of Jewish property owning, going sort of across and down, you see this mirrored in how this partition would have looked. And then the bit that looks a bit like a kidney, do kidneys look like that? Would be internationally controlled, which essentially means British controlled because they wanted Jerusalem and they wanted access to the sea. And the rest would be Arab controlled.

This never ended up happening, but I demonstrate it just to say that this was actually a very common colonial endeavour to partition the land as you see fit with no consultation of the indigenous population. All this to say, everything barrelled ahead up until 1948, which was the partition of Palestine. I included this map only because I really loved it. In the archives, it's massive. It sort of stretches from here kind of to the end of the screen. And it was Newsweek's map of the month. I presume it was included in magazines as you bought them. The only thing I want, there are two things I want to just highlight from this. The map itself is quite boring, but this text over here, the partition plan calls for the Jewish state containing approximately 500,000 Jews 416,000 Arabs.

So, about the same number of Jewish inhabitants and Arab inhabitants and an Arab state with a population of only 8,000 Jews and 715,000 Arabs. So even within the Jewish state the Jews would barely be a majority within the partition framework. And the last thing I want to say is this line, as the Arabs threaten violence on those implementing the plan. And again, you see this orientalist idea of us of Arabs or Palestinians just having this sort of feral primitive anger irrespective of any kind of organized logic in resistance to colonial endeavours. I'd like now to turn to, to Zionist mapping during this period. So let me see. I won't dwell too long on this but there are a few things that are really important to note here. So from the end of the 19th century the ambition of the Zionist movement had been to acquire and, and purchase as much Jewish land as possible to allow Jews worldwide to settle in Palestine.

This was primarily done through organizations such as the Jewish National Fund, which is still in operation today. And the declared goal of the JNF was to purchase the maximum amount of territory in Palestine in order to establish national ownership of the land, which would be non-transferable. I'll come back to this in a little while. This map is actually one of my favorite maps. I won't dwell too long on it, but first of all, it's super art deco, which is why I like it, but also the one on the left-hand side, you see that actually it depicts kibbutzim during this period, which were Jewish only settlements during this time, and no other Palestinian entity exists.

So, if you looked at this map, you would think no one lived on the ground to begin with. But the real reason why I love this map is you see this icon on the right-hand side, which is zooming in, of this wall and tower structure. this was the typical feature of how settlements used to be during this time. They would build a wall and a tower around it. And then kibbutzim could look at each other from that. And they happened again, you see the same settlement pattern in the north and down along the river, along the sea, sorry. And just to give you a sense of how this manifests today. So, this, the Gan HaShlosha National Park, which is in the Galilee, has essentially immortalised this and allows sort of young people and families to come and cosplay a settler during this time. And the reason why I found it so interesting is they have all these sort of kind of creepy reenactments, but they do have maps, British survey maps, like the one I was just pointing out earlier, all along the walls. And you see sort of an intention into how and where to settle the landscape.

So, the JNF, according to Baruch Kimmeling, who's a really excellent scholar, said the lands owned by the JNF could be rented only to Jews, but not sold. The JNF solicited capital for land purchase from the Jewish communities in the diaspora, not only to obtain capital, but also to enlist active participation of the Jewish world community in the process of land redemption in Palestine. Redemption here meaning settlement. The JNF also sought to prevent the return of lands to Arabs in which they had already been purchased by Jews, i.e. once the land has been sold, it can never go back to Palestinian ownership. And these sorts of maps were designed to help that.

So, you can see it says help them across at the bottom. It lists the number of Jewish immigrants during this time. I think this was from 1936, but I could be mistaken. The Keren Hayesot is the fundraising arm of the Jewish movement. And again, you see the same settlement pattern that I was pointing out earlier. And then my favourite part is you just have these, where Palestinians live, you just have three wise men on camels riding through the desert. So again, you see this orientalist perspective of how Palestinians are. And this is the last map I want to show of the Zionist period, prior to the creation of the Israeli state. This was a map from, it's a tourist map, but it was to encourage travel to Palestine. And you have the Star of David sort of emitting rays all over the landscape. And it was a number in Chelsea that you can call and they'll help you with visas and all the rest of it.

So, this is where I want to pause, which is essentially the partition of Palestine in 1948. These two maps on the surface looked quite identical. This was when I was in the archive and I suddenly understood what it was I was looking at. This map on the left was a British map from 1938. This map over here was from 1950. On the surface, like I said, the Israelis took over the same survey that the British took, that the British had established and basically made a very comprehensive, they kept exactly the same scale, the same representation, but they made a comprehensive change to the features on the map to demonstrate what was now there. And what I mean by that is, if you looked on the surface, it would look the same.

Now let's just take this as a sample. This is the territory between Tel Aviv, Jaffa, down to Gaza. And if you look at the same as well, Tel Aviv, Jaffa, down to Gaza, you see all of these dots have just disappeared. And I'm going to show a clip of the film, which I think summarizes this in more detail. But for instance, you can see Al-Fallujah. I don't know if folks at the back can see, but Al-Fallujah just disappears in later iterations. It's on this map, but all of the villages around it, Iraq, Al-Manshia, Hatta, Zeta, all of them have disappeared. in statu have Gat and Galon, which are settlements which exist to this day.

And if you Google this on Google Maps, you might, the only thing I found was a memorial monument to Araq al-Manshiya, this destroyed village, but nothing else. But again, you see Kriyat, Gat and others which still exist. I wanted to show a clip of, from the film, which kind of summarized a lot of what I was trying to examine through film about this revelation.

FILM AUDIO: In the two cups of earth I collected, I found a ceramic shard in one. Did I tell you? Could it be your mother's or great-uncle's or some other discarded kin? I thought for many years that the alienation was all mine, but it was an inheritance. This place of absence is really a place of amnesia. I lied because I had been forced to forget. It has been two years since we spoke, so I have never told you about the moment I understood what happened. When it faced me, the whole tragedy of it. I found myself in denial, staring at two near-identical maps. One, coloniser-made from 1938, the subsequent coloniser from 1950. The same, except for the green gash across the latter. There, the cities, the main roads, the capital. There, the sea, the river, the mountains. It was uncanny in the Freudian sense. When I looked closer at the second, I saw the dots had disappeared. Hundreds of them dropped off the map altogether. I saw then why it was the catastrophe. Each dot, a village, each village, families, each family, faces, including yours, the raw innocence of children too bright to look at. That is why this place can only ever be ephemeral, a place of ghosts. For us still living, the unsuspecting survivors, we try to bear some witness, with eyes unlearned to seeing..."

I think the part that I really just want to emphasize before I move on to countermapping is that Israeli maps deliberately obfuscate, omit and ignore Palestinian localities, both populated and depopulated. Just as the Israeli state has to a large extent been built on the ruins of Palestinian villages, towns and cities, the map has been drawn to negate any Palestinian presence and a map in a way is perfect for this project. Designers, cartographers and geographers in the decades immediately after and before statehood understood this and Noga Kadman who's an Israeli geographer said:

"most of the sites of depopulated Palestinian villages were never granted an official name in Israel even though traces of many still remain in the landscape most of the villages that retain visible remnants on the terrain have been ignored by mapmakers."

And you can just see here, this was one village I saw last summer in the, in the summer of October 2023. I want to move now to where we are today and what maps look like and how we can learn to see otherwise. Maps produced by UN bodies like UN OHCHR and others are multi-layered, convoluted, they're often illegible to anyone who actually, who's actually trying to use them and crucially they're out of date almost as soon as they're produced. Palestinian lands are truncated, barriers are expanded, collapsed, relocated. Maps within the Green Line, within modern day Israel, are treated as a fixed homogenous geography but maps beyond it within the Gaza Strip, within the West Bank, are painted as constantly in flux and constantly negotiated.

And we see this in real time today in Gaza, so it's quite clear that the north of Gaza is intended to be recolonized, and you can see just how this new road which is called the Netzarim road which, Netzarim is an Israeli settlement in Gaza up until 2005. It's a four-mile road that runs just south of Gaza City and runs east to west which cuts it. This is a charming photo of Netanyahu with a baton illustrating where the road goes. There's a piece on the archives but I don't really want to dwell on them other than to say you just see how the override is so obvious in so many places. This is from the Library of Congress where everything that says Palestine on it has been essentially rewritten and of course I think we often assume Google to be useful and clear but actually I mean, this was a facetious one this was from several years ago of how to get from Jerusalem to Gaza but this actually the reality is if you search how to get from Gaza to Ramallah which is an hour's drive if as you know as the crow flies, the map, Google, simply says "we cannot figure out what to do" and this was my experience when I was driving. Google, I was trying to get to somewhere across the green line, I can't remember now, but around Abu Dis I just come across a concrete wall and suddenly the road I'm driving just stops existing.

And this is another example, I'm driving along using Waze, I want to go to Nablus, a very big populated Palestinian town and Waze just literally stops the road in the middle of it and sends, gives me a U-turn and tells me to come back. It just says "navigation ends" even though these are Palestinian places that exist but they're unmapped, uncharted, and inaccessible. So, Palestinians have resorted to countermapping. And this is, for me, the really exciting part of this project. Palestinians and anti-Zionist groups have found alternative ways of understanding the landscape. This here is an image of different pins of destroyed villages, which indicate just how much research has gone into documenting destroyed villages and giving Palestinians access to places that no longer exist on Google Maps. And one of the creators of the app, this is called the app is called Aynekba or I Return, said,

"we returned the Palestinian village to the map and we now seek to return the Palestinian refugee. It's powerful because it's interactive. If you're in Sin El HIlwa a [refugee] camp [in Lebanon], you can be updated about your village in Palestine. It's brought back to life."

And so I'm just going to run through some other examples. This is Palestine Open Maps, which is the first comprehensive open source mapping of Palestine with multi-different layers. You can pick different surveys. Here's the survey, the Western Palestine Survey, which I was telling you about from the 1870s. And you can sort of filter to find the things that you want. There's a whole bit on de-colonization, which I will skip over. But this also, you know, Palestinians play with sci-fi. They play with short films. They play with artistic projects.

Larissa Sansour's work is amazing. She imagined the whole of Palestine in one big skyscraper. And you can see what each floor would be with the assumption that we keep getting kettled and kettled into smaller space. And she imagines what that would look like. She also made this short film, 'In the Future We Ate from the Finest Porcelain', which is essentially an archeological, it's a tongue in cheek archeological project to demonstrate, to prove a Palestinian existence. And these were just some things I found when I was in Palestine last summer. A tatreez project, a Palestinian embroidery project of the landscape with different motifs. This was from the Palestine Museum, which had a really cool expo going on about the sea. And of course, Palestinians document this through books, through art projects. These two books are real tomes that Palestinians refer to to find destroyed villages.

These were two maps that I made using data that I was talking to you about earlier from Zohrat, which is an anti-Zionist organization. And of course, playing with it in the book as well of just how do I use the map and use landscape to imagine space differently through words and texts. And then these just last, in the last 30 seconds I have, I just want to show you some amazing art projects that also play with the map artistically.

So, Mona Hatoum is a phenomenal Palestinian Lebanese visual artist. This project, Present Tense from the year 2000, essentially maps the whole of the Oslo Accords onto soap from Nablus, which is, Nablus is famous for its olive oil soap. And she also made the map into a traditional rug just to disrupt it. There's also Francis Alys' project Green Line where he takes 76 cans of paint and leaks it all across what the green line ought to be just to show how ridiculous that green line parameter is. And then more recently, Palestinians students on UK campuses today are being censored constantly.

And this was from an art piece of different designers and art students across London. This student was at Central St. Martins and she layers historical mapping with testimonies to demonstrate maps of exile. This was Omar El Amine's map who basically made a, he's an architecture student at the RCA and he made a workbook of imagining, re-imagining Palestinian futures.

And then lastly, I was in New York last week and Nadine Fattaleh's work is an exhibit at NYU to essentially imagine space differently and how we can resist on campus in an alternative using maps as counter-cartographies. And she made the NYU encampment into a map of campus itself as an alternative map and a counter-map.

And I want to finish there just to say that although all the maps I've shown you so far might seem as abstractions or distant spaces, actually mapping and counter-mapping is a really energizing, empowering way to re-understand yourself and re-inscribe yourself into the spaces that you are, and in this case, on campus. So, I'm going to leave it there and open it out to questions. But I appreciate your time. Thank you.