

Zoometrics and the Dogs of Gaza:

Species, Race, and Settler-Colonial Violence

Irus Braverman

Abstract: Zoometrics—the shifting hierarchies that calibrate value between the more-or-less human and the more-or-less animal—is a core technology of settler colonialism. Such hierarchies govern life and death, authorizing both violence and care. Drawing on the literature on posthumanism, more-than-human geographies, political ecology, Black and decolonial studies, and critical animal studies, this project identifies strategies of humanization, dehumanization, and feralization performed in Gaza through companion, free-roaming, and military dogs, especially since October 2023. Most acutely, I trace how conceptual violence through zoometrics precedes, and often precisely predicts, physical violence. I write about dogs not to center their suffering over that of Palestinians, but to reveal how species difference intersects with race to rationalize and justify extreme atrocities. At the same time, the dogs in Gaza are not mere metaphors; they are living beings with relations and capacities that matter and resist.

Keywords: zoometrics, dogs, Gaza, settler colonialism, animal-humans, ferality

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We are fighting animal-humans (“hayot-adam”), and we are acting accordingly.

—Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, announcing a total siege on Gaza, October 9, 2023¹

Introduction: Israel’s zoometric making of hayot-adam in Gaza

A couple of days after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, the Israeli Defense Minister depicted Gazans as hayot-adam—Hebrew for animal-humans.² This rhetoric exemplifies what my article’s focus on zoometrics seeks to name: The calibration of humanness and animality as

a settler technology. Soon after the statement was released, the Israeli media circulated images of Israeli soldiers rescuing dogs and cats from the rubble of Palestinian homes they had just bombed in Gaza. No similar images circulated that depicted Israeli soldiers digging Palestinian children out of the rubble.

But animal representations do not merely degrade, or “dehumanize”; they also elevate, or “humanize” the living beings involved, producing ever-shifting hierarchies of humanness and animality. Effectively, whereas the figure of the animal can delineate the nonhuman and subhuman, it can also mark who is human and even more-than-human. Constantly changing, animal-human classifications are not merely biological or zoological; they are socially constructed and relative—anybody can be on the receiving end of these ranks.

I call such dynamic hierarchies of humanness and animality “zoometrics”—a scheme for indexing life and death that calibrates who is more-or-less human and who is more-or-less animal, distinguishing grievable from killable lives.³ By zoometrics, I mean the systematic measurement and deployment of species difference to structure governance and authorize violence. Zoometrics appear in many regimes and contexts—the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature is one example, far removed from Gaza’s frontlines.⁴ But the work of zoometrics is especially pronounced in colonial, fascist, and other oppressive regimes. Building on the zoopolitics framework in posthumanism, this article extends that discussion by introducing the concept of zoometrics and the everyday mechanics of this matrix in settler colonial societies.

Specifically, I draw on scholarship in posthumanism, more-than-human geographies, political ecology, Black and decolonial studies, and critical animal studies to explore how companion, free-roaming, and military dogs in Gaza have been mobilized to humanize, dehumanize, and feralize—especially in the aftermath of October 2023. My study of zoometrics illuminates how colonial governance exceeds population management, leveraging animal-human dynamics as a tool of domination and dispossession. I write about dogs not to center their suffering over that of Palestinian humans, but to expose how species difference intersects with race to rationalize and justify extreme violence. Most acutely, I trace how conceptual violence through zoometric classifications precedes, and often precisely predicts, physical violence. As Aph Ko explained, “you must be thought of as an inferior subject before your body is used, abused, manipulated, and consumed.”⁵

Israel's systematic destruction of homes in Gaza since 2023 has materialized this inferiority by turning Gaza into an unlivable space. By January 2025, 92 percent of the housing units and 70 percent of the structures in Gaza were uninhabitable for humans and nonhumans alike,⁶ a condition increasingly described in the literature as domicide.⁷

The process of dehumanizing the Palestinian other through domicide has simultaneously provided the Israeli settler state with ample opportunity to demonstrate its own humaneness—for example, through highly publicized efforts to rescue innocent animal victims. Heroic missions to evict Gaza's zoo lions and to airlift hundreds of donkeys from Gaza into sanctuaries in France and Belgium have been criticized for diverting resources from human aid, for prioritizing animals while civilians were left to starve, and for stealing animals without their owners' consent and severing their ties and lifelines.⁸ Under the conditions in Gaza, the same interspecies intimacies that have enabled such civilized rescue missions have been denied from Palestinians in their relationship with companion animals.⁹

Another zoometric dynamic that has played out in Gaza involves Israel's extensive use of military dogs. By sending them as scouts to discover explosives in Gaza's maze of tunnels and blasted buildings, Israel has sacrificed its dogs in the place of its human soldiers. "Dogs are doing amazing work," chief spokesman for the Israeli military remarked in a briefing.¹⁰ Animal as well as human rights groups have expressed much less enthusiasm about the work of military dogs in Gaza, however, highlighting their troubling uses to attack and maul Palestinians, and especially vulnerable groups.¹¹ The choice that the dogs have in the matter of their deployment, their active participation in the war, and their possible forms of resistance to being conscripted by one side or the other are rarely topics of discussion in human rights discourses. Furthermore, the canine soldier does not bear any rights under international humanitarian law.¹²

Rather than naturalizing or essentializing the human-animal divide, this article pushes beyond the anthropocentric position of critical scholars who write on settler colonialism and decolonial theory, on the one hand, and the animal studies literature that decouples human and animal rights and does not sufficiently attend to the underlying power dynamics and intersectionalities of both, on the other hand, to interrogate how the human-animal divide is mobilized in settler colonial governance through zoometrics. In this sense, my criticism of the human-animal binary and my documentation of its strategic instrumentalization by settler societies through labels such as dehumanization are intertwined: The strict

juxtaposition between human and animal is arguably what makes possible the very act of pushing certain human groups beyond the threshold of humanity into the realm of animality in the first place, setting the ground for unimaginable atrocities to come.

A similar idea was sounded by Cary Wolfe in *Before the Law*, where he wrote that the distinction between human and animal, like the history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism “is a discursive resource, not a zoological designation.” “It is all the more ironic,” he added, “that the main line of biopolitical thought has had little or nothing to say about how this logic effects nonhuman beings—a cruel irony indeed, given how ‘animalization’ has been one of its main resources.”¹³ An animal is not just a dog or a rhino; according to Aph Ko, it is also “a social construct the dominant class created to mark certain bodies as disposable without even a second thought.”¹⁴ In *The Law is a White Dog*, Colin Dayan argued along these lines that “the sight of citizens turned refugees in their own country made me think about abandoned dogs. Not because I want to equate people with dogs, but because the proximity between them helps us to grasp the relationship between legal status and proprietary interests. . . . [A]t what point are dogs legally recognizable, and when do they cease to count?”¹⁵

Within the particular zoometric scheme that has unfolded in Gaza in the aftermath of October 2023, the Israeli canine soldier was honored and mourned, while the dog affiliated with Palestinians was deemed feral and killable unless reassigned to an Israeli home. At the same time, Palestinian civilians were enlisted as (less-than) human shields to substitute for Israel’s canines and were reduced to eating animal food, while Gazan dogs fed on the bodies of those who could not be given a proper burial. The zoometrics were made crystal clear, preparing the ground for the settler state’s perpetual acceleration of violence.

While zoometrics is typically leveraged as a technology of domination, its scalar logic also presents openings for agency and resistance—both human and nonhuman—to unsettle such hierarchies. As part of recognizing these forms of resistance we must finally realize that animals are not only metaphors¹⁶ but are living beings with their own agency. As Donna Haraway highlighted, dogs “are not here to think with. They are here to live with.”¹⁷ In the next section, two dog stories illustrate how zoometrics operate on the ground, leveraging strategies of humanization and dehumanization to translate abstract hierarchies into lived realities.

Zoometrics in practice: Humanizing and dehumanizing dogs and humans

The juxtaposition of dehumanized versus humanized subjects and civilized beings versus beasts is a central zoometric device that divides between and distinguishes populations framed respectively as “human” and “nonhuman” for the purpose of evaluating and governing them. Two stories will help illustrate some of the problems with this bifurcated mindset. The first story is about a dog with a name and an owner—a dog that matters; this story speaks to the humanizing role of nonhuman animals. The second story is about the numerous unowned and unnamed dogs that have been roaming on and nearby the Israel-Gaza border; this story speaks to the dehumanizing role of nonhuman animals. Together, these two dog stories demonstrate how human-animal hierarchies become part of colonial governance through intricate zoometric practices of devaluing, degrading, and asserting moral superiority.

Bella is a small Shih Tzu. On October 7, 2023, she visited kibbutz Nir Yitzhak with her Jewish owners—17-year-old Mia Leimberg and her mother, Gabriela. When Mia was taken hostage that morning, her dog hid under her pajamas. As Mia’s father later told reporters, once her captors discovered this, “a bit of an argument ensued, and it was decided to let her keep the dog instead of leav[ing] it behind.”¹⁸

Photographs of Mia crossing back to Israel with Bella clenched to her chest during the release of 132 Israeli hostages from Gaza in November 2023 circulated widely in Israel and beyond, eliciting compassion among viewers.

Yet many of these responses seemed to be at odds with each other. While Jewish Israeli accounts criticized Hamas’s inhumanity for kidnapping a dog and highlighted the Israeli girl’s humanness and resourcefulness, Palestinians and various international voices emphasized the humaneness of Hamas in allowing Mia to keep her pooch. Despite their polarized viewpoints, however, these two narratives arguably share an important perspective: for both, Bella’s rescue illustrated an upward zoometric shift. Whether by humanizing the Israeli girl who was willing to sacrifice her own life to keep the dog alive (and dehumanizing Hamas for taking a dog as hostage) or by humanizing Hamas soldiers who were empathetic to a child and her dog—these narratives both portray Bella as a victim of war and as an agent of (de)humanization. Social media and news sites have overflowed with stories and videos that likewise employ animal rescue to humanize different actors, whether as victims or as saviors, and to highlight the relative humanity of one side over the other.

Bella's story exemplifies how species difference becomes a weapon in the colonial arsenal that serves to perform civility. But Bella's miraculous return, together with her companion human, to the safety of their Israeli home, is the exception to the fate of innumerable companion species in Gaza. Animals such as dogs and cats, left behind when their families escaped or died, afford a particularly bleak picture of the utter ruination that has occurred in Gaza and, to a lesser extent, also across the border in Israel, since October 2023.

Accordingly, my second dog story does not have a visible individual protagonist but is composed of many, mostly invisible and nameless, dogs. Amidst the unprecedented devastation in Gaza, since October 2023 thousands of dogs have lost their homes and were forced to the street, alongside their human companions. Some of these dogs crossed the border from Gaza into 1948 Israel, usually in packs, through passageways in the previously sealed aboveground border. These dogs have compounded an existing problem in the southern part of Palestine-Israel (Naqab in Arabic or Negev in Hebrew), especially in vicinity to the semi-pastoral Palestinian Bedouin communities.

The state of Israel, like the British Mandate and Ottoman governments before it, views free-roaming dogs as dangerous because of their potential to transmit diseases—rabies in particular—and to attack wild and farm animals and even humans. The Rabies Act of 1934, enacted under British rule and later incorporated into Israeli law, permits state officials to execute ownerless dogs by classifying them as feral. Based on this and on newer laws enacted with similar definitions and goals, the state of Israel killed 2,000 dogs in 2022 alone. While most cases of rabies detected that year were from further north, most of the killings occurred near the Palestinian Bedouin communities in the Naqab-Negev. This reveals how seemingly neutral laws framed as targeting nonhumans can quickly transform into racialized enforcement in the human realm. Unsurprisingly, the mass execution of free-roaming dogs did little to decrease their numbers—it rarely does.¹⁹ Instead, such zoometrics have criminalized and dehumanized Palestinian citizens of Israel who reside within the state's 1948 borders, demonstrating the porousness of the Green Line within the broader settler colonial scheme in Palestine-Israel.²⁰

The Israeli state's legal response to the dogs entering from Gaza since 2023 further reveals the complex and varied configurations of nonhuman animals within the country's colonial imaginaries. In April 2024, Israel's public television broadcaster, Kan, aired a program detailing the threats that the free-roaming dogs pose to the returning Israeli kibbutzim members, who left their homes after they were attacked by Hamas on

October 7, 2023. One member described his fear of the dogs, suggesting, cynically perhaps, that Hamas must have been training them to invade Israel. “I’d shoot them if I could,” he proclaimed.²¹ In the eyes of certain local Israelis at least, the zoometrical move of framing the dogs as Hamas proxies has amplified their killability.

A similar sentiment was expressed by the Amendment to the Law for the Regulation of the Supervision of Dogs of 2002, passed by the Israeli Knesset in April 2024. This Amendment further relaxed the already limited restrictions on the killing of dogs when captured within twenty kilometers from the border with Gaza and was later extended to the border with Lebanon.²² The perceived ferality of the dogs, coupled with their association with Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, has automatically rendered them hyper-killable.

If Bella’s story demonstrates the humanizing potential of animal companionship, the feralization of Gaza’s dogs exposes the inverse dynamic, illustrating how animality becomes a lever for dehumanization. Ferality here is not a natural condition but a colonial production, sustained through a detailed zoometric regime—with deadly consequences.

The zoometrics of in-betweenness: Feral and animal-humans

Alongside the work of juxtaposing humanization and dehumanization to index worth, zoometrics is also concerned with in-between entities who fall outside the traditional classifications of nature or culture. Neither here nor there, forms of life such as feral dogs and, in other contexts, also the figures of the hybrid and the “animal-human” have been ubiquitous targets of extermination projects. As Jacques Derrida phrased it in his interview “Eating Well,” “thou shalt not kill” turns out not to be a universalizable maxim, but one that only concerns those for whom it is a “proper” imperative, those who fall inside the frame.²³

Occupying a precarious space in the classificatory imagination, ferality is neither wild nor domestic, neither fully inside nor completely outside the human fold and therefore never “proper.”

Such liminality of the feral has long unsettled Western governance systems that depend on clear boundaries to maintain order. From an ecological perspective, feral beings represent a departure from domesticated life and a reorientation toward wildness. Nineteenth-century naturalists such as John Bernard Gilpin described feral animals in similar terms as “domesticated individuals continually escaping from man’s control,” attempting to re-found the “old primal stock” from which they were derived.²⁴ If until the theory of evolution, feral and wild were synonymous, then post-Darwinian thought amplified this anxiety, recasting

ferality as bestiality born of failed domestication—a deviation from evolutionary teleology. Effectively, ferality became a moral indictment, a disorder that demanded correction.

This negative association soon spilled into governance, where ferality acquired concrete and often lethal consequences. As Maan Barua observed: “Beyond ecological remits, ferality is equated with that which is neither domestic nor wild, threatening to disrupt social order. Colonial legacies underpin evaluations of ferality and have long served to render creatures deemed feral killable.”²⁵ Within zoometric frameworks, then, ferality is not simply a biological condition but also a political technology that calibrates killability and grievability by marking certain beings as outside the sphere of care. The dogs’ perceived ferality poses a perennial threat to the classificatory mindset of colonial regimes. Such calibration does not stop at dogs; it reverberates across species lines, shaping the treatment of racialized humans whose proximity to these feral animals becomes a proxy for their own devaluation.²⁶ Ferality’s in-betweenness thus becomes a juridical trigger for elimination spanning the animal-human spectrum.

Precisely for its potential to disrupt evolutionary teleology, a range of prominent critical theorists have come to embrace ferality as a mode of decolonial governance. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ferality denotes a “line of flight” from the circuits of commodity capital and entails escaping not only captivity but also the networks of trade.²⁷

Feminist and queer scholars such as Catriona Sandilands and Billy-Ray Belcourt extended this reading, framing ferality as a tactic for undoing patriarchal and racial taxonomies.²⁸ For Belcourt, decolonization is “a kind of feral-becoming,” a move beyond ontologies tethered to taxonomized humanity.²⁹ For these feminist, queer, anti-capitalist, and decolonial scholars, the term feral represents a desired shift in power dynamics toward hopeful emancipatory politics.³⁰

Yet such attempts to use the eco-juridical category of the feral to challenge colonial structures embedded in racial capitalism are at once insightful and problematic. While the term helps push beyond the nature-culture divide and challenge existing categories, a wholehearted embrace of ferality by critical theorists also ignores its troubled legacies and risks romanticizing a category that settler regimes still actively deploy for the extermination of populations.³¹

Against this backdrop of contested meanings, local actors have intervened in ways that expose the fragility of zoometric hierarchies. Consider the case of Ran Pachima, an Israeli animal rescuer of Jewish-Arab descent, who defied state extermination laws by saving dogs

classified as feral near Gaza in October 2023 and thereafter. At his shelter, these dogs—once marked for death—engaged and blended with dogs left homeless in Israel in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks. Speaking on Israeli media, Pachima declared that “the [Gazan] dogs are no different than the ones in your living room.”³² Re-domesticating these dogs, Pachima has been trusting the good heart of his fellow Israelis, he said, to provide them with new and loving homes.³³ The zoometric process of deferalizing the Gazan dog presents the settler state with an opportunity to civilize its mission, reasserting the strength of its own home built upon the destruction of the Palestinian home from where many of these dogs were severed.

While the state categorizes all dogs originating in Gaza as feral and has been seeking their immediate extermination as such, Pachima has protected their right to live through their domestication and ownership in new Israeli homes.³⁴ Pachima’s work thus underscores a key zoometric insight: ownership modulates worth. Under Israeli law, dogs only become grievable once they are folded back into domesticity—a privilege denied to Palestinian humans.³⁵ In this sense, Pachima’s intervention does not dismantle zoometrics; it merely reconfigures its terms, reaffirming the colonial equation between humanness and ownership.

This equation has been mobilized across racial regimes, where dog ownership and deployment have signified who counts as fully human and who does not.³⁶ As Black scholars have noted, colonization and repression raise questions not only about the right not to be owned but also about the right to own.³⁷ A 1942 decree that prohibited Jewish people from owning pets in Nazi Germany was part of a series of welfare laws enacted by the Third Reich.³⁸ Since humans alone can claim to own animals,³⁹ dog ownership became a marker of humanity and thus Jewish intimacy with companion species within the space of the domicile was prohibited.

Similarly, in the United States enslaved people were barred from owning dogs—a prohibition fortified by claims that Black people lacked the moral capacity to care for animals.⁴⁰ President and slave owner George Washington ordered that all dogs belonging to the slaves on his plantation be handed in because they allegedly assisted the slaves in pursuit of robberies.⁴¹ These arguments portrayed a deep-seated fear that Black people would use their dogs as a weapon against the white man. As Colin Dayan argued in *The Law Is a White Dog*, legal regimes have long linked the regulation of Black communities and dogs, restricting both groups’ ability to roam by configuring it as dangerous.⁴² These bans were not seen as dehumanizing because the slaves were construed as property, and one object could not, by definition, own another.⁴³ At the same time,

imported mastiffs were weaponized against Indigenous fugitives and runaway slaves, later morphing into police dogs trained to attack Black bodies.⁴⁴ But the connection between ownership and value is neither fixed nor globally shared. Other cultural contexts offer contrasting approaches to ferality, demonstrating that killability and ferality do not necessarily go hand in hand. In India, for example, street dogs are celebrated unconditionally, without mandating their domestication.

As Krithika Srinivasan explained, “dogs in India don’t have to be pets or guard dogs or laboratory animals or some other kind of human property. They can exist independent of human ownership and control and cannot be deprived of the opportunity for life simply because they don’t have human owners—individual or institutional.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Elizabeth Lo’s documentary *Stray*⁴⁶ portrayed Turkey’s embrace of free roaming dogs as part of urban life. Yet this tolerance proved fragile: in July 2024, Turkey adopted a controversial law mandating municipalities to round up stray dogs and euthanize those deemed feral.⁴⁷ This reversal, enacted by President Erdogan’s Islamic nationalist ruling coalition, resonates with the zoometric understanding of the dog as never fully domesticated and thus always potentially killable.⁴⁸

In the midst of Israel’s domicide in Gaza, the response by Israeli animal advocates to the “feral” dog problem signals another dynamic: the decoupling of animal rights and human rights activism in Palestine- Israel and the appropriation of animal rights discourses to confer moral legitimacy—a phenomenon critics have called “veganwashing.”⁴⁹

This prioritization of animal rights over (Palestinian) human rights is made highly visible in the Israeli military’s advertisement of itself as the “most vegan army in the world,”⁵⁰ even as it enforces conditions that leave Palestinians and their animals starving. Emotive stories and images of Israeli soldiers rescuing helpless kittens from the rubble or adopting terrified dogs in Gaza and transporting them to safe homes in Israel serve to civilize the settler project. At the same time, juxtaposing Israel’s humane treatment of animals and inhuman(e) conditions imposed on Gaza serves to further deny the humanness of Palestinians, who, like their animals, have been reduced to eating grass and animal feed. Deeply engaged in the civilizing mission, the state constantly fuels a binary imaginary of a just war between right and wrong, light and dark, human and beast, and moral and immoral. One particularly telling Instagram post in Hebrew from early 2024 (later deleted) depicted an Israeli soldier near his tank befriending a Gazan dog amidst the surrounding destruction. The image was framed with a caption attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: “The

greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

Roberto Esposito’s discussion of the “animalman” reveals the underlying logic of another element of zoometrics: the devaluation of those entities who are not fully animal nor fully human but a compilation of both. As such, and much like ferality, these entities fall in between traditional animal-human categories. Recalling Israel’s defense minister’s reference to Gazans as *hayot-adam*, or “animal-humans,” shortly before Israel’s military attacks on Gaza, Esposito’s concept “animalman,” developed in a different context, emerges as eerily poignant here. In his words:

He who was the object of persecution and extreme violence wasn’t simply an animal (which was indeed respected and protected as such by one of the most advanced pieces of legislation of the entire world), but was an animalman. . . . [T]he regime promulgated a circular that prohibited any kind of cruelty to animals, in particular with reference to cold, to heat, and to the inoculation of pathogenic germs. Considering the zeal with which the Nazis respected their own laws, this means that if those interned in the extermination camps had been considered to be only animals, they would have been saved.⁵¹

Drawing on Esposito’s insights, one can infer that had Gaza’s humans been assigned the status and value of donkeys, lions, or even dogs or cats, their fate may have been markedly different.

Accordingly, the zoometric project in Gaza operates through at least two liminal entities: the “feral” Gazan dog and the Palestinian “animal-human.” These entities and the dynamics they generate expose the colonial calculus at the heart of zoometrics, which governs the full range of daily interactions and intimacies. In Gaza, this calculus has been unfolding with brutal clarity.

Militarized dogs and human shields: Calibrating killability and grievability

If ferality exposes the mundane administration of zoometrics, military dogs reveal its most lethal expression—where species difference becomes a weapon of war. Dogs have a long history of participating in military conflicts that can be traced back to ancient Iran in 600 BCE and, more famously, to Greece and Rome.⁵² In modern times, the United States used dogs in WWI and in 1942 it created the first official canine army unit. American special forces used dogs in the raids that killed Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in 2011⁵³ and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State, in 2019. Tweeting a fake photo of himself

awarding a medal to the injured dog who participated in the operation that killed al-Baghdadi, President Trump praised the dog as “incredible.”⁵⁴

While technological advancements have reduced the need for animal use, dogs are still essential for the work of many armies. The Australian Defense Forces use dogs extensively in their operations.⁵⁵

In 2017, the Australian Defense Force commissioned the Canine Operational Service Medal, becoming the first military in the world to honor the contributions made by military working dogs.⁵⁶ These honors illustrate how militaries reinforce zoometric hierarchies of worth by elevating canine lives as grievable.

In Israel, the canine unit Oketz (Sting), founded in 1939, was incorporated into the Israeli military upon Israel’s establishment in 1948⁵⁷ and functioned under the guide dog school of Dr. Rudolphina Menzel.⁵⁸ Numbering some fifty soldiers and a few hundred dogs, the dogs were trained to locate injured soldiers, detect mines, and skydive with combatants into warzones. The unit was disbanded in 1954 and re-established in 1974 as a small secret force for fighting “terrorism.” A few years later, the unit expanded and evolved into one of Israel’s elite combat forces, playing a key role in several hostage rescue operations in the late 1970s and 1980s, and then in the first Lebanon war and the second Intifada. The unit’s deployment in Israel’s 2014 attacks on Gaza was extensive: The dogs located explosives and tunnel shafts, scanned them, and alerted to the presence of Palestinians, in two instances saving the lives of human Israeli soldiers by exploding in their place.⁵⁹

In 2023, Israel’s Oketz unit was among the first forces to reach the Israeli settlements targeted by Hamas. During the battles that ensued, the commander of the unit’s assault platoon was killed.⁶⁰

Yet the deployment of police and military dogs remains controversial. In the American South, police dogs trained to attack Black people were called “white dogs.”⁶¹ Due to their color-blind vision, the dogs could see only in black and white. Dogs have thus become instruments for defining the human as white and the Black as other. The association between race and dogs in America is lingering and ongoing. Police dogs attacked Black protesters during the 1963 civil rights riots in Birmingham, Alabama and more recently, were deployed against protesters in Ferguson, Missouri—prompting several police departments to adopt explicit bans on using dogs for crowd control.⁶²

The “white dogs” of United States racial policing find their counterpart in Israel’s “apartheid dogs,” deployed against Palestinians

throughout the settler colonial space of Palestine-Israel⁶³ and, most intensively so, in the recent war on Gaza. Israel's elite Oketz unit was especially scrutinized for its operations amidst civilians in Gaza. There, the unit was repeatedly documented attacking civilians in domestic spaces, transforming the soldier-dog bond into a device of terror. During a December 2023 raid on Kamal Adwan Hospital, the general director of Gaza hospitals reported that Israeli soldiers forced displaced civilians and health workers into a pit, stripped them half-naked, and unleashed attack dogs on them.⁶⁴ In June 2024, footage recorded by an Israeli military dog's body camera documented the dog mauling an elderly Palestinian woman at her home in Jabalia.⁶⁵ A few weeks later and only three miles away, Muhammed Bhar, a young man with Down's Syndrome, was attacked by an Israeli military dog and was left bleeding in his home after the soldiers evacuated his family.⁶⁶

Muhammed's mother described:

The dog attacked him, biting his chest and then his hand. Muhammed didn't speak, only muttering "No, no, no." The dog bit his arm and the blood was shed. I wanted to get to him but I couldn't. No one could get to him, and he was patting the dog's head saying, "enough my dear enough." In the end, he relaxed his hand, and the dog started tearing at him while he was bleeding.⁶⁷

The Israeli military admitted that after he was attacked by the army dog and after they had ordered his family to evacuate, the soldiers left the disabled man on his own while he bled to death. This practice echoes French colonial spectacles whereby the colonists deployed dogs to publicly consume rebel slaves in a "performance of white supremacy and domination."⁶⁸ The execution of the slave by the dog was a sublimated form of cannibalism: "By eating the Other, through a canine proxy, the French troops enacted their abjection for the black Other."⁶⁹

These incidents, far from isolated, reveal how Israel's dogs have infiltrated the most intimate zones of life, collapsing safe spaces such as the home and the hospital and transforming them into a battlefield. Rather than exceptions, these incidents exemplify how settler violence operates through zoometric means. By August 2024, Israel mourned 29 fallen military dogs with state funerals and a national day of commemoration,⁷⁰ a spectacle that elevated canine sacrifice while occluding the human Palestinian lives undone by these same animals, simultaneously disregarding the agency and autonomy of the sacrificed dogs. In August 2024, the Israeli media reported that the military will be reducing its

canine operations in Gaza and might dismantle the dog unit altogether due to the accelerating loss of its expensive and highly valued military dogs.

At around the same time, Al Jazeera revealed how Israeli troops abducted Palestinian civilians, dressed them in military uniforms, attached cameras to their bodies, and sent them into underground tunnels and buildings to shield Israeli troops.⁷¹ This prompted claims that Palestinian humans were being deployed for the same actions that were previously performed by the dogs. Israeli forces have long relied on Palestinian civilians as shields. In those instances, Palestinians in nonmilitary attire were clearly recognizable as noncombatants. During the latest Gaza war, however, Palestinians were disguised in Israeli uniforms and used as bait—not to deter attacks, but instead to draw fire and expose militant positions. In the words of Neve Gordon: “The moment these human shields, masked as soldiers, are sent into the tunnels, they are transformed from vulnerable civilians into fodder.”⁷²

As fodder, Palestinian lives are not only dehumanized, but specifically become even less valuable than the lives of the dogs: no longer regarded as sacrificable, the highly prized dogs had become easily replaceable by the less valuable Palestinian humans. An Israeli journalist ironically reported along these lines that “the new dogs are much cheaper, more obedient, and better trained—and their lives are worth much less.”⁷³ Because the human Palestinian “dog proxies” can also speak the same language as Hamas militants, the Palestinian civilians, acting as less-than-canines in the hands of Israel, were often ordered to verbally inform Hamas that they are defeated. For Gordon, this represented a new form of human shielding, one he characterized as “two war crimes in one” because it combined the use of human shields with their disguise in enemy uniforms.⁷⁴

Oketz dogs not only assist the settler state physically and militarily, they also legitimize and normalize its acts of violence and care through redefining whose lives matter. Recalibrating killability and grievability, canine soldiers mark Palestinians as targets while humanizing Israeli soldiers.⁷⁵ Underscoring how zoometrics are leveraged to rank lives both before and after death, this distinction is deepened under the colonial logic that juxtaposes settlers and natives and aligns these juxtapositions with other powerful binaries such as those between humans and animals and between civilized and beastly. Taken together, these dynamics illuminate the analytic power of zoometrics for understanding precisely how settler colonialism weaponizes species difference and transforms it into a juxtaposed and racialized mode of governance.

(De)humanization, ferality, resistance: The theoretical stakes of zoometrics

If up to this point I documented the on the ground manifestations of zoometrics in Gaza, this section situates zoometrics within debates on animality and colonialism, clarifying the distinct contribution of this concept and considering how to reinsert human and animal agency into the analysis. The section starts by defining zoometrics against the backdrop of zoopolitics, continues by addressing the criticisms toward the dehumanization concept, examines attempts to envision alternatives to the hierarchical modes of thought embedded in zoometrics—pausing to discuss Uexküll’s concept of *umwelt* and Butler’s vulnerability—and, finally, foregrounds interspecies alliances and intersectionalities and forms of resistance practiced by both humans and nonhuman animals.

In *Before the Law*, Cary Wolfe coined the concept “zoopolitics” to extend the biopolitical analysis across species lines, foregrounding the governance of animal alongside human life. As Wolfe wrote, “the human-animal distinction must be supplemented with the central distinction of biopolitics: the difference between those animals that are members of a community and those that are deemed killable but not murderable.”⁷⁶ This distinction, he argued, is not zoological but discursive: “animalization has been one of biopolitics’ main resources.”⁷⁷

Zoopolitics thus names the political rationalities that sort species into juxtaposed categories, revealing how animal life becomes a key instrument for managing populations under regimes of biopower.⁷⁸

Nicole Shukin pushed this analytic further by situating zoopolitics within capitalist economies. For Shukin, “an analysis of capital’s incarnations in animal figures and flesh is pivotal to extending the examination of biopower beyond its effects on humans.”⁷⁹ Her concept of “rendering” captures the dual process by which animal life is reduced materially and mimetically: “Rendering refers simultaneously to cultural technologies and economies of mimesis and to the carnal business of boiling down and recycling animal remains.”⁸⁰

Through this lens, zoopolitics illuminates how biopolitical governance and economic logics converge to regulate animal bodies.

If Wolfe’s and Shukin’s zoopolitical framework operates through the broad logic of governing life at the level of the human-animal boundary, the zoometric framework accentuates the granular processes of species differentiation and evaluation within that divide. Whereas zoopolitics provides an important account of how animalization structures and organizes life and death and, specifically, how it targets certain beings as

killable but not murderable, zoometrics provides a conceptual tool for fine-tuning our understanding of how worth is calibrated and measured. Rather than stopping at the point of animal-ization, zoometrics continues to closely track how the state actively indexes, ranks, and weighs degrees of humanness and animality across human and nonhuman populations—both before and after death—so that killability and grievability can be differentially produced and updated in real time. In other words, zoopolitics tells us about the species line in governance, while zoometrics more precisely shows how that line is produced and adjusted through everyday practices that constantly assess value based on animal-human relationships. Finally, while zoopolitics focuses on governance structures, zoometrics simultaneously highlights how such practices can be disrupted by acts of refusal, ferality, and interspecies solidarity.

Another conceptual clarification is in order, this time regarding my use of the term dehumanization in this article. Samera Esmeir cautioned that despite its radical intentions, literature that critically employs the term often risks reinforcing the notion that humanity is a status conferred or withdrawn by law. In her words: “the more we think of humanity as a juridical status, the more dehumanization becomes possible.”⁸¹ While taking Esmeir’s concerns seriously, this article underscores that genocides continue to rely on the language and logic of dehumanization. From this perspective, Esmeir’s insistence on the juridical impossibility of dehumanization may obscure the extent to which the concept nevertheless animates and legitimizes contemporary genocidal practices.

I would like to offer here that to prevent this form of degradation from happening, one must understand that animals and humans are in this mess together, and that as long as animals are deprived of recognition there will always be certain groups of humans that will be deprived right there with them. As Cary Wolfe pointed out in *Before the Law*: “if the frame is about rules and laws, about what is proper,

and not simply a matter of a line that is given by nature between those inside and those outside, then to live under biopolitics is to live in a situation in which we are all always already (potential) ‘animals’ before the law—not just nonhuman animals according to zoological classification, but any group of living beings that is so framed.”⁸² So long as humans treat any form of life violently, that violence will eventually circle back to haunt us. Indeed, as Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Cary Wolfe, and others have argued, those who fall outside the frame—because they are marked by differences of race, species, gender, religion,

or nationality—are always threatened with “a noncriminal putting to death.”⁸³

The constant threat of crossing the lines and becoming animals before the law is particularly enhanced under colonial projects. Following Frantz Fanon, one can trace a line above which there is the zone of being, where the full humanity of “humans” is socially recognized, and below which is the zone of non-being, for those for whom humanity is questioned or not recognized. But the fluidity and multiplicity of this delineation were not always fully captured by Fanon and by colonial theory. What I attempt to illustrate through zoometrics is that the animal-human binary creates all kinds of dynamics, not only downward through dehumanization, whereby entities become “less-than,” but also upward toward rehumanization and even sideways, whereby certain entities are reevaluated as “similar-to” others. The figures of animal and human—figures and not merely fixed physical or biological materialities—effectively appear, disappear, and reappear as agents of dehumanization, animalization, humanization—and everything in between.

Jakob von Uexküll highlighted the particularities and interconnections of human and nonhuman perceptions, strongly opposing such hierarchical modes of thinking and offering the framework of life-world or *umwelt* in their stead. Reflecting on Uexküll’s work, Giorgio Agamben explained that Where classical science saw a single world that comprised within it all living species hierarchically ordered from the most elementary forms up to the higher organisms, Uexküll instead supposes an infinite variety of perceptual worlds that, although they are uncommunicating and reciprocally exclusive, are all equally perfect and linked together as if in a gigantic musical score.⁸⁴

While Uexküll’s *umwelt* theory is often celebrated for its radical challenge to mechanistic biology, recent interpretations have argued that parts of his work—especially his organic metaphor of the state—intersected with conservative political ideas.⁸⁵ Others, however, emphasized that Uexküll was not a member of the Nazi Party and did not openly endorse National Socialist ideology, even as certain themes in his writing were later taken up in that milieu. In light of this contested intellectual legacy, claims about his work offering a radical alternative to racialized zoometrics require careful qualification.

Contemporary zoometric projects do not emerge in a vacuum; instead, they echo a long tradition of racialized measurement. As Frederick Douglass observed, slavery operated through a calculus that collapsed humans and animals into one degradable category. In his autobiography, Douglass wrote that “we were all ranked together... Men and women, old

and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. . . . All holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination.”⁸⁶ Claire Jean Kim has shown, similarly, how race and species operate in tandem as coproductive logics to create the animal, the Chinese immigrant, the Black man, and the Indian in the white imagination.⁸⁷ The concept of zoometrics picks up these threads of thought to highlight the stratified scale of being through which the settler colony establishes norms and delineates priorities.

In another attempt to counter the hierarchical mode of colonial thought, Judith Butler urged us to “consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on another, physically vulnerable to one another.” “From where,” she asked, “might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?”⁸⁸ Butler’s emphasis on a shared human vulnerability was promising, and yet, as Cary Wolfe pointed out, it was precisely in her depiction of vulnerability as a human property that Butler slipped. After all, why should the dangers and vulnerabilities, along with the exposure to violence and harm that accrue from embodiment, be limited to a “common human vulnerability?” Why not extend such vulnerabilities to all living beings?⁸⁹ Such an interpretation would better align with Foucault’s recognition in *Society Must Be Defended* that one cannot discuss biopolitics without talking about race and also that one cannot talk about race without discussing species.⁹⁰ Both categories are pliable and unstable, constantly bleeding into and out of each other.

Since neither Uexküll’s *umwelt* nor Butler’s theory of vulnerability offers a satisfying alternative to zoometrics, intersectional approaches and alliance-building may provide more effective strategies for destabilizing hierarchical regimes of value and for envisioning decolonial futures. Writing along those lines, Bénédicte Boisseron has highlighted how Western societies, and the United States in particular, have framed blackness and animality as competing entities, forcing Black people to engage in “a battle about likability.” In her words:

“The America-likes-pets-more-than-blacks attitude . . . is symptomatic of a system that convulsively pits blackness against animality.”⁹¹

Rather than engage in that battle, Boisseron has brought animal and Black studies into conversation. Drawing on Kim’s argument that one should not have to resubordinate the animal to defend blackness and vice versa,⁹² Boisseron has called for interspecies alliances wherein “blacks

and animals fight alongside, against, or with each other as they assert their dignity.”⁹³

One can observe such alliances that undercut the colonial and racial workings of zoometrics in the everyday tactics of resistance that have mushroomed in Gaza. Amidst the violence, destruction, and hunger, Palestinians have found solace in aligning themselves with the marginalized others in their midst, posting and re-posting photos and videos of dogs and cats traumatized after bombings, carefully fed despite the overwhelming hunger, and treated alongside the injured humans. An image of a young Gazan boy covered in dust who arrived at the hospital hugging his kitten was shared widely on social media. Gazans have regarded the survival of their nonhuman companions, alongside their own survival, as an act of resistance to Israel’s colonial domicile, infusing heightened political meaning to the concept of “conviviality”—a mode of coexistence that is just, equitable, and ecologically embedded, as opposed to the capitalist, extractive, or human-natureseparating logics of mainstream conceptions of nature.⁹⁴

Although the near impossibility of raising dogs and cats as cherished companions and family members marks a profound loss of an intimacy that many consider fundamental to human life, through their persistent efforts to nurture and protect the animals in their midst, Palestinians at the same time insist upon their own humanity.

The continued operation of Sulala Association for Animal Rescue exemplifies the Palestinians’ refusal to relinquish human dignity. In October 2025, Dr. Mu’ath Abu Rukbeh, a member of the Sulala Animal Rescue team and the sole veterinarian in northern Gaza, was killed by Israeli gunfire.⁹⁵ Still, Sulala persisted. Their founder Saeed al-Err won the Worldwide Vets award in 2024 and is in the running to win the second time as I write this. Using the wheels of toy cars and children’s bicycles, al-Err builds mobility devices for cats and dogs disabled by the war, helping them walk, run and play again despite a lack of access to specialized prosthetics.⁹⁶

The compassion toward animals is widespread among Gaza’s Palestinian residents. Bisan, a young Gazan woman broadcasting the destruction of Gaza’s homes to millions of followers around the world, stroked a kitten amidst the rubble, telling her audience: “Despite the bombing, the war, the destruction—everything—this sweetie is still in the home and alive. So, this is Bisan from Gaza—and we’re still alive.”⁹⁷

The “we” here asserts the inherent connection between the marginalized, bombed, and fragile—yet resilient, recalcitrant, and tenacious—human and animal lives.

And what about resistance by the nonhuman animals themselves? In *Being & Swine*, Fahim Amir argued that resisting domination is a political act and that such resistance need not take on the exact same shape across species lines, especially when pertaining to animals. In his words: “An animal in revolt . . . does not at all resemble conventional ideas of civic participation in civil processes of self-legislation.”⁹⁸

He thus offered to replace Bentham’s famous ethical question for delineating rights, “Do they suffer?” with the question: “Do they put up resistance?” For Amir, the latter question “can produce a non-innocent solidarity that presupposes empathy instead of being limited to pity.”⁹⁹ Drawing on Foucault’s definition of critique as “the art of not being governed” or refusing to be governed in a particular way, Amir described pigeons as unruly subjects that disrupt urban order.¹⁰⁰

Going crazy and committing suicide are additional forms of animal resistance,¹⁰¹ as is embodying internal organs that refuse to be butchered effectively into meat, such as hog bodies that have been causing issues in industrial factories.¹⁰²

In Gaza, the ferocity and aggression of dogs becoming feral turned into a double-edged sword when the dogs, displaying their own agency and resilience, crossed the border and threatened Israeli humans and their associated livestock and companion species. Once unleashed, violence takes on a life of its own, radiating outward in widening spirals that cross species boundaries. We need to think more about how animals are already resisting, and what forms that resistance takes, amidst these intensely violent times.

Conclusion: “Please don’t eat us when we are dead”

This article has drawn on Black and decolonial studies, posthumanism, and critical animal studies to sketch the intersection of animality and racism within the specific conditions of Israel’s war on Gaza. I began by foregrounding the statement by Israel’s Defense Minister about Palestinians as “animal-humans” and then traced the various uses of dogs for Israel’s ongoing domicide of Palestinians in Gaza. The article documented, in particular, Israel’s systemic and intentional elimination of the Palestinian home not only by physically destroying structures but also through severing the multispecies ties and the human-animal intimacies that are part and parcel of life within the home. Israel’s zoometrical

matrix was on full display when it harnessed public health laws to execute animals crossing the border into its territory, casting these animals as unruly extensions of Palestinian life. At the same time, Israel has cast itself as a civilizing force—so attuned to animal (but not human) welfare that it rescued dogs and other (nonhuman) animals from Gaza’s streets and relocated them to “happy homes” in Israel and Europe.¹⁰³

Bella’s story, alongside the stories of the numerous feral dogs of Gaza and the military canine soldiers deployed by Israel, reminds us that the colonial project operates not only through land and “natural resources” but also through the very calibration of species and their relative worth. Embedded in practices of dehumanization, humanization, and feralization, Gaza’s dogs have emerged as powerful technologies for valorizing or villainizing populations, preparing the ground and legitimizing the exercise of further colonial actions, including extreme violence and mass exterminations. The article finally discussed the deployment of dogs within the Israeli army and how their lives have been sacrificed and thereby elevated. In a stark display of zoometric revaluation, the grievable military dogs were then superseded by killable Palestinian civilians, whose non-sacrificial lives were effectively registered as worth less than those of the military canines they had replaced.

While zoometrics is a common technology of myriad and diverse forms of governance, it is arguably most visible in oppressive regimes. Throughout, I proposed zoometrics as an analytic that reveals how settler colonialism weaponizes species difference to justify both care and violence and to sustain racial hierarchies. Such hierarchies do not merely do the work of generally comparing humans to animals, but actively and specifically measure worth through the figure of the human and the figure of the animal, calculating, distributing, and justifying value in both inter- and intra-species terms. The conceptual framework of zoometrics explains the underlying regulation of status, naming the political rationalities through which human and more-than-human life are governed and showing how species differences constantly underwrite and reconfigure who is killable and who is grievable. Zoometrics, in other words, provides a fine-grained instrument for tracking graduated scales of humanness versus animality and the dynamic assignment of value on those scales. It explains not only that animalization and dehumanization occur—what Wolfe calls “zoopolitics”—but how the shifts in degrees of worth authorize specific, often opposing, sociolegal actions, such as adoption versus extermination and enlistment versus abandonment, and how these actions in turn prefigure or ratify colonial violence.

Wolfe's zoopolitics and his "killable and notmurderable" distinction sketch the biopolitical stakes in broad strokes; zoometrics registers the finer and more mundane classifications and changes that privilege certain lives and deaths over others. Zoopolitically, the feral dog functions as a juridical category that enables exterminability; zoometrically, that same dog is re-indexed as hyper-killable when crossing into Israel, only to be recoded as adoptable and grievable once placed in a Jewish Israeli home—an upward tick on the scale that simultaneously downgrades the Palestinian humans linked with this ferality. Zoometrically, Oketz dogs elevate the grievability of Israeli soldiers, while degrading the Palestinians encountered by these dogs to a killable status. State funerals for dogs and heroic nationalistic narratives further quantify this reconfiguration of worth. These examples underscore why zoometrics matters and how this conceptual framework can open new directions for the nonhuman turn in critical theory.

Notably, the nonhuman turn has too often been framed as apolitical or as a liberal extension of rights and welfare to nonhuman animals, obscuring how it can simultaneously reinforce structures of dehumanization against racialized and dispossessed human groups such as Indigenous, Black, and poor communities. As I have demonstrated here, it is time to engage the nonhuman turn through politically and critically attuned analyses. In line with Mona Bhan and Radhika Govindrajan's criticism of those advocating for cosmopolitics as "plural and liberatory," this study has shown that we must become sensitive to the ways in which emancipatory politics—be they feral becomings or animal rights—may actively enable and even naturalize fascist and colonial politics.¹⁰⁴ If Bhan and Govindrajan have urged scholars to make room for skepticism toward cosmopolitical formations, this article extends the call to expose how the nonhuman turn has unintentionally obscured and minimized racial and class concerns, bolstering Western and colonial logics of domination and violence.

This study has also foregrounded the importance of accounting for animal agency. The dogs in this story possessed very little choice regarding their enlistment into a war that might not be theirs to fight. Indeed, despite the centuries-long deployment of dogs in military operations, legal frameworks regulating militaries and armed conflict offer minimal guidance about the use, protection, and treatment of animals during war. In fact, military and police dogs in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom are granted no additional legal status beyond their classification as military equipment.¹⁰⁵ This legal situation has significant consequences: as mere objects, canine soldiers can be targeted and destroyed like any other piece of inanimate army gear.¹⁰⁶

This discrepancy between formal law and public perception not only undermines these animals' autonomy but also stands in stark contrast to their popular portrayal as heroes of war, revealing just how fragile, disposable, and fluid zoometric rankings—including grievability—are in practice.

Finally, I have asked whether nonhuman animals may disrupt or refuse the roles assigned to them within zoometric regimes. At the end of the day, I argued, the animals are never without agency: feralized through Israel's aggression, Gazan dogs ended up crossing the border and attacking Israeli Jews near their homes in defiance of Israel's sense of safety and control. If anything, this course of events should serve as a reminder that animals are not only metaphors, even when—as in the case of feral dogs—those metaphors are deployed for noble purposes of feral becomings. The interplay of domination and resistance was especially visible in the case of military dogs, whose instrumentalization and symbolic elevation revealed the full force of zoometric calibration. Resisting the human program, Israeli army dogs die, or develop PTSD.¹⁰⁷

In closing, I would like to return to the dogs of Gaza for one final scene. Under the extreme hunger experienced by all species across this war-torn region, emergency services documented Gaza's dogs eating the dead bodies of Palestinian humans.¹⁰⁸ Such a scene underscores the brutal power of classifying certain humans as *hayot-adam*—"animal-humans." This terminology arguably set the stage for Palestinian lives to become utterly dispensable and deplorable—so much so, that they no longer deserved the decency of a burial, a decency that has been routinely afforded to Israel's military dogs. Recalling scenes of the genocide in Rwanda and French colonial spectacles in which enslaved people were publicly fed to dogs as technologies of racial terror,¹⁰⁹ Palestinians in Gaza have been facing a degree of dehumanization possible only when their very status as human beings has been stripped away.

Ultimately, zoometrics offers a vocabulary and analytic for understanding how violence is justified and naturalized not simply by reducing humans to animals and vice versa, but by deploying the figure of the animal and the figure of the human as measurement devices through which gradients of worth, killability, and grievability are produced, rationalized, and executed. This intervention expands settler colonial studies by shifting the focus from metaphor and discourse to the material, legal, and affective zoometric technologies through which species become instruments of hierarchical and racialized colonial regimes. Zoometric logics measure and reinforce such racial hierarchies, simultaneously

revealing their fragility. “Please don’t eat us when we are dead,” pleaded a six-year-old Palestinian girl in Gaza to her cat¹¹⁰—a haunting appeal that reveals the desperate ethics of human-animal survival in Gaza and the entanglements of care and violence under Israel’s colonial war.

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