

‘Weed troubles’ in Palestine: Environmental imaginaries of the harmful weed

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Abstract

This article explores creative interventions that challenge colonial environmental imaginaries of Palestine through a discussion of the 2020 Ramallah-based *Weed Control* exhibition. The discussion situates environmental imaginaries of the “harmful weed” at the intersection of settler colonialism, visual arts, and the environmental humanities, showing how “weedy” metaphors sustain practices of settler colonial expansion and elimination. Specifically, the article considers the links between the eradication of weeds and the eradication of populations in the Israeli state’s pursuit of territorial control. By centring the work of contemporary visual artists, this paper sheds light on the role of Palestinian art in disrupting settler colonial environmental imaginaries. The article offers an alternative reading to the Zionist environmental imaginaries of healing the land infected by weeds through the analysis of three artworks representing three “harmful seeds”: namely the *Carthamus tenuis*, the *Tordylium peregrinum*, and the *Melilotus indicus*. These creative interventions trace a continuum ranging from affirmative notions of survival as “rebirth” to more introspective engagements that emphasise survival as “defence” and “withdrawal”. The discussion is based on the author’s analysis of the artworks in the exhibition and interviews with some of the participating artists. This is combined with secondary sources, including the exhibition catalogue and archival material.

KEYWORDS

exhibition, Palestine, seeds, settler colonialism, survival, weeds

1 | INTRODUCTION

Between 1920 and 1948 Palestine was under the British colonial rule, with the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in Jerusalem overseeing policies to improve and modernise agriculture in the region. As part of the colonial project, efforts and resources were devoted to increasing land productivity (El-Eini, 2004). British institutions and Jewish agricultural organisations in Palestine were involved in conducting scientific research, experimenting with fertilisers, plant and seed breeding. This article examines the discourses and language associated with the control and eradication of weeds in

Mandatory Palestine and explores creative interventions into the colonial environmental imaginaries of the “harmful weed”. I situate the theme of the harmful weed and its seeds within broader environmental imaginaries of the Middle East (Burke & Davis, 2011; Gutkowski, 2024; Novick, 2023), and explore the persistence of these imaginaries today (Hughes et al., 2023) in the pursuit of territorial control and land appropriation.

I take the Ramallah-based 2020 *Weed Control* exhibition as an entry point to explore creative interventions into the Zionist environmental imaginaries of the harmful weed and its seeds. The *Weed Control* exhibition

was inspired by an illustration of 33 seeds (Figure 1). The illustration in question was enclosed in a letter dated 16 January 1940 and signed by a representative of the Organisation of Field Crop Growers in Palestine from the Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan located in the Haifa district. The letter promoted a travelling exhibition of weeds to raise awareness about methods to contain the spread of weeds across Jewish settlements in Palestine (Antebi, 1940) and was addressed to a British Agricultural Officer. The illustration of 33 seeds was accompanied by a title in the Hebrew language and an English translation that read “Seeds and fruits of weeds found in crops”. This document was retrieved from the Israeli state archives in a folder named “Control of Wild Plants” containing evidence of much correspondence between the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and members of Jewish agricultural organisations in Palestine between the 1920s and 1940s.

80 years later, Palestinian curator Yazid Anani invited 33 Palestinian artists to reimagine the lives, voices, and experiences of those weeds that had survived fierce attempts at eradication (Qattan, 2020). In response to the 1940 travelling exhibition, every artist was assigned one seed from the ‘Seeds and fruits of weeds found in crops’ illustration (Figure 1). The artists combined original research with more imaginative and subjective engagements with the seeds to create a new representation of each seed. The exhibition took place at the Ramallah-based Qattan Foundation: a central cultural institution and funding body for Palestinian contemporary art since the early 1990s. As detailed in the curatorial statement (Qattan, 2020), the exhibition aimed to revisit the emergence of early agro-industries and intensive crop farming under the British Mandate. The 2020 *Weed Control* exhibition was introduced to the public as “an exhibition of Palestinian flora and colonialism” (Qattan, 2020). The general idea was to remind its publics of the local knowledges and domestic uses of wild plants that were once widespread among Palestinian society and were later devalued as non-profitable.

The exhibition does not only offer a critical reading of the aftermaths of colonial agricultural modernisation, nor does it merely celebrate local knowledges of wild plants in Palestine. Through various imaginations of the seeds of harmful weeds, the exhibition invokes more affective and intimate relations with plants against purely utilitarian notions of productivity, casting the weeds and their seeds as survivors of violent processes of confinement and eradication, and asserting the vitality of these seeds against futile attempts to make them disappear. Focussing on the powerful analogy that runs through the exhibition of weeds-as-survivors, the article explores alternative engagements with the harmful weed. *Weed Control* offers a multifaceted discourse of survival as transformation that rests on a continuum: from affirmative notions of survival as

Key insights

Weeds and their control have been significant in Zionist environmental imaginaries of agricultural modernisation and land productivity. These, in turn, have long been used to justify territorial control and land appropriation. This article draws from research on colonial environmental imaginaries in Palestine to explore how imaginaries of the “harmful weed and its seeds” are revisited by contemporary Palestinian artists through the analysis of a Ramallah-based exhibition titled *Weed Control*. I contend that Palestinian creative interventions offer several critical insights into the ways in which plant metaphors sustain territorial expansion and the elimination of unwanted populations in settler colonial contexts.

rebirth to more introspective ones that emphasise survival as *defence* and *withdrawal*. By thinking and feeling with these artworks, the article seeks to centre the narrative work of the visual arts as “integral to conceptualizing both the legacies of rupture and the possibilities of imaginative recuperation and transformation” (DeLoughrey et al., 2015, p. 5).

The discussion is based on my analysis of the artworks in the exhibition and my interviews with some of the participating artists. This is supplemented by secondary sources, including the exhibition catalogue and archival material. The conversations with the artists were also shaped by my positionality as somebody with a personal connection to Palestine. At the time of the interviews in winter 2024, I was slowly recovering from writer’s block, which had set in in the aftermath of 7 October 2023. Engaging with the artists and their artworks helped me connect with a shared sense of loss, grief, shock, and disbelief. Many artists felt that discussing this topic was important precisely because of the ongoing genocide. Indeed, the Israeli state employs discourses surrounding sustainability and agricultural innovation to project an image of cultural, ecological, and technological superiority (Hughes et al., 2023). Environmental narratives today contribute to justifying the dispossession of Palestinian land and the intensified elimination of Palestinians.

This article is structured as follows: the next section situates the project of weed control within a critical discussion of colonial environmental imaginaries, showing how pesticides informed a specific Zionist imaginary of land redemption. Then, I review different engagements with weeds across geography, the environmental humanities, and related disciplines to consider how metaphorical and symbolic uses of weeds and seeds have contributed to expanding more



FIGURE 1 Seeds and fruit of weeds found in crops, Israeli state archives, file name: control of wild plants (667/14-M).

traditional and nationalist registers of environmental symbolism in Palestinian cultural production. In the remaining sections, I contextualise the 2020 exhibition and examine in more detail three of the 33 seeds of the “harmful” weeds: the *Carthamus tenuis* or slender safflower, the *Tordylium peregrinum* (lacking a common name, most likely because it is being rarely encountered or studied), and the *Melilotus indicus* or sweet clover. For each, an artist imagines a story of survival narrated from the perspective of the seed.

2 | COLONIAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINARIES OF THE HARMFUL WEED

The eradication of weeds during the British Mandate was part of a wider project to modernise agriculture and support the intensification of Arab farming. Intensive farming techniques were introduced to replace local farming techniques considered by the colonial authorities to be backward and inefficient (El-Eini, 1996; El-Eini, 2004). In this context, British colonial interventions facilitated the Zionist acquisition of land. As Gutkowski (2024) discusses in more detail, for

the Jewish population in Palestine, agriculture modernisation was not only about supporting a growing community but also about proving to the British government that, unlike the local Arab population, they could lead the process of development and modernisation. For example, development funds for Jewish agriculture in Palestine were gathered from Zionist organisations and Jewish philanthropists providing financial and techno-scientific expertise. Zionist agricultural institutions and research centres, including the Jewish Agency’s research centres in Rehovot and the Hebrew University, worked in parallel and sometimes in collaboration with the Jerusalem-based Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. For example, the British government supported some of the research conducted by the Jewish agricultural organisations including experiments for the development of pesticides and chemicals, although generally these organisations worked independently (El-Eini, 2004). In this context, the Department oversaw various initiatives for the containment and eradication of weeds that were deemed harmful to the crops with plant officers overseeing the testing and approvals of chemicals and pesticides. Formally, the government promoted the development of the land “in the interests of both

Arabs and Jews” (Luke, 1940), but colonial authorities were primarily concerned with educating the Arab *fellahin*, who were portrayed as backward and incompetent (El-Eini, 2004; Gutkowski, 2024).

Taking a closer look at the agricultural, educational, and scientific apparatus that was established in Palestine between the 1920s and 1940s provides insight into what Molavi (2024) described in a commentary on the 2020 *Weed Control* exhibition as “the intimate interlacing of the practices of colonial erasure, knowledge production, and territorial domination” (Molavi, 2024, p. 2). These links are visible in the educational initiatives, public dissemination, and awareness campaigns that promoted the eradication of weeds. From the dissemination of pamphlets and articles to the broadcasting of specialised radio programmes in English, Arabic, and Hebrew (Commissioner, 1938). For example, the “Agricultural Supplement to the Palestine Gazette” shared the results of research by the Jewish Agency’s Agricultural Research Station at Rehovot (El-Eini, 1996). In this context, the term “harmful weed” was frequently used to describe local plants that were considered invasive and dangerous to crop productivity. For example, in a speech titled “Weeds and how to fight them” dated January 1940 to be broadcast on the radio programme “Talk to Farmers” (Antebi, 1940), the Chief Agricultural Officer at the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries addressed the eradication of weeds in Palestine as an urgent matter, using expressions such as “unwelcome”, “troublesome”, and “alarmingly spreading all over the fields”. These weeds, he emphasised “must be combated” (Antebi, 1940). Much of the correspondence between the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries of the British Mandate and Jewish agricultural organisations in Palestine between the 1920s and 1940s conveys a sense of urgency and threat: the weeds were corrupting the integrity of the crops and the land; they were spreading uncontrollably under the carelessness and incompetence of the colonised Arab inhabitants. These plants needed to be identified, contained, and eradicated in order to facilitate Jewish settlement.

The control and eradication of weeds in Palestine was incorporated in a project of land improvement through the development of better crops for the purpose of settlement (Tsedell, 2017). A substantial body of scholarship has documented the Zionist emphasis on land productivity and technological superiority as a means of justifying the dispossession of Palestinian inhabitants (Braverman, 2009; Long, 2009; Novick, 2023; Tal, 2008; Tsedell, 2017). The discourse of improvement was sustained by environmental imaginaries of a barren, uncultivated, and empty land and biblical imaginaries (Fields, 2012). Afforestation was a central part of the process of “redeeming the land” and “making the desert bloom”, as exemplified by the well-

documented planting of pine trees by the Jewish National Fund (Braverman, 2009; Järvi, 2019). The reshaping of the landscape through these material actions mirrored specific environmental imaginaries that brought together biblical notions of the Holy Land with images of civilised and picturesque European forests (Boast, 2012). From this perspective, the development of pesticides and chemicals to eradicate weeds also contributed to the creation of a Zionist national landscape.

The powerful interplay of Western improvement and capitalist exploitation in Palestine is well documented (Braverman, 2009; Long, 2009; Novick, 2023; Tal, 2008; Tsedell, 2017). However, the Zionist concept of transforming barren land into productive land was just one element of a broader environmental vision of redemption. Here I seek to draw attention to a second and less explored aspect concerning the control of weeds in Palestine. As weeds were constructed as infiltrating the land, spreading uncontrollably, and infecting the crops, pesticides were tasked with acting as healing technologies. In her analysis of swamp drainage and Zionist nation-building during the British Mandate, Sufian (2008, p. 31) focuses on the notion of “healing the land and the nation” to describe a powerful connection between the health of the land and that of its people (p. 33). Therefore, a strong, self-sufficient nation needed productive, healthy land in order to thrive. The notion of healing the land co-existed with the notions of redeeming the land through productivity but emphasised the unsanitary features of the landscape. Similarly, Gutkowski (2024) explores how draining the swamp—celebrated as a means of healing landscapes that had become infected because of Arab neglect—was narrated as part of the “Zionist war against disease” (p. 56). This marks a shift from barren, unproductive land to unhealthy, infected land. Interpreting the desire to contain and eradicate weeds in Mandatory Palestine alongside the concept of unsanitary landscapes thus reveals a more nuanced understanding of the connotations associated with unhealthy land (Gutkowski, 2018). This register centres on the role of pesticides in forming and sustaining environmental imaginaries of healing the crops from the infectious weeds.

So far, I have discussed how the eradication of weeds was part of a wider set of environmental imaginaries centred on the redemption, healing, and flourishing of both the land and the Jewish nation in Palestine. But limiting the discussion to settler colonial imaginaries often risks replicating the silencing of Palestinian voices (Hawari et al., 2019). The following section examines how weeds and seeds have been used to challenge colonial environmental imaginaries by discussing alternative environmental imaginings in Palestine and beyond.

3 | WEEDS AND SEEDS IN PALESTINIAN ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGININGS

Weeds have become an increasingly popular topic in a range of disciplines, including geography, anthropology, and the environmental humanities. This multidisciplinary field has focussed on the histories, politics, and meanings attached to weeds and their control. In many cases, weeds have come to embody the possibility of unexpected flourishing amidst the ruins of immense catastrophes (Bubandt & Tsing, 2018). Tsing (2019), for instance, considers the process of “weedy” rewilding to be an ambivalent one: the weeds that survived industrial destruction and abandonment repopulate human-disturbed landscapes, but rewilding also allows the most aggressive species to take over and thrive out of ruin. Here, weeds are described as proliferating on the ashes of destroyed worlds. Reardon-Smith (2025) points out the prevalence of metaphorical and symbolic uses of weeds in these literatures, observing how in many instances weeds have become a symbol of unruliness and a metaphor to describe the condition of being “out of place” (Carse, 2019). Indeed, often in the visual arts weeds are used to describe those who are unwelcome, making parallels between the spread of unwanted plants and human migration. For example, the 2016 exhibition titled *Weed is a Plant out of Place* (2016) and curated by Allegra Pesenti (2023) addresses the theme of migration, examining the journey of weeds and seeds that followed the paths of migrants and resettled in distant environments across the globe. Along these lines, the aggressive language often used against ‘invasive’ plants tells us something about the exclusionary and xenophobic structures seeking to confine and kill those deemed out of place. In other instances, weeds that proliferate in hostile and even toxic environments are mobilised to celebrate forms of political resilience against structures of exclusion and oppression (Aloi, 2023).

At the same time, confining weeds to the realm of the metaphorical presents a number of limitations. Firstly, when weeds and seeds become a metaphor for human resilience, there is a risk of romanticising real struggles and immense sufferings. This echoes a criticism made of resilience as a racialised category where the praise of resilience flows from those who benefit from structures of oppression to those who are forced to endure them, so that congratulating “them” for surviving these structures becomes a discursive tool of normalisation (Bonds, 2018; Lewis, 2023). When ‘weedy’ metaphors blur the lines between human and nonhuman survival, there is a flattening of important political categories in a context of settler colonial elimination of indigenous people (Salih & Corry, 2022). For example, Reardon-Smith (2025) urges us to consider the tangible impacts of weed control in different contexts and to take seriously the diverse range of reasons

for targeting particular weeds in relation to distinct ecologies.

With these caveats, examining the categories of “weeds and seeds” in Palestine reveal how notions of “invasiveness” and “harmfulness” justify forms of ecocide and genocide (Bousfield, 2020; Mastnak et al., 2014). In the Palestinian context, seeds and wild plants have become increasingly central in the fields of art and activism. The symbolic and political significance of wild plants and seeds is entangled with practical needs and self-sufficiency. In recent decades, numerous ecological and artistic projects involving heirloom seeds, seed libraries, and seed-saving initiatives have flourished in the West Bank. These initiatives form part of a broader movement to reclaim Palestinian connections to the land through various forms of agro-activism (Braverman, 2021; Kohlbray, 2023; Meneley, 2021b; Sinnokrot, 2022). Projects like Vivien Sansour’s Palestine Heirloom Seed Library stress the more affective and communal aspects of seed-saving practices that value individual stories, family recipes, and food heritage (Fullilove & Alimari, 2023; Meneley, 2021a; Nasser, 2024). In this context, Palestinian agronomists, artists, and activists who contribute to seed-saving practices strike a delicate balance between archiving traditional practices and experimenting with alternatives. Many contemporary agro-ecological practices enacted by Palestinian artists and activists stem from situated critiques of the exploitative and exclusionary relations with the land underpinning the settler colonial nation–state (Manna, 2020). Rather than merely romanticising the past, many of these initiatives challenge the ethnonationalist nation–state as a model that is proving unsustainable for both humans and ecosystems because of the combined effects of climate change and environmental violence. These are not calls to return to the past but experimentations with alternative futures (Hassouna, 2024).

In the visual arts, the imagery of rewilding (Gray, 2024) and abandonment (Salih & Corry, 2022) is increasingly mobilised to narrate memory and loss. Numerous artworks, installations, and performances represent the sprawling of insects and weeds amid the ruins of deadly sites, as in Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme’s video installation *And yet my mask is powerful* (2016). They depict worlds in which life emerges and seeds flourish from destruction or in the aftermath of ecological disasters, as in Larissa Sansour’s short film *In Vitro* (2018). These artworks and artistic performances offer a counterpoint to the traditional national environmental symbolism of rootedness through the motive of the olive tree. As Abufarha (2008) discusses in his analysis of the symbolism of the cactus (sabre), poppies, orange, and olive tree, these symbols often expressed the Palestinian people’s deep connection to Palestine among the diaspora and a collective identity predicated upon stories of communal sharing.

The *Weed Control* exhibition constructs weeds as both rooted in the soil and as moving and changing against essentialist notions of fixity and belonging. In contrast to more traditional environmental imagery and symbolism, the exhibition offers a nuanced exploration of survival through environmental art and interrogates what it means to survive “as weeds” under settler colonial regimes of control and eradication. While contemporary environmental art largely focusses on human relations with the environment in order to denounce the destruction of entire ecosystems caused by anthropogenic forces (Hawkins & Kanngieser, 2018), here the analogy of weeds-as-survivors and survivors-as-weeds is used to highlight the scale of violence, loss, and intergenerational trauma endured by Palestinians. Ecological sensibilities are used to highlight the settler-colonial logic of eradicating unwanted people in the same way that unwanted plants are eradicated for the purpose of claiming the land. This points to the dire consequences of taking this logic to its extreme: the extermination of all life deemed harmful by the settler-colonial state.

4 | THE 2020 WEED CONTROL EXHIBITION

The *Weed Control* exhibition took place at the A.M. Qattan Foundation in Ramallah from September to December 2020. Qattan is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working in the fields of culture and education. Funded entirely by a family endowment, the Foundation was established in Ramallah in 1993 and began its cultural work in 1998. Since then, it has provided financial support for other cultural institutions and programmes throughout Palestine in the form of grants and prizes, while also sustaining its own wide-ranging programmes in the cultural, scientific, and educational sectors. The foundation is also part of a global network of cultural organisations whose vision and mission are deeply shaped by transnational logics (Toukan, 2021). In this regard, the exhibition is part of a platform for representation and circulation that takes an envisioned global audience, discourse, and aesthetics as its frame of reference. It engages international audiences as well as members of Ramallah’s cultural circles, as exemplified by the bilingual nature of the online exhibition, which is available in both English and Arabic. This is part of a broader shift that began in the 1990s and helped Palestinian art spread throughout the world, gaining it international recognition (Sabella, 2010).

The 33 commissioned artists brought a diverse range of qualities and experiences to the exhibition. These included renowned Palestinian artists such as Vera Tamari, Suleiman Mansour, Tayseer Barakat, and Nabil Anani, who founded the influential New Visions movement together in 1987 (Laïidi, 2005). Many of the

artists who took part in the exhibition, including the three artists whose work and views will be discussed in more detail below, belong to a generation of artists from the late 1970s and early 1990s who are becoming increasingly established in the Palestinian and international contemporary art scenes. They belong to a generation of mobile and highly educated artists with strong global connections.

As curator Yazid Anani explained in his curatorial statement, each one of the 33 Palestinian artists was asked to “scrutinise the botanical anatomy of their given plant and turn the seed into an artwork that subverts the British colonial and industrial value of the seed into a more personal, mythical or poetic one” (Qattan, 2020, p. 3). Based on the 1940 illustration of the 33 seeds, each artist participating in the exhibition was assigned a distinct seed. The artists harnessed the symbolic power of the unwanted weeds threatening the integrity of the desired crops. Here, the question of what is allowed to grow and prosper versus what is to be contained or eliminated within a given political order emerges organically through the various interpretations of Palestinian artists. The exhibition denounces the loss of knowledge to modern industrial values, and the classification of many domestic plant species as weeds. A closer look at the artworks reveals three distinct interventions into the colonial environmental imaginaries of Palestine. Firstly, the artists reclaim the affective and intimate relations with plants against purely utilitarian notions of capitalist productivity that reduce the seed to its industrial value. Secondly, the exhibition casts the seed as a survivor of violent processes of confinement and extermination. Finally, they assert the vitality of the seeds against futile attempts to eradicate them. I now turn to three artworks representing three harmful seeds: namely, the *Carthamus tenuis*, *Tordylium peregrinum*, and *Melilotus indicus*. While these artworks carry their individual perspectives and are not exhaustive of the multiple perspectives articulated in the exhibition, they form a continuum from more affirmative to more introspective experiences of survival. These interventions shift our focus from the pesticide’s healing mission to the noxious weeds’ quest for survival.

4.1 | Survival according to a *Carthamus tenuis* seed

Mahdi Baraghiti is a Palestinian visual artist who works across a range of media including performance, installation, and collage. He was born in Ramallah in 1991 and is currently based in France. His work, which delves into the notions of the body and masculinity, as well as home and the mundane, has been exhibited in several exhibitions, including *Cities Future* (2013) in Naples, Italy and *Cities Exhibition 6/Lydda – A Garden Disremembered* (2018) in Birzeit,

Palestine. For *Weed Control* Baraghiti was assigned the *Carthamus tenuis* seed, in Arabic قُرْطَم نَحِيل. The plant, whose common name in the English language is “Slender Safflower”, is an annual edible herb that belongs to the family of the Asteraceae. It is native to Palestine and surrounding areas, including Egypt, Lebanon–Syria, and Turkey and has light blue–violet petals and prickly stems. The exhibition catalogue notes this as a plant that grows near roadsides and takes its name from the Arabic verb “qurtum” (that is, to dye) with reference to the use of this plant for textile dyeing (Qattan, 2020, p. 104). In the artwork inspired by this seed and titled “They do what I can’t do” (2020), the seed is represented through an installation just over 2 metres high (Figure 2). The installation displays the ruins of a Greek column, which is made of plant-based gelatine, flour, corn syrup, and slender safflower seeds. The column is a symbol of the colonial state’s political order and institutional power turned by the seeds into a source of nourishment for the birds.

Baraghiti imagines the seed as “a survivor of an attempted genocide by British occupying forces. It remains proudly within its ecosystem, resisting attempts at eradication, continually rebirthing itself” (Baraghiti, 2020). As Baraghiti explained during our interview: “these columns are the first thing you see when you enter a building from the Mandate area, for me they symbolise the power and wealth of colonial institutions” (interview, October 2024). The column rests on the floor against the backdrop of a video installation displaying the landscape of Ein Arik, a village near Ramallah, producing the sounds of the landscape with the birds singing in the background.

The title of the artwork “They do what I can’t do” (2020) refers to the ability of seeds to fight structures of oppression on the artist’s behalf. In creating a column made of slender safflower’s seeds, the artist sought to represent the impermanence and fragility of colonial institutions that are eaten by the birds and returned to nature: “I wanted birds to come and eat and destroy this column. I wanted the seeds to nurture the birds to make them stronger so they can help us fight colonization” (interview, October 2024). The seed was able to survive and fight colonisation through multiple transformations. It has the power to dissolve colonial institutions and return them to nature in the form of nourishment. Thinking of the seed as a source of strength, explained Baraghiti, was also a reference to the everyday uses of the slender safflower by Palestinians, who used it to feed chickens and other birds as well as to dye fabrics. The seed has the power to permeate the structures of oppression of the nation–state from within, slowly turning its fabrics into something nurturing, and something edible and biodegradable. In this way, explained Baraghiti, natural decay makes it possible to speak to the impermanence and fragility of

colonial institutions. The power of the seed can ease what the artist described as feeling powerless and caged.

When I asked Baraghiti about his first encounter with the seed, he explained that from the beginning he had felt a sense of warmth and familiarity towards it. When he was first assigned the *Carthamus tenuis* seed by the curator Anani, the seed reminded him of his childhood. Baraghiti explained that he grew up in the periphery of Ramallah at a time when most of the area was still surrounded by hills, fields, and grass with “just a couple of houses in the middle of nowhere”. Looking at the plant, he was reminded of the times when he used to pick flowers as a child, making bouquets with them, playing, and sometimes drawing with the colours out of its petals. When the artist began to do research to learn about the history of the slender safflower, he learned about the diasporic history of the plant and felt he could relate to it deeply. The plant had been growing in different parts of the Mediterranean, just like his own family was forced to move to refugee camps and was displaced within Palestine and in neighbouring countries after 1948. The artist felt that he and the seed shared a similar story in that both had to grow up separated from parts of their family—in the case of the *Carthamus tenuis*, the relatives are imagined as other varieties of *Carthamus* “part of your family is far away and you’re here and you can’t move, so somehow I could relate to that” (interview, October 2024). When the exhibition ended, the artist brought its artwork back to nature, where the columns were eaten by birds and eroded by spring rains, until one day it was gone.

4.2 | *Tordylium peregrinum*: to remain a stranger

Shada Safadi is a visual artist born in 1982 in Majdal Shams in the occupied Golan Heights. Her practice engages with questions of identity, displacement, and collective memory that resonate with her lived experience moving between the occupied Golan Heights and Ramallah. She works with installations that bring together memory with the environment at the intersection of the human and more-than-human. Safadi’s artworks have been displayed in various exhibitions across Syria, Palestine, and Europe. The *Tordylium peregrinum* is an annual plant from the Apiaceae family and goes by multiple names. It is also known as *Kruberia peregrina* and *Capnophyllum peregrinum* الطرديلين الغريب. The plant is native to the Levant and other Mediterranean areas, including Portugal, Spain, Italy, and parts of North Africa. It grows primarily in climates characterised by warm and humid summers with mild to cool winters. The *Tordylium peregrinum* is considered at risk of extinction; however, its seeds are



FIGURE 2 Photo of the seed-made column in the artwork “They do what I can’t do” (2020) by Mahdi Baraghiti, 240 × 50-cm installation, courtesy of the artist and Qattan Foundation.

distinctively resistant. In the exhibition catalogue, the seed is described as “grooved, wrinkled, and plait” with “smooth and branched stem with a universal involucre leaf” (Qattan, 2020, p. 94). The description also noted the plant’s pharmacological qualities, including anticancer, anti-inflammatory, and analgesic functions. In the artwork titled “Waiting for the white bloom” by Safadi (2020), the artist imagines the seed as a “combatant seed” that has developed defence mechanisms because of the prolonged loss, fear, and violence it had to endure. The artwork represents the seed in the shape of a strong iron-made seed (Figure 3). The seed has a defense mechanism that activates whenever its sensors detect a human presence in its proximities. When the sensor is activated, the seed’s iron blades start rotating and the artwork produces a sound similar to the sound of a siren.

When asked about the process of engagement with the seed, the artist explained it was a challenging process. Because of the rarity of the seed and lack of information about it, it took her several months to locate the *Tordylium* seed. After five months, she was able to visit the Israeli-run Nature Reserve of Baniyas spring, located in the Jawlan, where Safadi finally encountered the

seed next to spring water. During our interview, Safadi explained that she found it striking how her seed was named as a “foreigner” and a stranger within its family (the word *peregrinum* in Latin and the word *gharib* in Arabic mean foreigner), unlike other members of the same family known for the places where they grew up (for example, *Tordylium palaestino*, *Tordylium syriacum*, and *Tordylium aegypticum*). The description of the seed states “You will remain a stranger — nothing consoles you and nothing harms you. There you are, alone, afar ...” (Safadi, 2020). Safadi explained how she identified with the loneliness of the seed because of her experience of growing up in the Jawlan. When Israel occupied the Jawlan in 1967, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced with most of the villages being demolished, except for five that still stand today. In our interview, she talked about the loneliness of living with an undefined nationality and feeling like an isolated and undefined anomaly within the dominant geopolitical regime of nation-states. Like Safadi, the seed had experienced a state of deep loneliness, being perceived as a stranger wherever she goes/grows.

In this artwork, the condition of exile is a cause of deep suffering and generates defence mechanisms.

The artist understands this condition and the solitude that comes with it as a form of protection and self-sufficiency. During our interview, Safadi explained how she was inspired by learning that the *Tordylium peregrinum* seed can produce both male and female gametes. The reproductive self-sufficiency became one symbol of strength and the ability to continue life and nourish life by herself. When the iron-made defensive structure of the seed is activated in the proximity of humans, the seed exercises her power to mark her own boundaries. In this way, she reverses the process by which boundaries are imposed on her by the coloniser. Yet, this is not a choice made out of free will but rather the only survival mechanism the plant has known. In order to guard her vulnerable soft core, the seed was forced to make herself dangerous to others. As written in the artist's statement for the artwork:

She [the seed] continued developing these mechanisms until they gradually became an integral part of her composition and she transformed into a combatant seed with a resistant and defensive structure (Safadi, 2020)

The seed is waiting for the right conditions for her white flowers to bloom. She waits for a future in which she no longer needs to protect herself and can finally blossom and “let go” of the heavy iron-made defensive structures. As the seed waits, however, she gradually transforms in relation to the violence she has already endured and is now inscribed in her structure. The theme of waiting for the right conditions to bloom returns in the third artwork below.

4.3 | Wounded by words like a *Melilotus indicus* seed

Alaa Abu Asad is an artist and photographer born in Nazareth in 1989 and based in the Netherlands. His research-based work focusses on the links among language, plants, and identity, combining writing, film, and interactive installations. Abu Asad's focus on wild plants offers critical interrogations on territoriality, border-making and belonging. The *Melilotus indicus*, in Arabic حندقوق هندي, is also known as sweet clover. It is an annual edible herb that belongs to the family of the Fabaceae and has medicinal properties. It is native to Palestine and surrounding areas of the Mediterranean as well as central Asia. The plant has round seeds and produces yellow flowers. As described in the exhibition catalogue “the plant is about 30-70 cm high, the stem is branched hollow, and the triangular leaves are oval in shape, and the cluster flowers sprout from the base of the leaves are yellow and have an aromatic scent” (Qattan, 2020, p. 224). In the artwork dedicated to this

seed, Abu Asad focusses on the violent, xenophobic speech used to describe various plant seeds. In the artwork, these words are so violent that they prevent the seed from sprouting. As the seed remains underneath the soil, 200 words are projected onto the soil and violently occupy the space where the seed would grow (Figure 4). The title of the artwork is “The Dog Chased its Tail to Bite it Off” (2020) and refers to Abu Asad's ongoing research to document the violent language used to describe some plants. Specifically, the artist was inspired by the history of another plant known to be invasive: the Japanese knotweed. The artwork's title also refers to the circularity and futility of attempts at exterminating plants. As the artist explained during our interview, “all the methods and tools, technologies, time and money devoted to killing weeds and invasive species are usually futile because the plants continue to grow and they'll find a way to resist ... the plant keeps growing and we keep killing it, but it grows again” (interview, November 2024).

This artwork speaks of absence and of the inability to grow. Words such as “Abnormal, Abandoned, Killer, Intruder, Assassin, Threat, Freak” echo in the room through a recording made by the artist who pronounces each word while the same word is projected onto the soil. The artist rehearses a violent language that underpins geopolitical discourses and political projects of expulsion and elimination of “undesirable” people, often identified in the figure of the illegal migrant. The seed, wounded and weakened by these violent words, can never grow out of the soil. The artist wanted to emphasise how this xenophobic language is applied to both humans and plants across different media: “This language, this war-like terminology, is present in scientific research, scientific papers, but also in the literature and the media” (interview, November 2024).

When the artist first received the name of his seed to research for the exhibition, he began to locate examples of sweet clover in the Netherlands where he resides. Eventually, he was able to locate it: the seed grew locally, adjacent to farming land. Abu Asad remembers the first encounter with the seed as an intimate moment:

When you look at a seed, you look at it in a very casual way, you don't see anything. You just see a grain, a dark grain, but when you really start looking at it, there are so many details ... it is almost an intimate moment when you start discovering the terrain of the seed, you notice the colours, the patterns, it was as if a new world was revealing itself in front of me (interview, November 2024)

Much of the artist's relationship with the seed was based on spending time with the plant, getting to know



FIGURE 3 Photo of the artwork “Waiting for the White Bloom” (2020) by Shada Safadi. Courtesy of the artist and Qattan Foundation.

FIGURE 4 Photo of the artwork “The Dog Chased its Tail to Bite it off” (2020) by Alaa Abu Asad, the words projected onto the soil mean “abnormal”. Courtesy of the artist and Qattan Foundation.



the plant, learning its anatomy, and examining the details of its roots, stems, and leaves. As he explained during our interview, his research is fundamentally about questioning exploitative and utilitarian relationships as the dominant way of living with plants: “We need to be learning from more than human entities, learning how to live with them, to share this place with them” (interview, November 2024). In emphasising the violence of the language of plants, Abu Asad brings to the fore the urgent question of how to think and practice alternative ways to co-exist, which are not predicated upon categories of “alien” or “foreign” along territorial divides and border-making practices. The seed remains hidden under the surface, waiting for the right conditions to finally grow and germinate.

4.4 | Wounded survival

In this exhibition, the seeds of harmful weeds are brought to life through the artists’ eyes. By casting the seed as a survivor of violent processes of confinement and eradication, these interventions contribute to destabilising the very category of “weed”. I have discussed earlier how the category of weed was instrumental to the settler colonial appropriation of land and the making of territory in Palestine. Here, the artworks use the notion of “noxious weed” to make the devastating consequences of these settler-colonial categories not only understood but also felt through intimate enquiries. In different ways, these representations of “harmful seeds” insist on the deep transformations that arise from the toxic aftermaths of war that linger for generations, resonating with deeply disturbing accounts of the entanglements between human bodies and military remnants in the soil, the air and the water in war-torn

ecologies (Rubaii, 2023). Rather than idealised notions of harmony and balance with nature, these artworks engage with violent transformations.

These imaginative and material acts reckon with deep wounds and fractures in an effort to tell the story of weed control from multiple Palestinian perspectives rather than “official” colonial narratives. The artworks also depart from the environmental symbolism that has characterised much of Palestinian artistic production (Abufarha, 2008). In much of the symbolism revolving around the olive tree in the 1980s, for example, rootedness was celebrated to transcend the fragmentation of Palestinians to produce shared meanings. In these works, the relationships with plants are interrogated through subjective engagements and not assumed a priori. In their accounts of the research and artistic processes, the artists describe the gradual and tentative development of affective and intimate relationships with their assigned seeds. There is no single encounter with the seed, but many. When each artist was assigned one of the 33 seeds from the 1940s archive, this marked the beginning of a longer journey. For some, finding the actual seed involved multiple unsuccessful attempts and research journeys articulating the geographies of weeds as both rooted in the soil and always moving and changing, against notions of essentialism and fixity.

The artists imagine survival in different ways: from affirmative dreams of rebirth from the ashes of the colonial state’s apparatus to contemplative expressions of woundedness and solitude. In Safadi’s and Abu Asad’s artworks seeds wait for their time to bloom. From this perspective, the last two artworks offer a more explicit engagement with the long-lasting consequences of intergenerational trauma, exemplified in the genetic transformations endured by Safadi’s seed and the

radical withdrawal of Abu Asad's artwork as consequences of trauma. While Baraghiti imagines the seed as able to destroy the violent structures of colonialism from within, in Safadi's artwork, the seed's genes are altered by the remnants of unspeakable violence, and in Abu Asad's, work the seed is announced by its absence: it is a seed that cannot grow.

The seeds bear witness to a project that can never be completed: the weeds are still here. Baraghiti and Abu Asad's artworks make reference to the futility of colonial attempts at eradicating plants. For example, Abu Asad's chosen title for the artwork the 'Dog Chased its Tail to Bite it Off', refers to a vicious circle of uprooting and killing but never fully succeeding as well as referring to a sense that "history keeps repeating itself" (interview, November 2024). A similar point was illustrated by Baraghiti when discussing a parallel between the fact that the settler colonial project with weeds and the elimination of Palestinians from the land could never be completed: "Palestinians always say 'they try to bury us and we grow again'. We are like these plants, they try to kill us we grow again" (interview October 2024). Initially, it seemed to me that these references to the futility of eradication resonated with narratives of Palestinian steadfastness or *sumud*: a term used by Palestinians to describe everyday nonviolent resistance. For example, Shqair (2023) has explored the notion of eco-*sumud* as an idea that refers to distinctive forms of ecological steadfastness based on "indigenous land-based knowledge, cultural values, tactics and tools Palestinians employ to fight back against the violent Israeli settler colonial disruption of their sustainable relationship with the land" (Shqair, 2023 p. 79).

However, celebrating resistance and resilience felt dissonant with the current moment, bearing in mind that these conversations took place in 2024, one year into the intensified genocide in Gaza and the killing of Palestinians in the West Bank. Baraghiti addressed this dissonance explicitly when he explained that the affirmation and sense of potential in his artwork belonged to a time before the genocide, stating that "everything is different now". He discussed his current inability to create art and his need to reconsider the meaning of art for him in the aftermath of the genocide. His 2020 artwork was "art before the genocide" (interview, October 2025). From this perspective, the artists required grappling with the trauma of the current moment to think with this exhibition in 2024 and imagine survival today.

5 | CONCLUSION

This article has explored some of the critical interventions made by contemporary Palestinian artists revisiting the Zionist environmental imaginaries of the "harmful weeds and their seeds". As I have argued,

these interventions offer several critical insights in the study of settler colonial environmental narratives and the ways in which the category of "weed" was mobilised to sustain and justify its territorial appropriation and expansion. Examining the language and registers used by colonial authorities and members of Zionist agricultural organisations in the colonial archival documents through the prism of the Ramallah-based exhibition, I have argued, highlights some overlooked aspects of the Zionist environmental imagination. From this perspective, a closer focus on the meanings and metaphorical value linked to the use of pesticides as healing technologies reveals powerful imaginaries of healing the land from infectious diseases as another key site of narrative justification for settler colonial expansion on Palestinian land. Bringing this relatively under-researched aspect, together with a more established area of enquiry focussing on land productivity, offers a more nuanced account of colonial environmental imaginaries of land redemption. Linked to this point, I also discussed the need to pay more attention to alternative anticolonial frameworks that emerge from Palestinian experiences as even critical approaches to environmental imaginaries often run the risk of perpetuating the silencing of Palestinian voices by inadvertently reinforcing Zionist or Eurocentric frames of reference of the official archive.

This is where artistic approaches and creative interventions can help foreground anticolonial interventions showing the limitations of authoritative accounts from colonial archives and unveiling the ongoing consequences of their underlying imaginaries. This article attended to an approach that combines original botanical and historical research with emotional, intimate, and subjective engagements with colonial archival documents to challenge Zionist environmental imaginaries. In *Weed Control*, artistic interventions offer an alternative perspective on the "harmful weed", demonstrating how a project of weed eradication and control can be recounted differently and become a narrative of transformation and survival. In this way, the artists highlight how the political category of "weed" has been mobilised to sustain the project of territorial control and land appropriation. Through the installations, audiences can experience these alternative readings of the Zionist imaginary of weed control before conceptualising them. Above all, these artworks rely on an emerging environmental register that is different from the traditional canons of Palestinian environmental and nationalist art and centres embodied and sensory experiences of dislocation and loss that are woven with a wider critique of settler-colonial relations with humans and nonhumans.

The question of survival remains central to indigenous communities under settler colonialism and a core material concern for Palestinians in the face of the ongoing genocide. In light of this, when examining different perspectives on survival in the artworks, I have

also sought to highlight the problematic nature of overly celebratory references to resistance and the purely metaphorical use of the term, which seems particularly out of touch with the current situation. This point echoes well-established critiques of purely metaphorical engagements with weeds, highlighting the limitations of romanticising them as resilient symbols of survival, and the depoliticising effects of praising resilience when it becomes a normalising tool in the hands of those who benefit from structures of oppression. Similarly, “weedy” metaphors that blur the lines between human and non-human survival in the Anthropocene risk flattening histories of political struggle. Despite these caveats, Palestinian anticolonial interventions through the registers of environmental art are doing important work: they help denounce the dehumanisation of Palestinians and articulate a plurality of voices and experiences that confront us with the deep moral failures of humanity at this moment in history.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Artworks provided with the artist's consent and permission to use the images of the artworks from the A. M. Qattan website was obtained from Qattan Foundation. Institutional ethical approval was not applicable for this article.

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