The blood of the cactus stains just like mine

Ailo Ribas

In 1492, as the Moors were being expelled from Granada, the first Spanish ships landed on the shores of the Americas. These expulsions were the spasms of a nation in labour, gestating an embryonic Empire who would enter the world as it meant to go on: flailing and covered in blood.

Following the bloodthirst of conquest, attention turned to empty coffers. An extractive industry formed around local crops, heavy metals, and dyestuffs. Soon, the Spanish held a monopoly on the most valuable agricultural export, by weight, in the world—cochineal, known in Nahuatl as the blood of the cactus, *nocheztli*, a deep crimson dyestuff whose longevity and brilliance were unmatched in the natural world. In Mixtec myth, this red insect spawned from the fatal wounds of two brothers, gods, who died fighting over a mountainside of nopal. Each drop of blood spattered on the pads coagulating into wingless thorax, legless abdomen. From Oaxaca to Sevilla, countless palaces, cathedrals and monuments to genocide were built on its blood gold.

Cultivated on the pads of the *nopal* (known in English as prickly-pear cactus, and in Spain as *chumbera*) the insect and its host-plant have been domesticated alongside one another for thousands of years. The cactus' story is one of displacement and adaptation, raising questions on the nature of belonging in colonial landscapes. Spanish traders brought the cactus to Spain in the 16th century, where it proliferated in the south's arid environment and farmers quickly adopted it as a cheap and effective living hedge to enclose agricultural fields and corral livestock. Its ability to prevent soil erosion, act as an effective barrier to wildfires, and high water content inadvertently turned it into a lifeline during droughts and famines over the centuries to come.

In 17th century Spain, blood was an immutable biological and social marker. An obsession with the purity of blood split society into *cristianos viejos* (old Christians) and *cristianos nuevos* (new Christians), mostly *moriscos* (converted Arabs) and Sephardi Jews who, after generations of resistance and in spite of their forced conversion, were eventually exiled regardless. Colloquially referred to as the fig of the Moors (*higo de moro*) across Spain—leading to subsequent folklore surrounding its Arabic provenance—the plant and the people had very little in common at the time. Other than their perceived otherness, that is, and their shared displacement at the hands of the Spanish crown. They occupied either end of a pendulum of dispossession: one expelled as *sangre sucia*, invasive, alien, the other fetishised as exotic, otherworldly, the spoils of conquest. Disgust and fascination are two sides of the same, racist coin—and somewhere in the movement between the two, otherness is constructed. As the cactus followed the exiled moriscos to North Africa centuries later via trade routes, it came to be known as *karmūs en-naṣāra*, the fig of the Christians.

Eventually the cactus made its way across the mediterranean sea to Palestine, quickly setting its roots, and earning the name *sabr*, meaning patience, perseverance, tenacity due to its capacity to endure and thrive in harsh environments. Photographs of Gaza from the early 20th centuries show fields of *sabr* stretching all the way to the horizon. In the years following the Nakba of 1948—when hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages were destroyed and depopulated by the Israeli army and their ruins subsequently concealed behind forests of pine and eucalyptus planted by the Jewish National Fund (JNF)—the *sabr* began to grow back among the trees, retracing the contours of destroyed Palestinian villages, and in doing so, becoming monuments to Palestinian resistance and perseverance in the land. It has become a common saying among Palestinians that wherever a wild hedge of *sabr* grows, there once stood a Palestinian village.

In 2013, after almost 500 years of cohabitation and shared history, the Spanish government officially classified the prickly-pear cactus as an exotic invasive, declaring that it has "nothing to do with the genuinely mediterranean", effectively preventing its protection from a nascent spread of a wild, voracious cochineal subspecies that over the past fifteen years has gone on to decimate the cactus all across the country and the Mediterranean as a whole. Features in a landscape, like words, coalesce to form texts to be read; but who they are legible to is a political choice. It follows, then, that language and landscape often reflect and co-construct one another, a mutual regurgitation. The landscape of imperial Spain, dotted with *chumbera*, agave (*pita*), and bougainvillea, mirrored its desire to consume its colonies, to absorb them into itself. It not only sought to enrich its own libraries, gardens and museums with the knowledge, plants, and culture of its overseas territories, ripped from context, but to transform their landscapes and inhabitants in its own, righteous image. A double dispossession judged to be so significant that at the beginning of the 20th century Western scientists established 1492 as the boundary for determining a species' nativeness or foreignness, a before and after that precludes more nuanced conversations around provenance and belonging.

The new phase of imperialism—if we think of the United States' involvement and the complicity of various European nations in the geopolitics of the Arab world, for example—and the rising tide of the far-right feed off fear: fear of the other, fear of change, fear of the outside making its way in. Consequently, across much of Europe we are seeing stricter borders, rising racism, and an obsession with the genuinely "native", from food and culture to landscapes and language. The cactus' classification as an exotic invasive ignores centuries of cohabitation and shared history, sealing its fate with the same chauvinistic dogma that cast out the moriscos centuries earlier, only this time framed as environmental preservation instead of racial purification. These are the stories people tell each other to justify the unspeakable. But the underlying reality is the same: the people or plants in question simply no longer hold any value to those in power, and stand in the way of something they want. In spite of considerable loss, the cactus remains in the landscape, often only in places where people look after it, removing the cochineal by hand or with a hose, in some cases with chemicals or fire. Whatever the method, this is how people choose to give back to a plant that gave them so much.

In the midst of the ongoing genocide, destruction and displacement driven by the Zionist settler colonial machine in Gaza, Palestine and Lebanon, the prickly-pear cactus—*nopal*, *higo de moro*, *karmūs en-naṣāra*, *sabr*—is a reminder of the land's ability to metabolise change and safeguard histories of the dispossessed, of patience as resistance.

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