

Homeward bound, we move as foreigners

[Abba Solomon](#) November 21, 2018



REST IN MY SHADE

A Poem About Roots

by Nora Lester Murad and Danna Masad

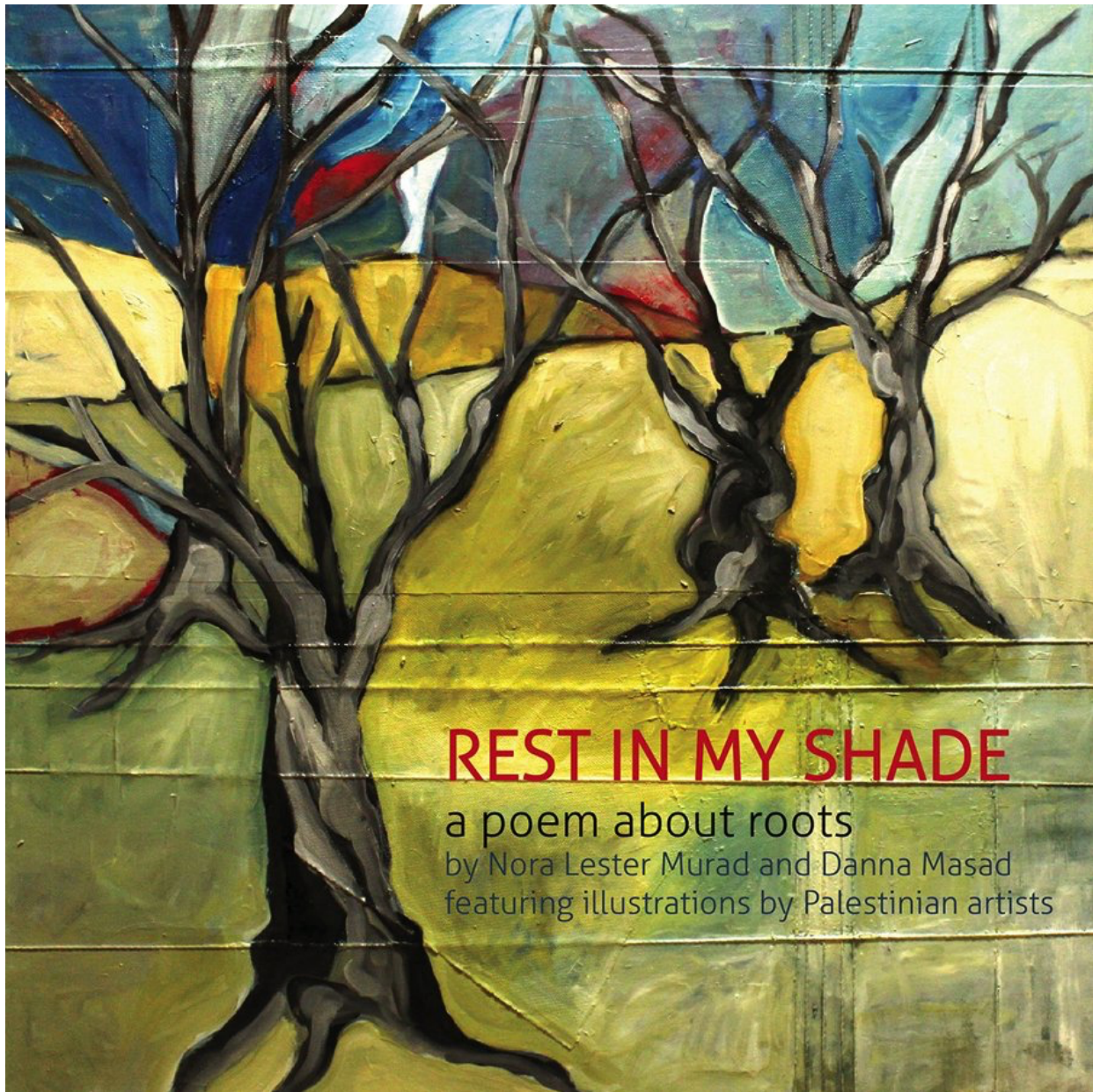
48 pp., \$20. [Interlink Publishing](#) with support from the [Palestine Museum U.S.](#)

The opening stanza of "[Rest in My Shade: A Poem About Roots](#)," the poem that is the scaffold of this Palestinian fine arts book, is about the randomness of life's distribution, determined by commerce and the quotidian:

*"Sprouted from an olive pit
tossed on a footpath
along an ancient trading route."*

The poem is about home, and roots; the anguish of involuntary change, destruction, and loss, in a book illustrated by Palestinian artists from around the world.

Some of the accomplished artists in the book are citizens of Israel, some not; reside in the "Jewish state," the territories or a refugee camp, or work in exile.



Cover: Bashir Qonqar, Olive Trees Behind Fence, 100cm x 100cm, oil on canvas with embroidered cloth and thread, 2013/2014. (By permission of the artist.)

The artists are Fouad Agbaria, Tamam Al-Akhal, Motaz al-Omari, Hani Amra, Nabil Anani, Ayed Arafah, Rafat Asad, Rana Bishara, Ahmad Canaan, Ziad Yousef Hajali, Michael Halak, Abdul Rahman Katanani, Suleiman Mansour, Dina Matar, Marwan Nassar, Bashir Qonqar, Steve Sabella, and Ismail Shammout.

Authors Nora Lester Murad and Danna Masad also live in the world of multiple identities that Palestinians inhabit. After first meeting in a writing workshop in Ramallah, they collaborated on this poem and assembled

the illustrations from Palestinian artists.

By the metaphor of the olive tree, the process of settlement — “*Sprouted from an olive pit / tossed on a footpath*” — of migration and then rootedness — develops in the deceptively simple poem.

*“Then came a family.
Their grafts burned and throbbed,
but they harmonized their seasons around
my oily fruit, and
I was more.”*

The poem in its metaphors is an anthropomorphizing, universalizing story of Palestine — both pastoral and a crossroads, cosmopolitan, settled and enriched successively, and since the *nakba*, a home awaiting a people in exile.

In the book, there is no triumphalism of driving out or punishing, no vows of victory and humbling of the oppressors.

The olive tree serves in the poem as symbol of Palestinian *sumud*, endurance — sheltering and sustaining.



Félix Bonfils (French, 1831-1885, Photographer), Olivier du jardin de Gethsemani, ca. 1870s-1880s, Albumen silver print. Photography Collection, New York Public Library.

The olive tree is also the transplant, the refugee, the immigrant; it yearns for the time people can rest under its branches.

*"May people
again
rest in my shade
and be home."*

The beauty of the works of 18 artists in this 8-by-8-inch hardbound book promote thoughts of a peaceful Palestine that could be, when exile and

anger and walls of concrete and razor wire are gone, when the roles of alien and native — enforced with battle rifles carried by conscripts — are forgotten.

Co-author Murad said, “The curation of the artwork was a process just as creative and intense as the writing of the poem. There were too many wonderful pieces than we could include, but ultimately, the artwork seemed to just fall into place.

“I realize now that the story of the poem had already been told in the artwork of Palestinian artists over the decades. We just brought some of them together so there is a visual story that accompanies the story told in words.”

The poem is a meditation on belonging to a place, an idea which is also a key to the Zionism-in-Palestine experience.

The concept that belonging to Jewish soil would transform Jews' existence was expressed by Nahum Sokolow in a [1916 book of Zionist writing](#): “We Jews have to commence life again, to leave the artificial fictitious world of abstractions. The return to agriculture will be the redemption of our race.”

Human history since Africa is migration and, sometimes, expulsion. We glory in imputed origins — Scots [imagined themselves descendants of Egyptian royalty](#) — and celebrate that we belong right where we are.

Studies in anthropology both clarify and deepen the mystery of origins: [Who is from where? Who belongs?](#) With our origins more complex and more heterogeneous than we like to think, we are all kin as foreigners.

Today, doctrines of identity as separators of humanity, and of land, are again ascendant. President Trump at the United Nations [hailed nationalism](#) as protecting peoples “bound together by ties of memory,

tradition, and the values that make our homelands like nowhere else on Earth."

The poem and pictures of "Rest in My Shade" carry a vision of a world where *shabbatot* could blend with the Muslim call to prayer and church bells, without cruelty and oppression.



Dina Matar, A Musician's Rest, 130cm x 200cm, acrylic on canvas, 2013. (By permission of the artist.)

Exile and home-longing is part of the Palestinian experience in the 20th century, in tandem with the joy of Zionists that they are at last "home."



Roots, or indigeneity, is a sort of sacrament of human genuineness, as seen in these displays from Students Supporting Israel (SSI) at Columbia University, October 2018. (Photo: Abba Solomon)



"Students Supporting Israel" displays, Columbia University, October 2018 (Photos: Abba Solomon)



Members of the Native American Council at Columbia University held a silent protest of Native American iconography used for the Zionist displays. (Photo: Abba Solomon)

Patriots of their land, *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel, Lieberman or Bennett or Netanyahu — all of whom have origins and culture from other lands as much as Israel — fiercely defend their indigeneity.

Whether a people is indigenous is entirely a construct, a human artifice. Often there is a call to precedents of antiquity. Archaeology was brought to serve Zionist advocacy in the 20th century.

Zochrot is the Israeli organization which records and disseminates information of the *Nakba*, collecting data on the non-Jewish habitation of the land. It [fights](#) "the continued adherence of Jewish Israeli society to colonial concepts and practices."

The sin contained in the word "colonial" is not just immigrating somewhere as a group, it is exercising power to erase or marginalize other residents. Avoiding being seen as colonizers is why the Israel advocacy group at Columbia University counters with the idea of Jews as indigenous people of Palestine.

Political Zionism in Palestine is based on a supposed golden historic moment when Jews were where they should be. Ending Jewish exile by creating Palestinian exile is enough to make one both giggle and weep.

There is no question that Jews have been a part of Palestine. Zionism can be a short hop to the magical idea that immigrating Jews are *the* indigenous people of Palestine, leading to the consequence of the beautiful heartache of "Rest in My Shade."

"Rest in My Shade: A Poem About Roots" will be [published mid-November 2018](#) by Interlink Publishing with support from the Palestine Museum U.S.