

**The Holy Land in Transit:
Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan**

Steven Salaita

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In *The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan*, Steven Salaita explores not just similar, but identical aspects of settler colonialism in the New World and the Holy Land. Indeed, on both continents ethnocentric colonial discourse forged the “noble savage” and “chosen people” dichotomy. On this basis, the author compellingly argues that the United States and Israel are not merely bound politically and strategically, but also historically and philosophically: both have transformed theological narratives into national histories. In this groundbreaking comparative analysis of the Holy Land pathos (labeled “pernicious mythology” and “messianic extremism”) across national boundaries, Salaita explicates the Manifest Destiny process of “wresting Edenic land from savages in the name of prophesy and progress” (p. 119).

Armed with Biblical narratives and garrison force, covenantal “chosen people” set out to cultivate a bountiful “promised land” presumed to be vacant in the New World and the Near East. Newcomers escaping persecution on a quest for Canaan justified their occupation of foreign territory by placing the subjugation of inferior indigenous “Canaanites” within a Biblical

framework and “constructed themselves as bearers of enlightenment to a heretofore savage land” (p. 113). Not assailing Israeli and American denizens, Salaita primarily interrogates “the notion that one people’s scriptural prophecies override the rights of another people’s very existence” (p. 44).

With colonialism at the near-center of Palestinian and Native American literatures, according to Salaita, encoded in their contemporary fiction is a form of resistance to settler encroachment and chicanery often dubbed “terrorism.” Bringing together authors that have never had personal or critical contact – although often alluding to one another – he unites groups with common histories and deconstructs the “theology of divine progress” (p. 113) that has dehumanized indigenous peoples. An insightful analysis of how politics influences literary production, *The Holy Land in Transit* focuses on the works of four Palestinian and Anishinaabe (Ojibwe/Chippewa) novelists who resist, challenge, and even ridicule colonialism: Gerald Vizenor and Winona LaDuke of the White Earth Anishinaabe Nation, Palestinian-Israeli Emile Habiby, and Palestinian-in-exile Liyana Badr.

Not only are Palestinian-Zionist and Anishinaabe-American encounters remarkably similar, but also both bodies of literature face parallel issues of authenticity and questions as to what constitutes serving community and nation. Likewise, Salaita is mindful of his own scholarship’s utility. As Arabs and Natives remain little understood in the American consciousness, he builds solidarity by informing Arab Americans of domestic indigenous issues and Native Americans of related foreign affairs. As his anti-dogmatic scholarship is ultimately concerned with redress, the author reaches out to activists and non-specialist general readers as well.

After firmly establishing the critical and theoretical framework in the first three chapters, chapter 4 probes colonial and indigenous interplay in LaDuke’s *Last Standing Woman*. Chapter 5 juxtaposes Israel’s Kahan Commission Report, produced after the Sabra and Shatila massacres, with Badr’s *A Balcony over the Fakihani*, while chapter 6 compares the trickster narratives of Vizenor and Habiby. Salaita concludes with a powerful personal narrative, “Dreamcatchers on the Last Frontier,” in which he recounts his summer sojourn in the Shatila refugee camp. There, he noted the myriad ways in which Palestinian refugees express their common liberation struggle with the dispossessed *Hindi Ahmar* (“Red Indians”) of the New World. Living in “their own version of a reservation” (p. 179), Salaita underscores how the Palestinians of Shatila venerate Native Americans, even to the extent of appropriating Native symbols.

Despite notable differences between Native and Palestinian cultures and somewhat homogenizing indigenous histories to bolster his argument, Salaita's undertaking is an outstanding success. Furthermore, his work does not exhaust the Native-Palestinian paradigm; rather, *The Holy Land in Transit* marks the beginning of a potentially fruitful interdisciplinary conversation. As the book is conceptualized as traditional literary criticism, historians may, for example, desire a comparative archival study of colonial histories, legal scholars an in-depth analysis of dispossession through legal systems, and religious scholars a significant treatment of Biblical literature. Future contributions will certainly rely upon the foundation that Salaita has set.

This exploratory model makes an important contribution to the burgeoning field of global indigenous studies, as tribal societies in modern industrial states throughout the world embark upon decolonial movements. This book will be of interest to scholars of Middle Eastern studies, Native American studies, literature, history, political science, sociology, and comparative ethnic studies, among many other areas of inquiry. Bringing to light diminished histories of settler societies and ethnic cleansing, Salaita's engaging comparative analysis of colonial rhetoric in *The Holy Land in Transit* is an eye-opening new interpretation.

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