

“Redwashing: Israeli Claims to Indigeneity and the Political Role of Native Americans”

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Inspired by Edward Said’s legacy of cultural and political analysis, this proposed panel session aims to document and critically engage the cultural and political formation of “redwashing,” what I define as the promotion of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas as a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of the Palestinian people. In these cases, Israelis typically appeal to indigenous peoples by drawing parallels between their respective claims to indigeneity, legacies of genocide (evoking the Jewish holocaust), and ongoing adversity regarding threats to “cultural extinction.” In turn, many indigenous groups and individuals have responded. There are many examples: just last month, the President of the Navajo nation met with Israeli diplomats and members of the Arizona Israel Business Council in Arizona to follow up on his December visit to Israel and in March Israeli farmers visited Navajo Nation to speak to Navajo farmers at a two-day conference. In another case last year, a group of leaders in Canada representing several First Nations led by Grand Chief David Harper, from the province of Manitoba who heads the Cree tribal nation, visited Israel’s Knesset at the invitation of a Christian lobby group to express support for Israel. Also in 2012, thirty young aboriginal leaders from Canada traveled to Israel to study culture and society in the Jewish state as part of “The Youth Leadership Development Mission to Israel” under the auspices of Canada's Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs and the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg. And then there was the scandalous case of Native American poet and performer Joy Harjo (Muscogee) who rejected mass appeals that she abide by the academic and cultural boycott and took up a residency at Tel Aviv University. These developments deserve careful attention as they have relevant connections to the pinkwashing and greenwashing campaigns by the Israel government. Redwashing also speaks to transnational American Studies because although tribal governments in the above cases are encompassed by the borders of the U.S. nation-state (and by Canada in the First Nations examples), these domestic dependent sovereigns are nations. Moreover, the Israeli government’s recognition of tribal nationhood may account for the affective appeal to indigenous actors, besides the analogies asserted by Zionists that may have religious significance to native peoples in the Americas. Hence this series of papers proposes to map indigeneity, race, and ethnicity in relation to settler colonialism and imperialism to track the political and economic stakes, as well as the symbolic weight, of these forms of redwashing within a range of contemporary cultural and political contexts.