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Settler Colonial Inversions: Israel's "Disengagement" and the Gush Katif "Museum of Expulsion" in Jerusalem

An unconscious tendency to inversion is never absent and is of particular value in throwing light upon hysteria in men. [...] Some of them accept their inversion as something in the natural course of things, just as a normal person accepts the direction of his libido, and insist energetically that inversion is as legitimate as the normal attitude.
Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality*

Abstract:

In this article, I analyze the emergence of a new discourse among Jewish settlers during the 2005-2006 Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip and four settlements in the West Bank. I define this new discourse as *settler colonial inversions* – the mimic transformation of the settler subject into the indigene, and of the Palestinian indigene into the settler. After reconstructing the context of the 2005-2006 disengagement and the emergence of new settler colonial actors and discourses, I turn to analyze an interview I carried out with one of the settlers involved in the disengagement, an art therapist who also took part in the creation of the Gush Katif Museum. Next, I reconstruct the narrative structure of the museum and its crucial discursive operations, analyzing the settler inversions appearing in the museum. I conclude by comparing Jewish settler inversions with other forms of settler colonial mimicry.

Introduction

In 2008, three years after the 2005 so-called Israeli "disengagement" and evacuation of 8,000 Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip, and two years after the 2006 withdrawal from four settlements in the West Bank, a group of settlers funded by Israeli and international donors inaugurated the Gush Katif Museum in Jerusalem. The museum borrows its name from the main Israeli block of settlements that had been built in the southern area of the Strip before the evacuation. Located in a modest building in West Jerusalem, it is conceived as a space of dissemination of settler knowledge aimed at educating the Israeli and international public – individuals, schools and educational institutions, civil society organizations, and international visitors – about the life of the settlers in Gush Katif and the "suffering of the disengagement." It uses a "wide range of mediums" like "artistic creations, photographic displays, and artefacts of historic value." Through these mediums, it aims at reconstructing "the history of Jewish settlement in Gaza over a timeline of three thousand years, [...] describing] the establishment of the Jewish settlements after the Six-Day War."ⁱ The museum commemorates 2005 as "the expulsion," "trauma" and "violations of the rights of the settlers," when the government led by Ariel Sharon, deploying the Israeli military and police "uprooted the settlers." While the government portrayed the disengagement as a gesture of peace and as constituting "progress toward the resolution of the conflict,"ⁱⁱ in reality it did little more relocating some settlers from the Gaza colonies to other areas under its control.

Figure 1, The entrance of the Gush Katif Museum, Jerusalem. Source: Myself.

In this article, I will examine the Gush Katif “Museum of Expulsion” as a specific genre of settler museum, different from other museums created in a variety of settler colonial contexts. Unlike postcolonial settler museums, its aim is not to acknowledge or remember the injustice committed against the indigenous population; there is no trace of the injustice of Jewish colonization in it nor of the practices of dispossession that led to the creation of Israel’s settlements blocks in Gaza. Moreover, unlike postcolonial settler museums such as those created in South Africa, New Zealand, Canada, or Australia at the end of the last century in order to shape a “shared” and “bicultural” comprehension of the colonial past (Henare 2004; MacLeod 1998; Nettelbeck 2011; Smith 2011), these themes do not exist in the Gush Katif museum. In fact, Palestinians are not the target audience of the museum; its main audience is the Jewish polity of Israel. In addition, the aim of the museum is not one of preventing future injustices against Palestinians; on the contrary, as we will see, its underlying rationale is the legitimization of present and future settler colonial dispossession of Palestinians.

I propose to analyze the Gush Katif Museum as a microcosm for understanding the emergence of a very recent discourse among Israel’s Jewish settlers. Echoing and further articulating the narrative of the “trauma of Yamit” (Kliot 1987; Benyamini 1987; Dasberg and Sheffler 1987) – the relatively small settlement block that Israel evacuated in the Sinai Peninsula in 1982 – this museum does not merely display objects and artifacts related to millennial Jewish presence in Gaza, the construction of the settlements after 1967, and their evacuation in 2005-2006. Its memorialization techniques introduce some very peculiar traits when compared with other settler museums. The Gush Katif museum naturalizes the colonization of Gaza and native dispossession until the year of the disengagement, as we will see, by deploying the discourse of trauma, rights, and “displacement of the settlers.” In this way, it also produces a specific ethos that organizes the settler understanding of recent events as a form of historical injustice perpetrated by the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon.

I accordingly argue that the 2005-2006 evacuations of the Israeli colonies were new moments of a particularly significant construction of settler subjectivity, and the Gush Katif museum can be treated as an “alluvium” of this process of construction. I further maintain that the unprecedented settler mobilization and appropriation of the discourse of trauma, human rights, and displacement during the evacuation, which appears in the museum, constitute a new interesting phase in the historical construction of settler subjects in Israel. This means that a new way of legitimizing the settler colonial enterprise manifested itself, for which new interpretative keys are required.

The first element of novelty in the reproduction of settlerness in the specific historical moment is a “negative” one. The museum creators and the discourse mobilized by the settler movement during and after the 2005-2006 evacuations did not produce a positive-affirmative narrative of settling. Their ideological framework is not one of justification of the settling practices on the basis of the positive assertion of civilizational, religious, military or security arguments. To be sure, the messianic, military and security discourses are constitutive parts of the museum. However, the museum is not really about them, and it is not about settling. Rather, it is a “museum of unsettling” preoccupied with the end – and its moral implications for the Jewish

polity – of Zionist settler colonialism in Gaza. It offers a moral chastisement and condemnation of the evacuation of settlements. In this way, it articulates its *negative ethics of settling* by framing settling as a form of prevention of the trauma of unsettling. Settling is not posited using classical Zionist patterns like redeeming the land, or its reappropriation by a chosen people in order to establish Jewish Israeli sovereignty. Rather, it is conceived as a practice through which further manifestations of Jewish collective trauma and the beginning of the end of Zionism can be averted.

The second element of novelty in the reproduction of settlerness is that the museum creators and the discourse mobilized by the settler movement before, during and after the evacuations, articulate a specific form of settler colonial mimicry. Different scholars have discussed the question of mimicry in the Israeli settler colonial context. Haim Yacobi has examined how indigenous Palestinian architecture has been assimilated into settlers' culture, whereby the Israeli architectural professional elite has used Palestinian architectural themes in order to "go native" and Orientalize the Israeli-built environment (Yacobi 2008). Moriel Ram (2014) has analysed settler spatial mimicry in the Golan Heights and the mimic attempt to transform the Heights into a sort of "Israeli Swiss Alps," normalizing the occupation. Other forms of mimicry between the oppressor and the oppressed or different social groups in the Israeli-Palestinian colonial context have been analyzed in the field of cinema and art history by Hannan Hever (2012) and Sara Chinski (2002). However, as we will see, what emerged with the 2005-2006 evacuation of the settlements is a peculiar and unprecedented form of appropriation and mimicry of two indigenous narratives by the settlers: the narrative of human rights violations associated with clinical trauma, and the narrative and symbols of Palestinian national dispossession.

As I have highlighted in my book *The Human Right to Dominate*, at the beginning of the new millennium, and then more markedly during the evacuations, for the first time in its history, the settler movement appropriated the international *lingua franca* of human rights in order to legitimize settler colonial dispossession and domination, and prevent any form of decolonization of Palestine (Perugini and Gordon 2015). During the last decades, starting from the first *Intifada*, the language of human rights has been adopted by the Palestinian civil society in its struggle for justice (Allen 2008, 2013; Hajjar 2001, 2005; Hammami 2000; Hanafi and Tabar 2005), often in combination with that of clinical trauma (Fassin 2008). Several Palestinian and pro-Palestinian Israeli and international NGOs have denounced human rights violations perpetrated by the Israeli regime often using cases of clinical trauma among Palestinians as evidence for these violations. In this article, I will examine how during the evacuations and within the Gush Katif Museum memorial practices, for the first time the Israeli settler movement has appropriated this combination of denunciation of human rights violations with clinical trauma in order to articulate its "moral economy of settler colonialism" (Perugini 2014). This deployment of human rights and trauma in order to reproduce settlerness and shape the settler collective subjectivity presents its specificities, but should be understood in the framework of a broader global trend of mobilization of human rights and trauma to justify forms of inequality, discrimination, and domination (Fassin 2007; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Hopgood 2013).

The other element of novelty in this mimic process is that—as we will see in the section of this article dedicated to the analysis of a specific section of the museum that deals with the question of the return to the homeland and its key symbols for Palestinians, the keys of return to the homes from which they were expelled by Israel—the settler discourse appropriates indigenous Palestinian symbols of

dispossession and rights claims in order to claim the right to settle and dispossess Palestinians.

In other words, whereas the discourse of national collective trauma, national rights, and displacement was deployed as a positive assertion of new state sovereignty and nationalism in Palestine when the state of Israel was created (Butler 2012; Cohen 2012; Zertal 2005) and in Israel's state memorial practices (Handelman 2004; Zerubavel 1995), as well as in the 1982 evacuation of Yamit, in the case of the 2005-2006 evacuations, for the first time, the trauma-human rights nexus was deployed in the specific form of clinical trauma as evidence of human rights violations perpetrated by the Israeli government, and ultimately as mimicry of Palestinian indigenous iconography and claims of justice. From this point of view, the fundamental characteristic of the negative ethics of settling is one of unprecedented *mimicry*; one that further reveals the fundamental instability and ambivalence of the relationship of power between settler and indigene in the specific politico-historical context of Israel/Palestine.

The third novel element results from the first two. By deploying the negative ethics of settling and colonial mimicry, the museum creators and the settler discourse during and after the evacuation produced an *inversion* through which the settlers are represented as the dispossessed indigenes of Gaza, and the Palestinian indigenous population of Gaza is portrayed as a settler population endangering the Jewish "indigenous settlers." This inversion, articulated through the settler appropriation of the discourse of trauma and human rights, aims at erasing settler colonial dispossession; transforming the colonizer into the colonized, and vice versa; and positing the displacement of the indigenous Palestinians as an act of historical justice.

From a methodological point of view, in order to theorize settler colonial inversions, I utilize different tools: the historical reconstruction of the context of the evacuations and the analysis of the discourse of evacuation-as-dispossession and rights violations deployed by different settler actors; a long interview with one of the artists involved in the creation of the Gush Katif museum and the examination of her specific negative ethics of settling the analysis of my own visit at the Gush Katif Museum. Within this framework, I conceive the museum as a settler memorialization site but also, and more specifically, as an assemblage of material objects in which are condensed and epitomized the politics of trauma, human rights, and dispossession that I intend to analyse through the lenses of colonial mimicry and inversions. The Gush Katif museum is an apparatus in which a certain settler subject marked by the above mentioned elements of novelty is construed—and can be deconstructed—through the analysis of expositive path set up by the museum's curators and contributors.

Therefore, in the article's first section, I describe the context of the 2005-2006 disengagement, the key actors involved in it, and the emergence of the "triple discourse" of trauma, human rights, and displacement among settlers. I then turn to analyze an interview carried out with one of the settlers involved in the disengagement: an art therapist specializing in trauma who was involved in creating the Gush Katif Musuem. In the third section, "The Museum of Expulsion," I reconstruct the narrative structure of the museum and its crucial discursive operations of appropriation, mimicry, and inversion. In the fourth section, "The Settler's Right of Return," I continue by analyzing the settler appropriation of the Palestinian keys of return. I show how this symbol encompasses the negative ethos of settling. By way of conclusion, I contextualize the settler appropriations and mimicry analyzed in the article in light of other contexts of settler colonial appropriations and mimicry, and highlight their specificity.

The 2005-2006 evacuations and the emergence of the new discourse

In August 2005 – more than twenty years after Israel’s withdrawal from Sinai, the first government sanctioned evacuation of a settlement in the state’s historyⁱⁱⁱ – Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided to disengage from Gaza. Sharon argued that:

“The disengagement recognizes the demographic reality on the ground specifically, bravely and honestly. Of course it is clear to everyone that we will not be in the Gaza Strip in the final agreement. This recognition, that we will not be in Gaza, and that, even now, we have no reason to be there, does not divide the people and is not tearing us apart, as the opposing minority claims. Rather, the opposite is true. Disengagement from Gaza is uniting the people.”

In an attempt to sweeten the government decision to withdraw from Gaza, Sharon added:

“I accompanied the settlers of the Gaza Strip when I served as Head of the Southern Command, and then as a minister in the Governments of Israel. I was privileged to see the first greenhouse erected, the first field planted, homes built and children born. I was with them in their difficult moments, in their daily concerns of security needs, in their courageous stand when faced with mortar fire and terrorist attacks. As Prime Minister, as a citizen of the State of Israel, as a farmer - I am proud of them for their accomplishments, I am proud of them for their courage, I am proud of them for their great love of the land.”^{iv}

About 8,500 settlers living in 21 Jewish settlements within the Gaza Strip were evacuated alongside a few hundred settlers from four settlements in the northern part of the West Bank. The military troops stationed in the Strip were also redeployed. Nonetheless, Israel imposed first a closure, and after Hamas took over the Gaza Strip it implemented a full-blown military siege on the region. In the months before, during, and after the evacuation new settler organizations and a new discourse of settler trauma, human rights, and displacement began to emerge within Israel’s settler polity in opposition to Sharon’s plan. The *Legal Forum for the Land of Israel*, a fledgling right-wing Zionist NGO active in the defense of the “human rights of the settlers” that was involved in providing the Gaza settlers with legal assistance, stood up against the government during the evacuations and warned, some weeks before the disengagement, of the risk of a collective trauma:

“[The government should do] everything in its power to see to it that the communities stay together, wherever they are relocated. Every significant study, especially those regarding what happened when people were moved from Sinai, indicates that keeping community intact helps to prevent post traumatic stress disorder, which can result in serious emotional disability.”^v

During the evacuation, the Gaza settlers engaged in a series of actions inscribed in a familiar script and symbolic archive, and explicitly referencing the trauma of the Holocaust. A handful even “tattooed” their ID numbers on their arms, protesting against “being placed in ghettos”; many wore orange clothes and yellow stars while being evacuated; a father, in front of TV cameras, carrying his daughter in his arms, shouted to soldiers “Expel her! Expel her!” (Gorenberg 2006: 375). A new narrative of “trauma of unsettling” was produced, representing the disengagement as endless repetition of the past.

Before the disengagement, the Israeli military provided its soldiers with special mental health training in view of the potential trauma they could have when evacuating Jews. In 2008, after an investigation was conducted by a team of scholars and psychologists sympathizing with the evacuees, a complaint was sent to the ethics committee of the Israeli Board of Psychologists against two of the psychologists who had taken part in mental health preparations. Some excerpts from the complaint submitted to the Israeli Board of Psychologists can help us understand another important chapter in the articulation of the politics of trauma during the Gaza disengagement: “The expulsion of the Jews from twenty-one settlements in the Gaza Strip and four settlements in northern Shomron [northern West Bank], and the transformation of these settlements into piles of destruction, was a calamity for those who were expelled, a blow for those faithful to the return to Zion, and a national trauma for Israel and the entire Jewish nation.”^{vi} Abandoning the colonies is transformed into a collective psychological calamity; the trauma of the Jewish settlers of Israel is made coincide with the trauma of all Jews.

Following the evacuation from Gaza, some settler organizations began to frame Sharon’s disengagement as an egregious human rights violation. The Ariel Center for Policy Research, a settler think tank, published articles condemning the Israeli government while defining the withdrawal as “ethnic cleansing,” “deportation,” and “Jewish self-hatred.” In 2006, one of the articles in *Nativ*, the think tank’s journal, characterized Sharon’s government as “A regime lacking basic respect for universal human rights—the rights to life and property, to freedom of conscience, expression, and assembly, the right to fair and impartial justice and to equality under the law—such a regime is no longer a democracy.”^{vii} The notion that the disengagement abrogated the settlers’ universal human rights was a pervasive trope informing the rhetoric of different groups, organizations, and institutions of the settler movement.

In 2005, Yesha for Human Rights—a settler NGO founded in 2002 to protect the human rights of the settlers—prepared a report entitled *Israeli Government Violations of Disengagement Opponents’ Civil Rights*. After several years of submitting lawsuits in various Israeli courts against outpost evacuations, the settler human rights NGO capitalized on its experience and began a wider advocacy campaign against the “potential disintegration” of the Jewish polity. Denouncing what it conceived of as the suspension of the law and the breach of the national-Jewish contract on which Israel’s sovereignty is founded, the report condemns the government’s “extensive violations” of the human rights of those who had opposed the disengagement.^{viii}

In February 2006, following a High Court appeal, the Israeli government evacuated the illegal settler outpost of Amona, in the West Bank. Thousands of settlers, mostly from the settler youth movement, joined the outpost’s inhabitants and tried to prevent the evacuation. Settler activists and right-wing members of parliament formed a human chain around the outpost, while others used the building rooftops as a

garrison of sorts. Violence clashes erupted between the 5,000 soldiers and police officers and 3,000 settlers, resulting in several hundred injuries and arrests, and massive local and international media coverage. For the settler movement and their new human rights NGOs, Amona confirmed the “persecution” that began in Gaza. The “expulsion” carried out in 2005 was considered the beginning of a chain of unjust and discriminatory acts, including the discriminatory application of the law against Jews. *SOS Israel*, an NGO that was founded in 2003 in order to “to oppose and fight the political accords with the Arabs [Palestinians] that include land or security concessions,” went so far as to baptize the evacuation as the “Amona pogrom,” thus evoking the history of anti-Semitism in order to frame the settlers as victims of egregious abuse committed by the Jewish state.^{ix}

Israeli settlers are often misleadingly defined in many mainstream narratives as an homogeneous “ideological block” driven by religious fundamentalism – a fanatic minority, as some liberal Zionists and many scholars and analysts call them (Feige 2009; Lustick 1988; Shahak and Mezvinsky 2004; Zertal and Eldar 2007; for a critique of these narratives see Dalsheim 2011; Dalsheim and Harel 2009). However, this reductionist framework does not help us understand the ideological transformations occurring in the settler movement, which cannot be reduced to an “extremist minority.” This is not to say that settlerness in Israel does not contain a strong element of religious fervor and zeal. But looking at specific historical moments like the disengagement, and the associated social processes of production and reproduction of the settler ethos helps us understand this formation as dynamic – and also to comprehend which specific discourses characterize these processes. In this sense, the evacuations constitute a microcosm of analysis in which the reproduction of settlerness and settler identity takes place through the deployment of a specific discourse in a specific historical-political moment. At this historical moment the discourse is different from other settler discourses developed in the past. We no longer witness only the civilizing mission, labor-Socialism, religious fanaticism, military and security necessity utilized in the previous decades by the settler movement and the Israeli government to colonize Palestine (Gordon 2008; Lockman 2012; Said 1980; Weizman 2007; Jabary Salamanca, Qato, Rabie, Samour 2012). The discourse and negative ethics of unsettling that emerged from the 2005-2006 evacuations is one of trauma, human rights, and displacement.

Art therapy, settler colonial trauma, and human rights

In order to further explore the emergence of this new settler discourse and ethics, and to situate it better in relation to the establishment of the memorial space of the Gush Katif Museum, I carried out an interview with a settler involved in the creation of the museum. The aim of this interview was to interrogate more directly, through a conversation with a settler involved both in the disengagement and the creation of the Gush Katif Museum, the ideological and political underpinnings of the negative ethics of settler colonialism at the center of this article. I met Bella Levin in a place very close to the buried Green Line, where she arrived by car from the northern occupied West Bank settlement, where she currently lives. She immigrated to Israel from the United Kingdom in 1976 “for Zionist reasons, to live in the land of Israel.” After a scholarship at the University of Maryland, where she met her husband, she moved to Jerusalem and then decided to live in a West Bank settlement. “Someone drew for me a line on the map but the so called Occupied Territories were not really anyone else’s. [...] If you read the Bible, most of the Bible took place over the Green Line.”

Bella Levin became particularly active against the evacuations. She also took part in the protests in Amona. “2005 was a shock,” she tells me.

“Sometimes I feel that when people are talking about human rights, they are not talking about my human rights. Because they always seem to be talking about Palestinians’ human rights and I don’t hear them talking about our human rights, our rights where we want to live.”

Like the above mentioned NGOs that mobilized against the 2005-2006 disengagement while using the new discourse of trauma, human rights, and displacement, Bella Levin considers the evacuations a violation of the human rights of the settlers a perversion of justice, but also a perversion of Zionism. “Zionism is being in favor of Zion. Zionists through all the ages always built settlements, they did not destroy settlements.” She describes the experience of the 2005 evacuation as a “surrealistic one,” and she explains it through a kind of metaphor of traumatization circles.

“I think that you can say that there were different circles of traumatized people. Obviously you have the people who lived there [in the evacuated settlements] and were evacuated from their houses. They were expelled from their houses and they are the hard core of the traumatized people. We were the circle of activists around that, and we were also traumatized. And I think that the soldiers were traumatized in a different way, because they were told, you know: ‘You have to do this for your country.’”

Similarly to the representations of the disengagement that circulated among the right-wing NGOs, Israeli politicians and the national mainstream media I have mentioned above (see also Perugini 2014), Levin describes the evacuations as a collective trauma that involved different “circles” of the settler polity, from the evacuees to the military. After taking part in the “passive resistance” – in the settlement of Homesh, in the West Bank, where she spent a month with her family in solidarity with the evacuees – against what she names *gerush* (“the expulsion”, in Hebrew), Levin started to paint her evacuation experience in order to “cope with it,” as she explains, using psychological terminology.

“I am an occupational therapist, and I am studying art therapy at the moment. I have been interested in art therapy for many years and I am doing a doctorate in art therapy at the moment [2012] at Haifa University. But at that time, seven years ago, I had just finished my master in occupational therapy at Tel Aviv University. Art has always been an interest of mine, and a hobby, basically. I have done other stuffs, like sculpture, but mainly painting and collage. So when I finished my master, in 2007, I said ‘I am going to paint!’ and this coincided with the expulsion. And for a year I just felt that I couldn’t paint anything else [other than the evacuation]. So, actually, it was me and a friend of mine together, we painted

and exhibited together in a few places. She is an art teacher, and she paints, and we just decided that we got together. Some of the time we painted just for ourselves, some of the time we painted in an art class and the teachers helped us a bit. I have a friend who is a music therapist and she did music therapy with children of families who were expelled. I have a friend who did art and drama therapy with children of families who were expelled. But [...] we mainly painted for ourselves, as therapy for ourselves.”

Levin conceives her participation to the healing of settler suffering in the period of the evacuations as a mobilization for the protection of the human rights of the settlers, and her contribution through art therapy as form of psychological support for the children of a dispossessed settler colonial community. Her negative ethics of settling translates into a therapeutic intervention helping the children of settlers to cope with national collective trauma. Trauma is politicized through the transformation of the individual experience of clinical trauma into collective trauma: from the “painting selves,” through the smaller groups of people directly affected by the disengagement, to the bigger social groups of the military and the Israeli settler polity as large, as Levin had previously pointed out using the metaphor of the “circles of traumatized people.”

One of Levin’s paintings is decorated with a collage of phone numbers. When I asked her about the meaning of those phone numbers, she answered:

“One of the things that I like to do when I want to express things that are very... like deep, often collage is a way that I like to do it. So, I took the telephone books of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip together [the telephone books of the settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, which she calls with the Jewish name of Judea and Samaria]. So I took the telephone books and I tore out all of the pages of the settlements that were destroyed. So it was like ripping them up, a real therapeutic thing, and I put the telephone numbers and names of the evacuated families in my collages.”^x

Thus, she understands her artistic production and art-therapy practices also as a form of self-healing and a way to enter into a relationship of settler empathy with the evacuees. This self-healing takes the shape of a collage of phone numbers that ultimately re-enacts the experience of “expulsion.”

The museum of expulsion

Bella Levin’s paintings are exhibited at the Gush Katif Museum, which I had visited some weeks before meeting her and where I found her business card. In the museum, her works accompany the visitors through the central rooms of the exhibit. Inaugurated in 2008 with the support of several donors from Israel, the US and other countries, the museum seeks to show “the spirit of Gush Katif” and create a

relationship of “intimacy” with the settlements, in the words of Miriam Gottlieb, the museum curator.

At the museum’s entrance, a long chronology reconstructing the millennial continuity of the relationship between the Jewish people and the Gaza Strip is displayed with the help of pictures and maps of the area from different historical periods. Pictures of the settlements, the cultivation of lands expropriated from the indigenous Palestinian population, vegetables, and scene from the pre-disengagement period follow. A third room hosts photographs from the protest against the evacuation and some of Levin’s paintings: protesters marching, scenes of daily life in a settlement during the days before the disengagement, and people praying. Levin then explained to me that painting represents the “past, present, and future coming together,” because the beginning of the evacuation coincided with Tisha B’Av. Tisha B’Av is the day of the Jewish calendar commemorating the fall of the Temple,^{xi} and the day in which she took the photo of people performing the traditional lamentations that inspired her painting.

Another work represents some suspended houses in a settlement, detached and uprooted from the ground. The theme of unsettling in her painting is reminiscent of other paintings of the wandering Jew – wandering in the sky with his house.

Figure 2, 3, 4. Bella Levin’s paintings, Gush Katif Museum of Jerusalem.
Source: **Myself.**

In the rest of the museum, videos and pictures of the clashes between soldiers and evacuees, people praying and crying before leaving the settlements emphasize the suffering of the evacuation. In the “room of expulsion,” some pictures focus on evacuated kids, looking through the window of the buses that transported them from the settlements to the hotels, containers, and pre-fabricated houses where they were relocated by the Israeli government and where they spent part of their lives after the disengagement. Some newspaper pages with and comments about the “national catastrophe” of the evacuation conclude the visit, together with the remains of an unexploded Qassam rocket – a type of missile used by one the Palestinian resistance groups in Gaza, the Al Qassam Brigades (affiliated to Hamas).

Crucially, the museum projects the past into the present and future of Israel’s settler colonial enterprise, trying to render it permanent, and under permanent risk. In fact, its creators portray the evacuations – what we could define as a moment of “missed decolonization,” since the disengagement did not result in any concrete destabilization of the protracted colonial relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, nor in any progress toward peace – as an act of collective injustice against Israel’s settler colonial polity. By so doing, and by representing the evacuees as expellees and their relocation out of the colonies as a moment of trauma and violation of their rights, the museum displays a rationale whose ultimate meaning is to prevent any future disengagement from the colonies under Israel’s control.

The Settler’s Right of Return

The whole museum is constructed as a crescendo of suffering, trauma and violations of the rights of the “expellees,” as the Gaza settlers are described in the captions of the various objects displayed in the museum. Many of the settler iconographic forms used in the museum to describe and memorialize the evacuation were already familiar to me, except for one object that was particularly striking: a set of keys of one of the

colonies that were demolished by the Israeli government as a result of the evacuation of the Gaza settlements.

Figure 5. The “keys of return” to the colony, Gush Katif Museum of Jerusalem. Source: [Myself](#).

After ending my visit at the Gush Katif Museum, I immediately thought that the exhibiting of those keys, had to do with a fundamental element of settler appropriation: the appropriation of the Palestinian right of return to the areas from which they were expelled from 1947, and the appropriation of Palestinian displacement. As is well known, keys are the object which Palestinians have mobilized symbolically in order to claim their right of return to the homes from which they were expelled as a consequence of Zionist settling practices and policies. Many Palestinian refugees have conserved the keys of their original homes and keep them in the refugee camps where they currently live (mainly in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria). The walls of the Palestinian refugee camps, villages, towns, and cities, are covered in graffiti of huge painted keys. During many demonstrations keys of different sizes are displayed or printed in the posters used by the demonstrators. In literature, films and many other crucial forms of expression of Palestinian popular culture, keys often embody what keeps alive the Palestinian desire for justice.

One can thus ask oneself: what is the meaning of settlerness represented in the form of the appropriation of a key-symbol of indigenous dispossession claimed by those who have been displaced by settlers? What is the meaning of appropriating the key symbol of resistance of the displaced in a context of settler colonialism, in order to claim the settler’s right of return to the evacuated colony? Perhaps in a more explicit form than in the appropriation of trauma and rights – two discourses through which a vertiginous obfuscation of the relationship of power and dispossession between colonizer and colonized – that have characterized the 2005 evacuations and the creation of the rest of the Gush Katif Museum, the key on display in the museum says something extremely important about settlerness and settler mimic practices of “going native.”

Reclaiming the keys of the evacuated colony might be seen as a form of bitter mockery of the indigenous population that was expropriated in order to allow the construction of the colony. However, it should be understood as a serious mimicry of inversion. It constitutes a crucial settler colonial inversion that is symbolically even more complicated than the normative apparatus through which Israel protects the selective right of return of the Jewish people, while denying the right of return of Palestinians to the homes and spaces from which they were displaced.^{xii} As in other settler colonial contexts, settler dominant subjectivities are constructed through the material and figurative appropriation of an absence. If, on the one hand, the persistence of the Palestinian settler colonial question, as the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish puts it, is the persistence of the “presence of an absence” (Darwish 2011) – the absence of the displaced – the settler colonial inversion of return through the keys is the persistence of the evacuation of this presence. The symbols of the absent are incorporated in the settler subjectivity, and mobilized in settler museums in order to keep on displacing both Palestinian presence and absence.

Conclusion: Settler Colonial Inversions

Crafting the indigenous presence as a threat to the settler subject and sovereignty, and couching the settler as a displaced native who is entitled to return to the colony in

case of evacuations, are two interrelated discursive operations that are made possible by the ambivalent nature of colonial power. As Homi Bhabha explained in his analysis of mimicry, in a colonial relationship not only the colonized desires to mimic the colonizer, but the colonizer at times desires to mimic the colonized (Bhabha 1994: 87-88). Not unlike other forms of settler colonialism, in the Israeli case colonial power is exerted also through the colonizer's desire of appropriating the position of the native, of "going native." In Israel's history, the desire of appropriating the position of the native manifested itself in various forms. Even before the state's establishment, the Zionist paramilitary group "Hashomer" mimicked the indigenous and carried out indigenous dispossession by dressing in Arab clothes.

Figure 6, Hashomer members. Source:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hashomer#/media/File:Ha-shomer.jpg> (Public domain).

However, what is specific to my case study is that the articulation of this desire through the appropriation of the discourse of trauma, human rights, and displacement described in this article, expresses a settler desire for becoming native in a very peculiar way: the colonizer's nativeness can, so to speak, be achieved only through a twofold process, beginning with obliteration of the practices of dispossession carried out against the colonized and followed by protecting the colonizer from dismantling its colonies – and framing any evacuations as an act of displacement and historical injustice. Through this mimetic process the colonized native is transformed into a colonizer and the colonizer into a colonized.

In other words, in the specific mimetic process I analyzed in this article, in order for the colonizer to go native the historical and moral relationship between colonizer and colonized must be inverted. But since every inversion depends on a prior recognition of the relationship of domination that is inverted, the colonial nature of the relationship between the settler and the native is unveiled by the mimic process of appropriation of trauma, human rights, and displacement.

Building on Bhabha's theory of colonial hybridity and Freud's theory of the uncanny – the uncanny as an experience of instability, ambivalence, and cultural hybridity of the subject – Avril Bell produced a compelling comparative analysis of settler subjectivity in different settler colonial contexts (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa), and defined the settler as a "mimic subject" par excellence (Bell 2014: 97-101). Adopting a heuristic framework similar to that I have adopted in order to understand the 2005-2006 evacuations and the settler ethos displayed during the disengagement and at the Gush Katif Museum, Bell interprets settler appropriations and mimicry as forms of reproduction of settler domination: "for settler peoples, the desire and need to 'mimic' the imperial culture has been fully replaced by the desire/need to mimic indigenous culture and authenticity. In this sense performative hybridity is another way to think about the practice of settler appropriation of indigenous difference" (Bell 2014: 97-98). The performative hybridity of the settler, and the processes of appropriation and mimicry this performativity entails, discloses the mimic settler subject as "the place where the operations of colonial power as negotiation are most intensely visible" (Lawson, 1995: 24). In her *Relating Indigenous and Settler Identities*, Bell further articulates his conception of the settler as mimic subject by borrowing from Alan Lawson's theory of the "old tripled dream" of the colonizer:

“The first is the dream of effacement of the indigene and evacuation of the land, which allows the practice of settlement. The second is the now familiar dream of authentic indigeneity, which in an important sense also denies that colonization occurred, or that it did no harm since indigenous authenticity remains, seemingly untouched. Thus, indigenous authenticity allows the settler to dream of redemption, or the resumption of innocence. The third is the similarly familiar dream of inheriting indigenous authority or rights to the land, the dream of inheritance, which Lawson (1995: 27) links to the ‘sentimentalization of the mixed-race figure who enacts the slippage between the white desire and the Native right’.” (Bell 2014: 102-103)

These three dreams can be identified also in the performative hybridity of the settler movement during and after the 2005-2006 evacuation, and at the Gush Katif Museum. Effacement, authentic indigeneity, and inheriting authority and sovereignty are crucial features of the settler subjectivity produced during and after the evacuations, and at the museum. However, what the case study I analyzed shows and adds to existing analysis of the construction of settlerness through mimicry, are two significant new elements. First, the articulation of the “old tripled dreams” through an unprecedented tripled discourse of settler trauma, human rights, and displacement. This tripled discourse can hardly be found in other forms of settler colonialism and must be understood in the specific mimic context of Israel/Palestine – whereby trauma, human rights, and the return to the place from which they have been displaced constitute some of the central features of the Palestinian claims for justice and reparations, especially in the last decades. Secondly, the settler mimic subject is constituted through an epistemic and political process of inversion that portrays the end of the settler colony as an act of historical injustice. Hence, the discourse of inversion produced during and after the evacuation, and in the Gush Katif “museum of unsettling,” should not be interpreted in opposition to the settler colonial state and its policies. On the contrary, it represents an attempt to shape a new settler subjectivity and transform the settler colonial enterprise into an endless one: a natural horizon of settler justice.

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ⁱ The Gush Katif Museum in Jerusalem, official website <http://en.gushkatifmuseum.com/?aid=1814> (Accessed 17 August 2016).

ⁱⁱ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Israel's Disengagement Plan: Selected Documents" <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/israeli%20disengagement%20plan%2020-jan-2005.aspx#doc1> (Accessed 17 August 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1948, during the foundation of the state of Israel, several agricultural communities (kibbutzim) were evacuated to protect Jewish noncombatants. However, these were not evacuations organized by state or centralized institutions like the 1982 and 2005-2006 evacuations (see Levinovsky 2007: 11-13).

^{iv} Address by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, 20 February 2007. Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/pressroom/2005/pages/address%20by%20pm%20sharon%20to%20the%20conference%20of%20presidents%20-feb-2005.aspx> (Accessed 17 August 2016).

^v Yitzhak Meron, Chairman of the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel, cited in David Bedein, “Gush Katif Lawyers Rebuff Gov’t Claims,” *Arutz Sheva*, 25 August 2005, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/88678#.UIB9da7WTNQ> (Accessed 17 August 2016).

^{vi} Ruth Eisikovitch, Gadi Eshel, Amira Dor, Boaz Haetzni, Aviad Visoli, Rachel Tassa, and Moshe Libler, “The Mental Preparation for Disengagement and its Aftermath in the Israel Defense Forces,” Preliminary Abstract, published on Israel Resource News Agency, 20 December 2009, <http://israelbehindthenews.com/the-mental-preparation-for-disengagement-its-aftermath-in-the-israel-defense-forces/6278/> (Accessed 17 August 2016).

^{vii} Ha’etzni Elyakim, “The Shock of Surrender,” *Nativ: A Journal of Politics and the Arts* 10 (April 2006), <http://www.acpr.org.il/english-nativ/10-issue/haetzni-10.htm> (Accessed 17 August 2016).

^{viii} Bam, Klein, and Meidad, *Israeli Government Violations of Disengagement Opponents’ Civil Rights* (Jerusalem: Israel Policy Center, 2005), http://www.erezyisroel.org/~jkatz/Pinui_Final_for_Web.pdf (Accessed 17 August 2016).

^{ix} The Amona Pogrom, SOS Israel, <http://www.sos-israel.com/3418.html> (Accessed 17 August 2016).

^x **Myself**, interview with Bella Levin, 12 July 2012.

^{xi} In 70AD, when the Roman army sieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Jewish Temple.

^{xiii} Israel’s Law of Return states that “every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh* [Jewish immigrant],” thus restricting the right of return to Israel/Palestine to Jews, and denying this right to the Palestinians expelled in 1948 as a result of the creation of the State of Israel. This law constitutes one of the pillars of Israel’s settler colonial regime and the main obstacle to a settlement of the conflict according to international law.