

To childhood and love, We return

الى الطفولة والحب نعود

**wipii gii-binoojiinwiying
gii-bi-zaag'igoowing, Gga-bskaabiimi**

Wanda Nanibush

Essay by Jamelie Hassan





We Return, More than a Billboard

Jamelie Hassan

We are in permanent mourning for what has happened in this country, but we're also trying to turn that into a form of power, a form of celebration and reclamation, of ceremony, and culture is right at the heart of that. [1]

Wanda Nanibush, March 2025

Many of us have also experienced the worst of humanity: we know what genocide has done, through our ripped-apart families, our stolen and murdered people. [2]

Tanya Talaga, Nov. 27, 2025

Ten years have passed since Wanda Nanibush made her first trip to Palestine in 2016. Three of us, Wanda, Ron Benner and I were travelling together to attend a conference in Bethlehem hosted at the Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture at the invitation of Palestinian-Canadian artist Rehab Nazzal. The conference, titled "Art & Resistance" - an international gathering - gained greater significance with the participation of Wanda Nanibush, an Anishnaabee-kwe word warrior, image-maker and curator, as one of the presenters. Already acknowledged, as a leading cultural voice on Turtle Island, Wanda was challenging institutional power and the negativity of its accompanying status quo. In 2016, she had also curated for the Art Gallery of Ontario, the much anticipated collection-based exhibition, *Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries, 1971-1989 / Gchi-oodenaang: Ezhi-mina-waajimong Eni-naabishigeng* and both Ron and I were included in this ground-breaking survey exhibition of over 100 artists. The exhibition's didactic information was in both English and Anishnaabe languages, a first for the AGO to include an Indigenous language on the gallery walls.

With this journey to the Middle East, a first time visit to this part of the world for Wanda, we were consolidating a relationship that had begun many decades previously, in the early 1990's at Trent University's annual Elders' Conference in Peterborough where Wanda was an undergraduate and journalist/activist with our son Tariq Hassan Gordon. In retrospect, we were witnessing, a turning point - a recognition of solidarity across communities that many of us had been working towards throughout the previous decades, beginning in the 1970's. The anti-colonial alliance at Trent University in this period was a powerful example of student activism and Wanda, not surprisingly, was very much at the heart of this alliance. In her career, Wanda has had many firsts to her credit - including being the first Indigenous woman to graduate from Trent University with a degree in Philosophy. At that time, Mary Simon, was Trent's chancellor who today is our country's Governor General. The convergence of 2 remarkable Indigenous women in this narrative is note-worthy. When Wanda was appointed the inaugural curator of Indigenous art at the AGO, she was witnessing first-hand the state-violence and brutality of the Israeli occupation in the Palestinian West Bank. Her own history and experience, both meeting with Palestinian cultural workers and being on the ground in volatile locations was pivotal and informed and deepened her advocacy - despite considerable professional risks and consequences. [3]

Israel's failure to respect the right to return for Palestinians who were forced to flee their homes in 1948 is a flagrant violation of international law that has fuelled decades of suffering on a mass scale for Palestinian refugees across the region, said Amnesty International, marking 71 years since the Nakba [catastrophe], as it is known to Palestinians.[4]2018

Wanda's billboard, *We Return*, is a public artwork that directly and profoundly foregrounds her history of activism and, through her use of the pronoun "we", the potential of collective action. The repeated image of a nopal cactus with the inscription in Arabic of the word فلسطين (Falastine) brings forth references to the perseverance of nature and land-based practices. The interwoven patterns of tatreez and the Anishnaabe saddlebag are juxtaposed with three languages reflecting concepts of intimacy and care, and her relationships to land and to friendships with those residing in the Palestinian West Bank, including theatre actor Mohammed Abu Laban.

We Return was originally commissioned by AKA Artist-Run Centre and Paved Arts in Saskatoon and installed on what has been a site for billboard programming on the facade of the building. Similarly, the installation of *We Return* at The Inc, the billboard is prominently located on an exterior wall of the gallery's building that declares its presence from several blocks away. In the months that the billboard has been part of the Hamilton street scape, it has not experienced any graffiti. The public of the St. James Street neighbourhood in Hamilton has demonstrated respect for this work and the message that it carries.

As I write this text the suppression and intimidation of anti-war and pro-Palestinian activists is ongoing and insanely evident in the recent home invasions and charges against several anti-war protestors in London, and other parts of Ontario. David Heap, well-known peace activist, professor of Linguistics and French at Western University, and one of the Canadian co-founders of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition against the blockade of Gaza was among those charged.[5] The toxicity of our times is blatantly clear when peace activists are charged by "peace" officers of the London Police Services while the white supremacists group who demonstrated in London around the same time, are left unharassed to deliver their message of hate.

Palestinian-American critic, Edward Said, writing in *Orientalism* (1978), urged us to understand the meaning of his critique of Eurocentrism – "in being a reminder of the seductive degradation of knowledge, of any knowledge, anywhere, at any time. Now more than before." [6] While this seminal book was written so many decades previously, Said's four closing words, "Now more than before.", are a call to action in the present. Wanda Nanibush enacts a form of resistance, offering us the alternative and healing power of her cultural practice. The knowledge of genocidal colonial projects of "any where, at any time" that we are witnessing today will not be buried or forgotten – instead *We Return* affirms that culture and knowledge are at the heart of that healing power.

[1]Veronica Miranda, article on Wanda Nanibush's visit to present the Duncanson lecture *Performing Sovereignty*, The Gazette, Western University, London, Ontario, March 4, 2025

[2]Tanya Talaga, Thomas King's storytelling now feels like a betrayal, Opinion, Globe & Mail, Toronto, Ontario, November 27, 2025

[3]Let Wanda Speak, June 4, 2024 <https://icca.art/let-wanda-speak/>

[4]Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/05/israels-refusal-to-grant-palestinian-refugees-right-to-return-has-fuelled-seven-decades-of-suffering/> May 15, 2019

[5]David Heap, 2025 AGM Keynote "Our Course is the Conscience of Humanity, abroad and at home", Council of Canadians, London, Ontario, Nov. 26, 2025, YouTube

[6]Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books Edition 1979, New York, USA, p. 328. Originally published by Pantheon Books, A Division of Random House in 1978.

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Laban & Alan Corbiere. Colours are not accurate due to riso printing.

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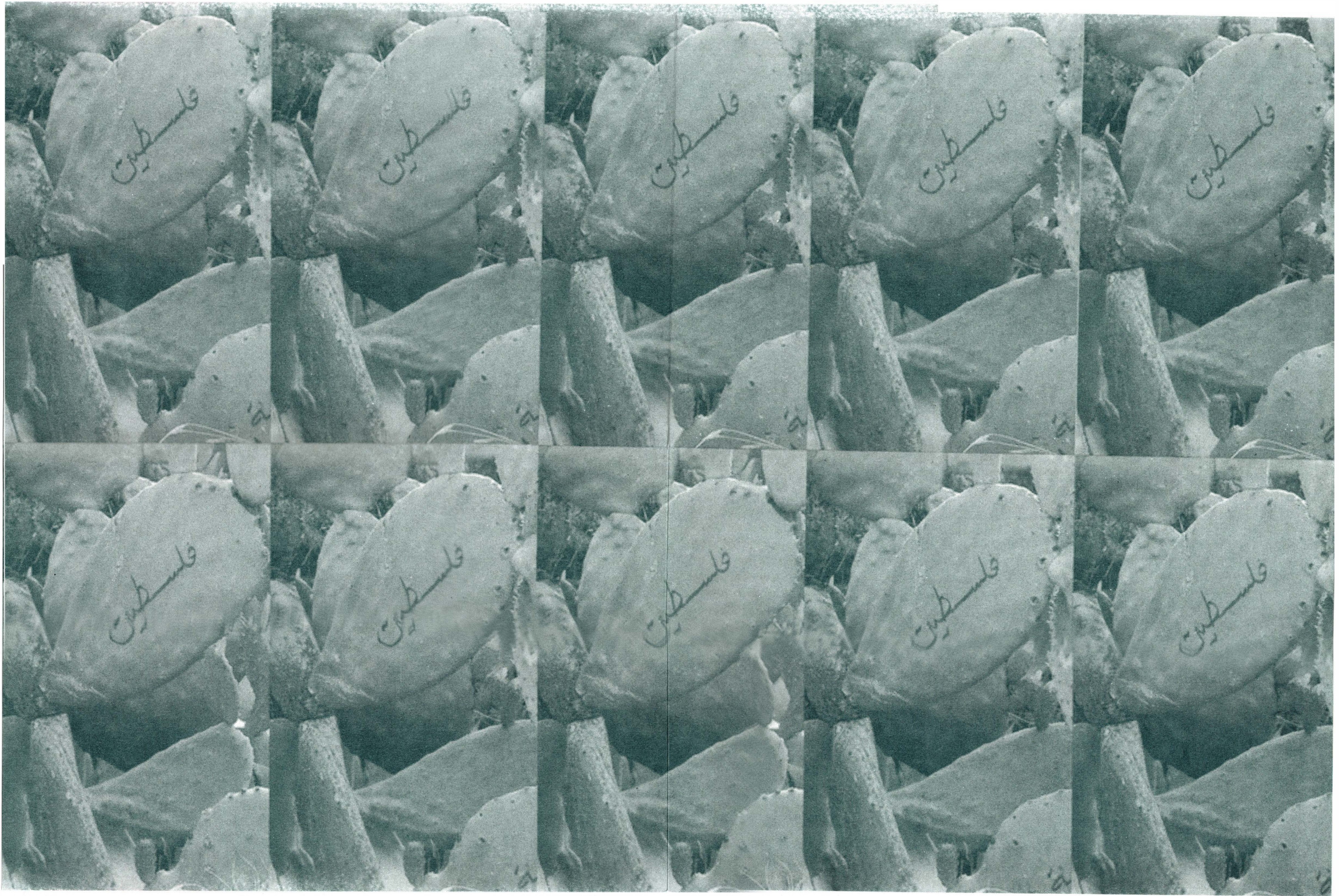


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We Return
by Wanda Nanibush

Sacred
Scarred
Scared

Triggered traumas leave lip lashed words
Between us

Everything is conditioned
Everything conditional

Walls external walls internal

We drive to quiet the noise inside
We open windows to tear gas clouds
Quickly shut to limit your camp sensitivities

Walls external build walls internal

We drive to mark these lands with love
And when we return it already belongs to settlers.
Our love unable to be a territory



We sing of circles while living in boxes
We affirm life while people around us die

We return to our childhood
We return to love
We return love to our childhoods
We return again and again
Making, marking, matriating

We met across borders
Palestinian to Anishinaabe
Refugee to Foster kid
Both system childhoods
cells for children

Terrorists are sometimes just

children throwing stones
words serving to witness
Mothers singing down prison walls
Artists grieving with Images
Land defenders everywhere

Are we just cautionary tales
Do we keep throwing to the wind
And say Palestine
I can hear hurt, fear, love, and devotion
in
nine letters

To childhood and love, We Return

الى طفولة الحب نعود

الى الطفولة والحب نعود

Scared
Scarred
Sacred





To childhood and love, We return

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wipii gii-binoojiinwiying
gii-bi-zaag'igoowing, Gga-bskaabiimi



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This poem extends from Wanda Nanibush's billboard project at AKA artist-run centre [November 8, 2024, to February 28, 2025], & Hamilton Artists Inc. [June 1, 2025, to May 30, 2026]. The project was translated into Arabic by Mohammed Abu Laban & Alan Corbiere.

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