

Imagining Palestine's Alter-Natives: Settler Colonialism and Museum Politics

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Settler colonialism has arrived. The productive power of the paradigm was marked by the 2011 launch of *Settler Colonial Studies*. The centrality of the question of Palestine from the start is evident in the many forums and articles that have since appeared in this journal, the earliest being a forum edited by four emerging scholars who were then graduate students.¹ The conversation they started about the frame of “settler colonialism” in Palestinian studies continues to this day as it is unpacked and interrogated.²

This essay began life as the 2015 Edward Said Memorial Lecture at the American University in Cairo; took new form for the 2018 Clifford Geertz Commemorative Lecture at Princeton University; and then shifted again thanks to an invitation to speak at the Palestinian Museum in May 2018, with cosponsorship from the Israel Studies Program at Birzeit University. Audience questions and the guidance of many colleagues and friends have been invaluable: Rana Barakat, Chiara De Cesari, Julia Elyachar, Didier Fassin, Ferial Ghazoul, Rema Hammami, Lara Khaldi, Catherine Lutz, Tara Matalka, Lynn Meskell, Monica Minnegal, Timothy Mitchell, Helen Pringle, Sophie Richter-Devroe, Leslie Robinson, Ahmad H. Sa'di, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Lana Tatour, and my Columbia University colleagues, Nadia Abu El-Haj, Mahmood Mamdani, Elizabeth Povinelli, Audra Simpson, and Paige West deserve special mention. The excellent suggestions of the editors of *Critical Inquiry*, particularly Orit Bashkin and W. J. T. Mitchell, sharpened my arguments.

1. See “Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine,” a special issue of *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012). Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie, and Sobhi Samour edited the volume based on a conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London. The issue included an Arabic translation of a field-defining 2006 essay by Patrick Wolfe; see Patrick Wolfe, “Arabic Translation: Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native (2006),” trans. Dalia Taha, *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 226–52. It also included a remarkable 1965 piece by Fayeze Sayegh that framed Palestine as “settler colonial” and invoked international solidarities; see Fayeze Sayegh, “Zionist Colonialism in Palestine (1965),” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 206–25.

2. See Nadim N. Rouhana and Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, “Settler-Colonial Citizenship: Conceptualizing the Relationship between Israel and its Palestinian Citizens,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 5,

I was puzzled initially by this explosion of thinking and writing about settler colonialism, struck by the apparent historical amnesia of the scholars analyzing Israel/Palestine in these novel terms. After all, Maxime Rodinson's book was called *Israel: A Settler Colonial State?* (translated in 1973 into English). In the same year, the theme of the annual convention of the Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) was "National Liberation and Settler Regimes." My father, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, a Palestinian scholar who since 1967 had also been associate director of the program in African Studies at Northwestern, was one of the organizers. With his colleague, Baha Abu-Laban, he published some of the essays in a comparative work called *Settler Regimes in Africa and the Arab World: The Illusion of Endurance*.³

no. 3 (2015): 205–25; Rana Barakat, "Writing/Righting Palestine Studies: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty and Resisting the Ghost(s) of History," *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2018): 349–63. For exchanges outside the journal of *Settler Colonial Studies*, see Raef Zreik, "When Does a Settler Become a Native? (With Apologies to Mamdani)," *Constellations* 23, no. 3 (2016): 351–64 (a response to Mahmood Mamdani, "Settler Colonialism: Then and Now," *Critical Inquiry* 41 [Spring 2015]: 596–614). See also "Settler Colonialism in Palestine," a special issue of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 21, no. 4 (2019).

3. See Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* trans. David Thorstad (New York, 1973), and *Settler Regimes in Africa and the Arab World: The Illusion of Endurance*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and Baha Abu-Laban (Wilmette, Ill., 1974); hereafter abbreviated S. For more on the AAUG, see Sarah M. A. Gualtieri, "Edward Said, the AAUG, and Arab American Archival Methods," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38 (May 2018): 21–29. Wolfe cautions that Rodinson treats Zionism merely as an extension of European imperialism and colonialism and that the original French title (1967) made no mention of the word *settler*; see Wolfe, "New Jews for Old: Settler State Formation and the Impossibility of Zionism," in *Stolen Lands, Broken Cultures: The Settler-Colonial Present*, ed. John Hinkson, Paul James, and Lorenzo Veracini (Melbourne, 2012), p. 286.

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Yet this *is* a very different historical and political moment. What has happened since the 1970s in colonial studies—and over the past decade in Indigenous and Native studies, not to mention in the worlds of international politics and governance—has indeed shifted the terrain. A revitalized Native Studies in North America and a critical rethinking of Indigenous Studies in Australia and elsewhere in the Pacific have sharpened debates about liberal multiculturalism and the politics of recognition in settler colonial nation-states. The impetus for these developments in academic work cannot be disconnected from the political advocacy that led to, and was further enabled by, the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007.

There are some good reasons to be cautious about the revival of the settler colonial framework and its application to Palestine/Israel. Nevertheless, the current embrace of this framework is productive precisely because it does a *different* kind of analytical and political work than it did in the 1970s. If Palestine/Israel had been safely sequestered for a long time from the mainstream colonial and postcolonial studies that emerged in the 1980s, as Ann Laura Stoler argues, settler colonial studies has managed to breach the barrier.⁴ Most importantly, the concept of settler colonialism opens up possibilities for thinking differently about Palestine's political present and future.

Despite the facts that Israel could just as easily be (and has been) analyzed as colonial, and that the history of the colonization of Palestine differs in crucial ways from the earlier colonization and settlement of the Americas or the Pacific, the value of the conceptual framework lies in the way it stimulates novel comparisons that burst open the political imagination. Instead of the well-worn comparisons with the imperial powers of the colonial/postcolonial canon—the French, the British, or the Dutch—or with the anti-colonial struggles that emerged in response, struggles that presumed national liberation to be the goal, anticolonial nationalism to be the ideology, and political solidarities to lie with Third World anti-imperial struggles, the references now privilege Indigenous and First Nation peoples.⁵ The orbit of

4. Stoler encapsulated this exclusion by noting the uneven uptake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *The Question of Palestine* (1979). The first became foundational in colonial and postcolonial studies; the second was ignored except by those who cared about Palestine; see Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Time* (Durham, N.C., 2016), pp. 42–44.

5. In the settler colonies that Mamdani calls successful, the colonists stayed and became the majority, or at the least imposed sovereignty. Other immigrants followed. This has led to debates within settler colonial studies about the tensions, most particularly regarding the formerly enslaved who were forcibly settled in the Americas and who now claim some ancestral rights. See Justin Leroy, "Black History in Occupied Territory: On the Entanglements of Slavery and Settler Colonialism," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016).

comparison for the state of Israel shifts to North America, Australia, and, to some extent, South Africa and other sites of ongoing struggles about white European colonial settler presence. Zionism gets reframed not as a *colonial-national* project, as Nadia Abu El Haj's study of Israeli archaeology put it, but a *settler-colonial* project.⁶

The key theoretical writings in this field by Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini, editors of *Settler Colonial Studies*, propose that settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, and that it is driven by the logic of elimination (of the native) rather than extraction of resources or exploitation of labor.⁷ If scholars like Rana Barakat now question the rush to adopt the settler-colonial framework because of the way it privileges settler narratives and assumes success, in this case of Zionism, again silencing Palestinian voices and agency, including through heritage projects of "museumification" that place Palestinians in the past,⁸ Veracini had argued that what made the framework so apt for Palestine/Israel is that, "far from equating settler colonialism with elimination, Wolfe's 'structure' refers to a *continuing* relationship of inequality between Indigenous and settler collectives." In defending the approach from an earlier critic, Veracini argued that "Wolfe's argument is that invasion is ongoing and unfinished. . . . While the structure *attempts* to eliminate Indigenous peoples it *fails* to do so."⁹

No one would deny the continuing existence of Palestinians or the relationship of inequality between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, including Israel's own Palestinian "citizens." The former tried to expel and eliminate the latter. Instead, they find themselves struggling to rule and manage this population by vilifying and criminalizing them and attempting to silence or discredit their narratives. Israel does so with a formidable arsenal of violent technologies legitimized by what Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian calls its "security theology."¹⁰ This situation leads many to describe Israel as an apartheid state. Yet because both apartheid (under erasure as Makdisi has observed)¹¹ and settler colonialism are borrowed or "transit" metaphors, the first coming from South Africa and the second from other sites of Indigenous

6. See Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago, 2001).

7. See Lorenzo Veracini, "Defending Settler Colonial Studies," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 311–16.

8. See Barakat, "Lifta, the Nakba, and the Museumification of Palestine's History," *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 5 (Fall 2018): 1–15.

9. Veracini, "Defending Settler Colonial Studies," p. 311.

10. See Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Security Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear* (New York, 2015).

11. See Saree Makdisi, "Apartheid / ~~Apartheid~~ / []," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Winter 2018): 304–30.

colonization, they both illuminate but also do not quite capture the situation.¹² Their value, Mark Rifkin suggests, lies instead in the political futures they open up for consideration. Before exploring what political imaginations—or what I call political “Alter-Natives” (given the new connections and comparisons) these frameworks open up—I want to consider both the value and limits of the comparisons that *settler colonialism* invites. This will lay the groundwork for an exploration of the workings of these political imaginations today, tracked through the specific case of museums in settler states, including the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit.

Specters of Reconciliation

In 2015, I was invited to give some lectures in Australia. At the University of New South Wales in Sydney, the colleague who was to introduce me shared the running-order instructions provided to her by the events coordinator. She was to acknowledge the Bedegal people as the “traditional custodians of this land” and to pay her respects to the elders and to all other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders present at the event.

At the University of Melbourne, a colleague shared with me the university’s *Aboriginal Cultural Protocols Guidelines* that scripted her own introduction to my lecture a few days later. The official document explains why these protocols have been adopted by the university: “An *Acknowledgement of Country* recognises the valuable and unique status of Aboriginal people as the original owners and custodians of the land and waters of this nation. It is a significant and symbolic reconciliation gesture.”¹³ Unfamiliar at that time with such practices, I could not help thinking: Could we ever imagine this happening in Israel? What would have had to have happened for similar cultural protocols to exist at an Israeli university? And would it be a good thing?

I tried to transpose, with the following results:

[Tel Aviv University] *is a community that aspires to participate in the creation of a diverse and harmonious nation. Our aim is to bring greater benefits to the Indigenous [Palestinian] people of [Israel/Palestine] through education and research, and to do so by involving [the Palestinian] people in those endeavours. On behalf of [Tel Aviv University]—we acknowledge: [The Palestinian] people as the original inhabitants of the [country]; Recognise their loss of land, children, health and kin, and the*

12. See Mark Rifkin, “Indigeneity, Apartheid, Palestine: On the Transit of Political Metaphors,” *Cultural Critique* 95 (Winter 2017): 25–70.

13. The University of Melbourne, *Aboriginal Cultural Protocols Guidelines*, murrupbarak.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2091571/Cultural_Protocols_University..pdf

erosion of their languages, culture and lore and the manifold impacts of colonisation; and [Israel] will only become a mature nation when the past is acknowledged, so that the present can be understood and the future confidently based on the mutual recognition of aspirations and rights.

The University records its deep regrets for the injustices suffered by the [Palestinians] as a result of European settlement.

The University also acknowledges and sincerely regrets any past wrongs carried out in the name of the University which have caused distress to [Palestinians].¹⁴

I knew about this distress firsthand. My father had grown up in, and then was driven out in 1948 from, the Jaffa neighborhood of Manshiyya (since razed, except for its mosque) on the border with Tel Aviv.¹⁵ The statistics about unequal access to education for Palestinians in Israel, like Indigenous Australians, are well documented.

The Australian practices of reconciliation such as Acknowledgment of Country and its ritual twin, the Welcome to Country (WTC)—in which traditional elders are invited to ritually welcome visitors to conferences, public events, and ceremonies—are currently *unimaginable* in the Israeli context. The recognition of the indigeneity or prioriness of Palestinians and the aspiration to live in harmony and democratic inclusion are not part of the discursive landscape, nor is the prospect for an apology for causing distress. Tel Aviv University, which extended its reach to incorporate land belonging to the Palestinian village of Shaykh Muwannis, even uses the restored former residence of the village's "clan elder" (*mukhtar*) as its university club, known as the Green House.¹⁶

Australia is not the only settler colony to have developed these kinds of practices of recognition and reconciliation. In some parts of North America it also has become commonplace to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and to invite elders to open public events and academic conferences. These welcomes can take concrete forms, such as at the Anthropology

14. The University of Melbourne, "Indigenous Cultural Protocols: Guidelines," Oct. 2018, murrupbarak.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2896828/UoM-Indigenous-Cultural-Protocols.pdf

15. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "Return to Half-Ruins: Memory, Postmemory, and Living History in Palestine," in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, ed. Ahmad H. Sa'di and Abu-Lughod (New York, 2007), pp. 77–104.

16. See Ilan Pappé, "Epilogue," *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 257–81, and Zochrot, "Tel Aviv University Is Asked to Acknowledge Its Past and to Commemorate the Palestinian Village on Which Grounds the University Was Built," Aug. 2003, zochrot.org/en/article/52183. Shaykh Muwannis, Jaffa, is among the destroyed Palestinian villages catalogued in Walid Khalidi, *All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, D.C., 1992).

Museum of the University of British Columbia, where in 2011, according to the website, the museum and the Musqueam people celebrated the official naming of the Welcome Plaza x^wəniwən ce:p k^wθəθ nəwəyət (Remember Your Teachings). The director's message explains that the museum is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded land of the Musqueam people and that "it is fitting that the first artworks and words you encounter outside the Museum are a welcome from our generous First Nations hosts."¹⁷

The Welcome Plaza is meant as a sign of respect and recognition of Musqueam priorness and presence. It symbolizes both their inclusion and hospitality. Yet the museum had been built and its magnificent objects collected long before this more mutual association had developed and innovative efforts undertaken to involve the communities in organizing and displaying collections through political pressures, which I discuss in the final section of this essay.¹⁸ Even though the artworks commissioned for the plaza attest to the Musqueam's ongoing lives and living presence, knowing the history of settlement and the Canadian state's absorption and appropriation of land and resources, not to mention violation of treaties, I wondered as I stood on the plaza about the conditions under which the Musqueam were currently living. How could this striking glass and concrete building, nestled among the trees on this lovely campus in Vancouver, distance itself from the larger processes of settler appropriation? I experienced the plaza as ghostly. I felt sad. I felt dread as I imagined an Israeli museum sometime in the future containing such a plaza.¹⁹

17. Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, moa.ubc.ca/welcome/

18. See Kelsey R. Wrightson, "The Limits of Recognition: *The Spirit Sings*, Canadian Museums and the Colonial Politics of Recognition," *Museum Anthropology* 40, no. 1 (2017): 36–51; hereafter abbreviated "L."

19. Imagine if the Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem that has been so controversial (and remains still unfinished) were to someday have a welcome plaza called "*ahlan wa sahlān*" (welcome) and a website that carried the message: "The Museum of Tolerance is situated on the traditional Palestinian Muslim cemetery of Ma'man Allah (Mamilla) where generations of Muslim inhabitants of Jerusalem including religious scholars have been buried." The director's welcome might be: "The Museum of Tolerance is built on traditional, ancestral, and illegally occupied land of the Palestinian people." Would the message be softened if Palestinian artists had been commissioned to produce sculptures to adorn the plaza? Perhaps the rubber-coated stones of Nida Sinnokrot that evoke the rubber-coated steel bullets the IDF uses to quell demonstrations, taking out eyes? Or the miniature ceramic olive trees of Vera Tamari, reminding us of the vengeful and systematic uprooting of hundred-year-old olive trees by the Israeli army? For critical analyses of the project, see Makdisi, "The Architecture of Erasure," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (Spring 2010): 519–59, and Shaira Vadasaria, "Necronationalism: Managing Race, Death and the Nation's Skeletons," *Social Identities* 21, no. 2 (2015): 117–31. Architect Frank Gehry withdrew from the project because of delays due to legal battles about the site; even the Israeli firm, Chyutin Architects, that took over has now withdrawn; see Riccardo Bianchini, "Museum of

An official reconciliatory moment of the sort that happened in Australia and Canada, and the practices of welcome associated with it, are inconceivable in this Israeli context. But why would they also be disturbing to most Palestinians? To answer this question—and in the end to ask us to think differently both about our unease about the transpositions and about the political possibilities such practices might actually open up—it is crucial to build on the critical thinking and political activism going on in Native and Indigenous studies and communities where these liberal reconciliation and recognition gestures are themselves controversial.²⁰ What are the pros and cons of political strategies that appeal to the concept of indigeneity, the basis for much comparative thinking in settler-colonial studies?

Transpositions

There are three reasons why Palestinians might resist comparing themselves with indigenous people and imagining something like the Australian cultural protocols being applied to them, even if they want the Israeli state to admit wrongdoing. The first objection would be that rituals of reconciliation and the terms of the UNDRIP evoke a static and often romanticized “traditional” culture that makes even less sense in this context than it might in Australia. Insofar as the Australian protocols refer to culture, traditions, rituals, and a certain continuity of community, they place all subjects in the double bind of having their recognition depend on the preservation or presentation of a distinct culture, a set of frozen “traditional” social forms, and an assertion of continuity in place. This is an impossible demand, as the history and existence of Indigenous Australians have been marked precisely by violent disruption, dispossession, and deracination. Critics argue that by defining indigenous groups by their culture, heritage, language, and tradition, the very history of settler invasion, continuing violence, and criminalization of indigenous people that has made cultural preservation impossible is erased.²¹

Tolerance Jerusalem (MOTJ)—History of a Controversial Project,” *Inexhibit*, 2 Nov. 2019, www.inexhibit.com/case-studies/jerusalem-museum-tolerance-chyutin-architects/

20. See Audra Simpson, “Sovereignty, Sympathy, and Indigeneity,” in *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire*, ed. Carole McGranahan and John F. Collins (Durham, N.C., 2018), pp. 72–89.

21. Elizabeth Povinelli argues that these demands, especially operative in Aboriginal land claims, place Indigenous Australians in the untenable position of proving their traditional kin ties and attachment to the land when what defines them most are the two centuries of displacement from their territories, decimation of their kin groups through disease and frontier violence, dependency on an inadequate state welfare system that removed children from their families to promote assimilation, and the suppression of some of their traditions as morally abhorrent to settlers. See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham, N.C., 2002). See also Kristina Everrett, “Welcome to Country . . . Not,” *Oceania* 79 (Mar. 2009): 53–64.

Transposed to Palestine, such a demand would be similarly problematic. The protocols in Australia require being greeted and perhaps blessed by clan elders from the very location on which the new settler institutions stand. A Welcome to Country at Ben Gurion Airport would require that only Palestinians originally from the city of Lydda would qualify for the ritual. Yet most of the population of Lydda was violently expelled in 1948, as described in harrowing detail in Reja-e Busailah's memoir, *In the Land of My Birth: A Palestinian Boyhood*.²² Its current inhabitants are internally displaced refugees. Extreme poverty and violence characterize the "Arab" neighborhoods.²³ Moreover, for Palestinians, the *hamula* (equivalent of the local clan) and the *mukhtars* (clan elders) who headed them, are viewed ambivalently because of the ways the Israeli state often worked through them, freezing the patriarchal social order as a means of social control and suppression of political activism.²⁴

What about the focus on cultural traditions? The Melbourne cultural protocols suggest that indigenous people performing Welcome to Country ceremonies should be remunerated because they are using their intellectual property to provide a cultural service. Palestinians are dismayed by Israeli theft of their cultural and intellectual property, appropriating and rebranding everything from foods to embroidered dresses.²⁵ A current exhibit at the Israel Museum on "decoding Israeli dress" even includes a high fashion cape from the 1970s made from the fabric used for the *kufiyyas* made iconic by Yasser Arafat and the fedayeen.²⁶ Palestinians are annoyed by this continual usurpation of their cultural and intellectual property, but this is not their main concern. It is the much larger and continuing loss of real property—land, homes, libraries, and archives—that is the focus of their outrage. Even the village memorial books by diasporic Palestinians that describe their lost or

22. See Reja-e Busailah, *In the Land of My Birth: A Palestinian Boyhood* (Washington, D.C., 2017).

23. This is the case in Australia and northwest Canada where indigenous groups also live precarious lives subject to violence; see Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Suhad Daher-Nashif, "Femicide and Colonization: Between the Politics of Exclusion and the Culture of Control," *Violence Against Women* 19, no. 3 (2013): 295–315; Jaskiran K. Dhillon, *Prairie Rising: Indigenous Youth, Decolonization, and the Politics of Intervention* (Toronto, 2017); Sherene H. Razack, *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody* (Toronto, 2015); and National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/

24. See Nahla Abdo, *Women in Israel: Race, Gender and Citizenship* (New York, 2011), and Sa'di, *Thorough Surveillance: The Genesis of Israeli Policies of Population Management, Surveillance and Political Control Towards the Palestinian Minority* (New York, 2013).

25. See "Labour of Love: New Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery," Palestinian Museum, Palestine, 18 Mar.–31 Dec. 2018.

26. See The Israel Museum, "Fashion Statements: Decoding Israeli Dress," www.imj.org.il/en/exhibitions/fashion-statements

destroyed villages so meticulously, sometimes nostalgically recreating village life, insistently map streams and wells, and detail precisely the boundaries of individual family properties.²⁷

The second objection to shifting the orbit of comparison to indigenous peoples might be that both rituals of recognition and rights claims from indigenous people seem foreign to a people whose political language has for so long been that of anticolonial or anti-imperial national liberation. This language is assiduously avoided in UNDRIP. Despite the dismal failures of this nationalist political project for Palestinians, the language remains resonant. The European Jewish settlement of Palestine came very late, mostly in the twentieth century. This makes it quite different from earlier settler-colonial enterprises. Palestinians were already politically mobilized around independence struggles, and the multiethnic and multireligious Palestinians that Jewish settlers encountered had industries and institutions—railways, newspapers, banks, business firms, export trade, and political parties. Their political and economic history is recorded and now archived, and they resist being evacuated from it. This makes historians, scholars, and lay people hesitate to apply the settler-colonial framework, with its implicit binary of advanced European civilizing settler/backward native. Protecting their “culture” or “traditions” has not been their priority, just as Palestinians never considered Zionist settlement a threat to their cultural identity. It threatened their lives, their autonomy, their political aspirations, and their sovereignty.

For at least a century, Palestinian politics, like the wider Arab politics of which they were a part, have been resolutely nationalist. Even the terminology of Abu-Lughod and Abu-Laban’s *Settler Regimes* reveals fundamental differences in the framing of settler-colonial studies then and now. The book is a “study of the internal dynamics of settler regimes, and the interrelationships and confrontations between ‘settlers’ and nationals” (S, p. [i]). Note that it is not settlers and “natives.”²⁸ The solutions proposed were also orthogonal to those current within the settler colonial framework and indigenous politics. As the foreword explains:

The colonial system and its oppressive social, economic, and political institutions have left an indelible mark on the life experiences of *national populations*. Although the colonized peoples of Africa and the Middle East are articulated differently in their respective settler regimes, they all have come to share similar experiences, including

27. See Rochelle A. Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced* (Stanford, Calif., 2011).

28. See Mamdani, “Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43 (Oct. 2001): 651–64.

discriminatory treatment, oppression, and human degradation. It is these experiential commonalities which may help explain similarities in reactions to the colonial system. [S, pp. (ii–iii); my emphasis]

The reactions to which they refer are anticolonial national liberation movements with distinct internationalist imaginations of solidarity. As the foreword to *Settler Regimes* further clarifies:

From the perspective of the settlers, it is understandable that the most threatening response is the rise of national liberation movements and related cultural and institutional supports. . . . As the Pakistani scholar Eqbal Ahmad reflected at the convention, liberation movements constitute the only hope for the subjugated and the dispossessed to alleviate the extraordinary misery and human degradation which they have suffered. [S, p. (iii)]

Ahmad was a regular participant, like his friend Edward Said, in the AAUG. He had spent some years in North Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s alongside Frantz Fanon and members of the Algerian liberation struggle. This informed his broader political vision about anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles from Vietnam to Palestine.²⁹

Unlike the situations of the indigenous inhabitants of the settler colonies that are the focus of current theorizing, the majority of Palestinians also now live outside of the historic land of Palestine, having been expelled and made refugees and exiles. Their response to Zionist settler colonization was to form a militant national liberation movement in the 1960s and '70s and to engage in diplomacy and armed struggle from outside. Palestinians living directly under Israeli rule were operating under different contexts and pressures of control and surveillance, but they continued to identify as Palestinian and Arab and to resist. They were never pressured, or allowed, to assimilate.³⁰ Long before the United Nations Forums on Indigenous Peoples, the representatives of the Palestinian struggle met in New York and Geneva, strategizing at the UN, working for support for Security Council resolutions about Palestine, and drawing on principles of national self-determination.³¹ They

29. See Edward W. Said, "Foreword: Cherish the Man's Courage," in Eqbal Ahmad, *Confronting Empire: Interviews with David Barsamian* (Boston, 2000): xxiv–v. See also Ahmad, *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad*, ed. Carolee Bengelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo, and Yogesh Chandrani (New York, 2006).

30. See Maha Nassar, *Brothers Apart: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World* (Stanford, Calif., 2017).

31. For a riveting account, see Shafiq Al-Hout, *My Life in the PLO: The Inside Story of the Palestinian Struggle*, trans. Hader Al-Hout and Laila Othman, ed. Jean Said Makdisi and Martin Asser (New York, 2011).

sought national recognition for a national territory in a world of nation-states. The political goal was to be recognized as a national entity with a place at the table and to regain their lands and their sovereignty, liberating Palestine and exercising the right of return. The Palestine National Authority that governs in Ramallah is the abject remnant of that bold national dream.

The third objection Palestinians often have to the comparison with indigenous or native peoples in settler states takes us back to the rituals of recognition and reconciliation that I encountered in Australia and Canada, two late liberal settler nations. These appear to be symbolic gestures that restrict native political potential with anemic promises of inclusion and evade questions of redress, reparation, and international law that have emerged in the debates about righting colonial and even settler-colonial wrongs. Admitting that a museum is on unceded land could be interpreted as an acceptance of the status quo. Critics like Emma Kowal early on characterized Welcome to Country rituals as “a national psychic bandaid” that soothes both the wounds of the indigenous due to the “acts of colonial dispossession and violence that founded the settler colony and the racist regimes that followed” and the wounds of the settlers who suffer “from a permanent need to transcend the role of perpetrator and smooth over the unheeded calls for indigenous sovereignty” in a caring national narrative.³²

Would this constitute adequate recognition of Palestinian rights? Or count as justice? The political history of militant struggle in the name of national identity cannot be so easily undone. The situation of illegal occupation of parts of the Palestinian homeland, including Jerusalem, and limited self-governance, along with international recognition of a Palestinian quasi state, keep the political tensions alive. Increasingly, the '48 Palestinians balk at the hypocritical label of being an Arab minority or Arab citizens of Israel. Even the Bedouin groups in the Naqab are voicing their Palestinian identity, although they had been encouraged by lawyers and sympathizers from the Israeli Left to build on their separateness and distinguish themselves as an “indigenous” community, encouraged by a colonial history of divide and rule, a longer history of difference between “the desert and the sown,” and the requirements for claiming indigeneity in the World Forum of Indigenous Peoples. Their political advocates hoped that gaining world status as “indigenous” would facilitate these Palestinians gaining some rights while seeming unthreatening to the state, assimilable in a multicultural scheme of mutual recognition

32. Emma Kowal, “Welcome to Country?” *Meanjin Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2010): p. 16. The project for Reconciliation Australia that began in 2007 to justify these rituals as tools in recognizing the connection between dispossession and disadvantage has developed numerous programs for greater inclusion; see www.reconciliation.org.au/

with the Jewish settlers on their land. But there has been too much violence and resistance for “inclusion” to seem an adequate solution.³³

These three difficulties with the settler-colonial framing of settlers and natives, and the associated politics of indigeneity and recognition, help explain why so many Palestinian scholars blur the colonial and settler-colonial frameworks, or use them interchangeably, despite the growing theoretical purchase and popularity of the latter framework over the past decade,³⁴ and why scholars of colonialism like Stoler express unease with the current academic embrace of this framework. Her reservations have to do less with the political concept itself, as she explains, than the way it is invoked as “an ontological state rather than a fractious historical condition.”³⁵ Yet only if one presumes that settler colonialism is a distinct “type,” as Stoler insists it is not, does one have to reject it for the multiple ways it does not map perfectly onto the historical and political dynamics of Palestine/Israel.³⁶

New Political Imaginations

The value of the settler-colonial framework lies, as I would argue, in the alternative political futures that the comparisons it sets up help us imagine. Its value also lies in some new solidarities these comparisons engender. The communities to which this framework looks are all experimenting with or exploring alternative forms of self-determination and sovereignty. They sometimes invoke decolonization, but they do not automatically turn to the kind of

33. For an analysis of international law and indigenous people, including its relevance for Israeli law despite the deniers of Bedouin indigeneity, see Alexandre Kedar, Ahmad Amara, and Oren Yiftachel, *Emptied Lands: A Legal Geography of Bedouin Rights in the Negev* (Stanford, Calif., 2018). The key history is Mansour Nasasra, *The Naqab Bedouins: A Century of Politics and Resistance* (New York, 2017). For the shifting understandings of Naqab Bedouins in terms of colonialism and settler colonialism, see *The Naqab Bedouin and Colonialism: New Perspectives*, ed. Nasasra et al. (New York, 2015), and “Israeli Settler-Colonialism and the Palestinian Naqab Bedouin,” a special issue of *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 15 (May 2016). See also Lana Tatour, “The Culturalisation of Indigeneity: The Palestinian-Bedouin of the Naqab and Indigenous Rights,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 23, no. 10 (2019): 1569–93.

34. Two major studies by Palestinian scholars use *colonial* and *settler colonial* almost interchangeably to expose the logic (and intent) of the forms of Israeli domination and to specify Palestinian injury; see Sa’di, *Thorough Surveillance*, and Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Security Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear*. For a focus on the tension of Israel as a “liberal settler state,” see Shira Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel’s Liberal Settler State* (Stanford, Calif., 2013). On the link between citizenship with settler colonialism, see Tatour, “Citizenship as Domination: Settler Colonialism and the Making of Palestinian Citizenship in Israel,” *Arab Studies Journal* 27 (Fall 2019): 8–39.

35. Stoler, *Duress*, p. 60.

36. See *ibid.*

nationalism that Abu-Lughod and Abu-Laban presented as the inevitable response to the misery, dispossession, and human degradation of colonialism.

What are these political alternatives? Yasser Arafat was haunted by Native Americans, even if Mahmoud Darwish paid homage to them in his poem, *Speech of the Red Indian*.³⁷ In one of his last interviews, Arafat insisted that despite many failures, he and the Palestinian movement had achieved something.

We have made the Palestinian case the biggest problem in the world. . . . Look at the Hague ruling on the [Separation] wall. One hundred and thirty countries supported us at the General Assembly. One hundred and seven years after the [founding Zionist] Basel Conference, 90 years after the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Israel has failed to wipe us out. We are here, in Palestine, facing them. We are not red Indians.³⁸

My colleague Audra Simpson, an anthropologist and Kahnawà:ke Mohawk, has challenged this statement. She insists, “We are still here.”³⁹

So what might Palestinians learn from Native American activism and theorizing now, given that Palestinians also have prided themselves on *sumud* (steadfastness, staying put) or being “still here”?⁴⁰ Against the limitations of the strategy of liberal containment, argues Simpson, some Native North American communities are engaging in a politics of refusal—of recognition and of settler state jurisdiction. They are experimenting with non-national sovereignties, new solidarities, and different forms of activism, legal and otherwise. We must look at these indigenous struggles. We cannot go back in time to the 1970s when my father and his comrades could speak about settlers and nationals, even if we now look back in wonder at the heady rhetoric, high hopes, and grand solidarities of Third World liberation movements.

Where should we look now for the challenging “threat” that they deemed crucial to liberation politics and that seemed to me so eerily absent on that Welcome Plaza at the Anthropology Museum in British Columbia? Even if the ideals of national liberation have soured, the threats to settler regimes seem not to be over. Elsewhere in the world, where white settlers think they have been accepted as natives, as Mamdani argued—in the US, Canada,

37. See Mahmoud Darwish, “The ‘Red Indian’s’ Penultimate Speech to the White Man,” trans. Fady Joudah, *Harvard Review* 36 (2009): 152–59.

38. Quoted in Issandr El Amrani, “Arafat: ‘We Are Not Red Indians,’” *The Arabist*, 6 Nov. 2004, arabist.net/blog/2004/11/6/arafat-we-are-not-red-indians.html

39. Simpson made this remark in response to a remark by Oren Yiftachel at the workshop, “Comparative Settler Colonialisms,” Center for Palestine Studies and the Heyman Center for Humanities, Columbia University, 9 Apr. 2015.

40. See also Kowal, “Welcome to Country: Acknowledgement, Belonging and White Anti-Racism,” *Cultural Studies Review* 21 (Sept. 2015): 173–204.

Australia, New Zealand—settler success is being contested. Indigenous critics are insisting that they do not want reconciliation and soothing liberal multicultural inclusion, as Glen Sean Coulthard forcefully argues in *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014).⁴¹ Even in Australia, observers note that while welcome rituals may enable nonindigenous people “to enjoy Indigenous culture and presence without feeling *threatened* by Indigenous sovereignty,” they can mean something very different to those performing the rite. “From the point of view of traditional owners,” writes Kowal, “a WTC [Welcome to Country] can be a quasi land claim.”⁴² The practices are indebted to indigenous agency.⁴³ “Once acknowledged in performance, [this agency] cannot be fully directed by the nation state to serve its own ends.”⁴⁴ They can lead to new demands for sovereignty. The 2017 “Uluru Statement from the Heart” demanded constitutional reform to include a First Nation Voice.⁴⁵

These threats, in other words, are taking new forms, shifting both domains and political modalities. If their pitfalls are apparent in the liberal practices of conditional multicultural inclusion that qualify belonging, the promises of the politics of indigeneity in the framework of settler-colonial theory have yet to be realized. Simpson argues that Arafat was wrong to distance himself from “red Indians.” In her keynote address to the Critical Geographers holding their annual meeting in Ramallah in 2015, she proposed instead, “We might all be Red Indians.”⁴⁶ There is resistance in Native communities in North America, colonized for so much longer than Palestinians. Her own people straddle the border of the US and Canada and refuse to carry passports issued by either, even though they have an internationally winning lacrosse team that sometimes finds itself in limbo. They protested in 1990 the appropriation of more of their land by a neighboring town to build a golf course. At first women protested peacefully, along with submitting petitions. Eventually, the Warrior society took up AK-47s in a militant standoff with the Quebec police and the Canadian armed forces. In 2014, Lakota Sioux in North Dakota tried to block the Keystone Pipeline through their

41. See Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, 2014).

42. Kowal, “Welcome to Country,” p. 189; my emphasis.

43. See Mark McKenna, “Tokenism or Belated Recognition? Welcome to Country and the Emergence of Indigenous Protocol in Australia, 1991–2014,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2014): 476–89.

44. Everett, “Welcome to Country . . . Not,” p. 53.

45. See “Uluru Statement from the Heart,” www.referendumcouncil.org.au/final-report.html#toc-anchor-ulurustatement-from-the-heart

46. See Audra Simpson, “‘We are Not Red Indians’ (We Might all Be Red Indians): Anticolonial Sovereignty Across the Borders of Time, Place and Sentiment,” lecture, International Congress of Critical Geography, Ramallah, Palestine, 2 July 2015.

territory. The massive protests and solidarity in the winter of 2016–2017 at Standing Rock testify again to the enduring resistance.

Can symbolic statements and acknowledgment become an effective base for building recognition for moral claims with serious political, legal, and economic ramifications?⁴⁷ Is there more to learn from First Nations communities engaged in the politics of refusal—the refusal of multicultural inclusion as second- and third-class citizens and its implied absolution for the settlers?⁴⁸ What kinds of politics are Palestinians themselves developing in the everyday and on the margins of the dismal official politics of the parties and the pretenses of peace negotiations?

Like most scholars in critical Native studies, Rifkin is impatient with liberal multicultural inclusion and recognition politics. Noting how the “transit of political metaphors” of apartheid and settler colonialism in the context of Palestine/Israel fail to capture many aspects of life on the ground, he insists that their real import lies in the different political futures they imply. Indigenous politics, the future implied by the settler colonial frame, is about interrogating “the legitimacy of the legal and administrative frameworks of the settler-state while also attending to the presence and contours of actual or aspirational political formations by indigenous peoples.” Engaging with indigenous politics means imagining “a political collectivity (or collectivities) whose existence, inhabitation, and governance cannot be conceptualized as an internal matter for domestic policy and whose modes of political organization and expression need not take the form of a nation-state.” In the case of Palestine, this means going beyond “individualized equality” (the future of a state that had abolished apartheid), “pluralistic recognition of ‘minorities’” (the future of a liberal settler state that has won), or “national independence” (or an independence-like kind of political separation).⁴⁹

I got a glimmer of alternative visions when I learned how Simpson opened her keynote address in Ramallah in 2015: “As per convention in North America and other parts of the Indigenous world, I acknowledge and pay my respect to the original caretakers and possessors of this land, the Palestinian people, whose land we walk and talk upon.”⁵⁰ Coming from her, this

47. Palestinians might have something to learn from their Naqab Bedouin compatriots if they ever manage to get international recognition for their “native” claims to their land and territory. So far, they have not succeeded in any land claims they have fought in the Israeli courts. For an early exploration of the strategy, see Nasara, “The Ongoing Judaisation of the Naqab and the Struggle for Recognising the Indigenous Rights of the Arab Bedouin People,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 81–107.

48. See Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, N.C., 2014), and Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*.

49. Rifkin, “Indigeneity, Apartheid, Palestine,” pp. 28, 56, 57.

50. Simpson, “‘We are Not Red Indians’ (We Might all Be Red Indians).”

“Acknowledgment of Country” carried a different valence than it had for me when I first heard words like this in the Australian and Canadian contexts. This was an act of solidarity. It was a sign of recognition from another group of people who are still there, still resisting a settler state. It was an act of recognition of Palestinian rights, an acknowledgement of their being *prior* and an acknowledgment that land matters. Land is at the center of their struggles, alongside collective political self-determination—of a sort yet to be explored.⁵¹

This is a far cry from what Said, my father, and their political comrades could have imagined when they labored beginning in the late 1960s to make the Palestinian experience understood, to present Zionism from the standpoint of its victims, and to shape a Palestinian liberation movement, a movement of hope that was also fraught with rivalries, betrayals, and defeats and that ended with the secret capitulations of the Oslo Accords that reduced Palestine to a small dependent fragmented territory inhabited by a tiny fraction of the Palestinian people, and serving the security needs of Israel.⁵²

It points to political possibilities that a new generation of Palestinians is exploring. What might self-determination in the historical present mean? Can we think about sovereignty outside the aspiration for equal citizenship within the Israeli state or through the establishment of a pseudostate on tiny patches of the land of historic Palestine? The fiction of a “two-state solution” was put to rest with Donald Trump’s defiant move of the US embassy to Jerusalem in May 2018. The pipedream of a state for all its citizens was put to rest with the passage in July 2018 of the new nationality law declaring that “Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people and they have an exclusive right to national self-determination in it.”⁵³

Palestinians have always been up against a settler colonialism of their own, anachronistically put in place just as colonialism was being defeated and empire receding elsewhere. They have unusual resources, in part because of their forced scattering in 1948 and in part because of who and what they were before the Zionist settlers came to displace them. Palestinians seem

51. Steven Salaita has made related arguments about the importance of American Indian Studies to Palestine Studies and the more crucial matter of mutual recognition and solidarity in the present. “Natives are not a defeated precursor to impending Palestinian dispossession but contemporaneous agents who directly inform the conditions of Palestine, just as Palestinians directly inform the conditions of Indian country” (Steven Salaita, *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine* [Minneapolis, 2017], p. 163).

52. See Said, “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,” *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 7–58.

53. Quoted in Haia Dakwar, “Israel’s Arab Minority Rallies against New Nation-State Law,” *Reuters*, 11 Aug. 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-politics-law-protests-idUSKBN1KW0KP

now to be developing a variety of inchoate and decentralized resistant political practices and imaginings. Some are bringing them under fire with terrible casualties. The Great Freedom March in Gaza follows earlier intifadas in this grim line. Others land them in prison and detention. Many practices also have emerged to keep Palestinians on the ground and to develop their institutions. Palestinians speak up, work the international system, and—especially since the demise of the movement for national liberation accompanying the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the suppression of political groups like Hamas that continued to challenge the colonial condition—increasingly seem to be taking upon themselves the responsibility of keeping the Palestinian nation alive. This is a people nation, not a nation-state, to borrow Chatterjee's distinction,⁵⁴ and we are witnessing now what Beshara Doumani has called “a thousand fires.”⁵⁵

Museum Politics

The new Palestinian Museum in Birzeit exemplifies the emergence of this kind of politics. In her ethnography of heritage politics since the second intifada, Chiara De Cesari has documented the proliferation of Palestinian cultural initiatives, especially in the West Bank and in Jerusalem. Neither backed by nor linked to the Palestinian Authority, heritage projects sometimes linked to urban renewal, workshops, film festivals, cultural centers, art schools and festivals, educational projects, and the civil society international boycott movement (BDS) have emerged, alongside popular and grassroots projects about Palestinian history and memory.⁵⁶ These can all be seen as rejections of the status quo and insistent challenges to the dominant settler-colonial project of elimination. Both inward and outward looking, what the cultural and academic projects share, even if they do not look revolutionary in the conventional sense and even if some can be faulted as elitist, is that they are independent initiatives that seek both to strengthen the bonds among Palestinians and to tell the Palestinian story to counter Israeli narratives.

To unpack the emergent political imagination of what Rifkin calls self-determination and sovereignty that is carried forward by these cultural efforts, I want to reflect on the new Palestinian Museum that opened officially

54. See Partha Chatterjee, *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (New York, 2020).

55. Beshara Doumani, lecture, Center for Palestine Studies, Columbia University, New York, 22 Feb. 2018.

56. See Chiara De Cesari, “Anticipatory Representation: Building the Palestinian Nation (-State) through Artistic Performance,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12, no. 1 (2012): 82–100.

in May 2016. The museum is housed in a stunning building, designed by international architects, and surrounded by terraced gardens that “respect the cultural and natural heritage of the landscape.”⁵⁷ Zina Jardaneh, head of the museum’s board, regularly characterized it as *a* national museum, not *the* national museum.⁵⁸ This insistent assertion of independence from any official sovereign has been consistent through the shifting visions for the museum over the twenty years since it was first conceived on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba.

Envisioned first as a Palestinian Memory Museum, its mission statement in the 2000 planning document prepared for the Welfare Association (the Palestinian diasporic development and humanitarian NGO that would fund it) articulates a somewhat conventional nationalist political purpose, even as it distances itself from the Palestinian Authority or the quasi state setting itself up in Ramallah after Oslo. Presented as an “independent Palestinian cultural and educational institution” whose focus would be the modern history of Palestine, its goals were ambitious:

Through the museum, the Palestinian people will be able to express their genuine roots in Palestine, make visible their national identity and patriotic commitment, and affirm both their opposition to settler colonialism and their continuous efforts to establish an independent state with Jerusalem as its flourishing capital, thus eradicating the traces of their catastrophe (Nakba).⁵⁹

The mission statement also mentions the Palestinian people’s struggle for rights, freedom, and equality on the land of Palestine. It proposes that the museum must document both the catastrophic expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948 as well as their resistance.⁶⁰

The document was authored by my father with a Palestinian team that he had gathered. He had returned to live in Palestine in 1992, forty-four years after being driven out of Jaffa. This was the last of several projects he undertook upon his return. An advertisement published in the *International Herald Tribune* in May 1998, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba, announced the Welfare Association’s launch of what at that even earlier stage was called

57. Hanan Toukan, “The Palestinian Museum,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, n.s. (Dec. 2018): 16, www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-palestinian-museum. For native plants and colonialism, see Tomaz Mastnak, Julia Elyachar, and Tom Boellstorff, “Botanical Decolonization: Rethinking Native Plants,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32, no. 2 (2014): 363–80.

58. Jardaneh accepted the prize on behalf of the Palestinian Museum when it received the 2019 Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

59. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod et al., Palestinian Memory Museum mission statement prepared for the Mu’assasat al-ta’awun al-filistiniyya (Welfare Association), 2000, p. 17.

60. See *ibid.*

the “Palestine Life and Remembrance Museum.” This call to the public explained:

The Museum will record the tragedy of *Al Nakba*, the uprooting of the Palestinian people, and the decades of exile and dispersion. It will document the continuing resistance and struggle for national rights, independence, peace, and justice in Palestine. It will also preserve the memory of hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns, especially those that were completely erased from the map, and all the men, women and children who paid with their lives in defense of their cause.

The Welfare Association invites all Palestinians and their friends to support the Museum and to contribute to its permanent archives, displays and activities by offering documents, photographs, letters, books, and other historical materials and experiences, whether written or oral.⁶¹

Shelved during the second intifada and after the death of my father, the project was revived eight years later and a new vision put in place by a different group led by the social historian Beshara Doumani, with Omar Al-Qattan as head of the board. No longer defined as a memory museum, the mission retained the focus on the Palestinian people and their rights, with a subtle shift.⁶² The nationalist dreams of state building of the 1990s had faded. The Palestinian Museum, as it would now be called, was presented instead as

a mobilizing cultural project that acts as an agent of empowerment, integration and international solidarity. For Palestinians to achieve self-determination, they must explain who they are, how they came to be, and their current conditions and aspirations. The museum generates non-partisan narratives about the Palestinians, their relationships to their land, to each other, and to the world.⁶³

Its stated goal was to become “the leading and the most credible and robust platform for shaping and communicating knowledge about Palestinian

61. Welfare Association, advertisement in the *International Herald Tribune*, 28 May 1998, p. 5. I am grateful to Sahar Huneidi for sharing a copy of this advertisement with me.

62. This phase saw the professionalization of the project and its engagement of a London-based professional museum consulting firm to replace the dedicated but less experienced Palestinian team that had first envisioned the museum’s contents, purpose, and architecture (antiquities and cultural artifacts showing the long *durée* of Palestinian’s artistic achievements and informative commemorations of the key historical events in Palestinians’ experiences, all presented in a building designed by Jafar Tukan that followed the outlines of traditional Palestinian stone houses).

63. Cultural Innovations Limited, “Museological Strategic Plan,” London, Nov. 2010, p. 6.

history, society, and culture.” The reasons given for this were “the absence of a state and the fragmentation of the Palestinian body politic,” a situation that has worsened since 2010.⁶⁴ This statement reveals a drift from the earlier language of national liberation. The nationalist vision had receded further by the time the museum opened. In early 2018, the museum’s website carried the following mission statement:

The Palestinian Museum aims to contribute to a vibrant Palestinian cultural scene with a national and international presence, capable of strengthening the bonds between Palestinians and those interested in their culture and history.

The Museum will focus on promoting Palestinian culture in the Arab world and internationally; creating the environment for free and innovative intellectual and creative endeavour; advocating for the use of cultural tools for educational purposes; strengthening a sense of unifying national identity; and fostering a culture of dialogue and tolerance.⁶⁵

More outward looking, this rather apolitical celebration of Palestinian arts and culture retained only a trace of the nationalist vision that had animated the Memory Museum—a single clause about “strengthening a sense of unifying national identity.”⁶⁶ The decision to prioritize building a monumental structure deferred to a later stage another aspiration of the first two plans—creating a decentralized structure of hubs and nodes that would both reflect and serve Palestinians as a dispersed people and defend against the widely sensed vulnerability of the museum to potential Israeli bombing or looting.⁶⁷ Having any kind of permanent collection was still being debated for the same reasons. The promises of dissemination and inclusion were to rest on confidence in the rapid advances of digital and virtual technologies. The

64. Ibid.

65. The Palestinian Museum, “The Museum’s Vision,” www.palmmuseum.org/about/the-museum

66. For a critique of the political concept of tolerance, see Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J., 2006). The mission statement underwent revision in 2019 and currently the Arabic and English are not quite aligned.

67. The wisdom of developing a permanent collection is still being debated, even though this is by definition a function of museums. For the history of looting of Palestinian archives, both pre-1948 and post, and an account of the extensive Palestinian material now held in Israeli military archives, see Rona Sela, “The Genealogy of Colonial Plunder and Erasure—Israel’s Control over Palestinian Archives,” *Social Semiotics* 28, no. 2 (2018): 201–29 and “Seized in Beirut: The Plundered Archives of the Palestinian Cinema Institution and Cultural Arts Section,” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 12 (Summer 2017): 83–114. For Palestinian books and libraries “abandoned” in 1948, see Gish Amit, “Ownerless Objects? The Story of the Books Palestinians Left Behind in 1948,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 33 (2008): 7–20.

digital would open the museum to the majority of Palestinians (and non-Palestinians) who cannot travel to the West Bank, or Birzeit, where it is located, because of Israel's strict control over borders and movement.⁶⁸

Despite the anodyne mission statement, the inaugural exhibition was hard-hitting and assertive. Presciently, it turned out, it focused on Jerusalem. Curator Reem Fadda was innovative in her ambitions to connect the museum not just to excellent Palestinian and international artists, but to grassroots community organizations in Jerusalem. The exhibit directed attention to the everyday economics and politics of Israeli settlements and the strangulation of occupied East Jerusalem. The indigeneity of the Christian and Muslim inhabitants of Jerusalem, the foregrounding of land dispossession and colonial settlement, and the independence of the museum's program from any official political parties or governing bodies that might claim to represent or govern Palestinians are hallmarks of the kind of alternative sovereignty that many say characterizes indigenous politics. The earlier optimism of Palestinian state building was gone. Neither the curator nor the staff and board took direction from the Palestinian Authority or any other political group. The exhibit was called "Jerusalem Lives" (*Tahya al-quds*)—the Arabic has a more defiant ring.

One analyst has characterized the museum's achievement so far as positioning itself as a "space of critique, resistance and decoloniality in the convoluted colonial context of Post-Oslo Palestine."⁶⁹ The exhibits all speak to this ambition. The third exhibit that opened in April 2019, for example, was called "Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape." Oriented around Palestinian artists' representations and connections to the land and landscape, the themes included "the ongoing drastic and violent transformation of the landscape," "the different views Palestinians have of the land in relation to their restricted access to it," "the question of the erasure of our presence in the landscape and the complexity of remains, traces and testimonies," and "the ongoing fragmentation, loss, longing, memory and nostalgia."⁷⁰

The Palestinian Museum is just one of the more ambitious examples of the decentralized self-initiated efforts that so many Palestinians across the

68. See Cultural Innovations Limited, "Museological Strategic Plan."

69. Hanan Toukan, "The Palestinian Museum," p. 18. Lara Khaldi, "The Fugitive Object and the Hollow Museum" (master's thesis, European Graduate School, 2015) addresses more pessimistically the significance of the proliferation of Palestinian museum projects.

70. The Palestinian Museum, "Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape," www.palmuseum.org/exhibitions/intimate-terrains-representations-of-a-disappearing-landscape

world are engaged in, each, in a sense, doing what they can.⁷¹ Are these projects national? Not in conventional understanding. Are they anticipatory of a state, as De Cesari has proposed in her evaluation of the efflorescence of cultural projects across the West Bank in the 2000s? I don't think so. Rather, the museum exemplifies what I am calling an Alter-Native conception of self-determination. It can be seen as one of the many ongoing experiments with alternative sovereignty.

It is as if Palestinian identity, community, and rights as the native inhabitants of the historic lands of Palestine are more and more assumed and embraced as the responsibility of every Palestinian individual and community to assert. The nation-state has lost its special place in the political imagination. Although compelling critiques of NGO-ization in post-Oslo Palestine lament the depoliticization of activism, the Palestinian Museum alerts us to something missed by these judgements. De Cesari notes that many of the cultural activists working on museums, cultural centers, and art festivals in the West Bank are either demobilized political activists or people too young to have ever been part of the standard political organizations that mobilized Palestinians.⁷² Even if they have become experts or professionals, rather than political activists, they are still trying to mobilize Palestinians. And they are working hard to represent Palestine and its perspectives on the world stage. No one has given up on Palestinian rights to their land. No one has abandoned their identities as Palestinians.

Are we then witnessing the emergence of a new social, ideological, and political configuration—not tied to standard party or faction politics or ideologies, or to conventional power politics; not shy about invoking the international languages of human or even indigenous rights; suspicious of all the technologies of governance and rule; and cynical about the nation-state form? This may be a more democratic form of politics. It is more gender inclusive than the earlier nationalist and anti-imperialist forms, even if the struggles are carried out differently by different classes and communities in wildly differing situations, with more dire consequences, of course, for some than others.

To consider the political potential of this museum, guided by the comparisons and solidarities opened up by the move of thinking Palestine in terms of settler colonialism, I want to return to the Museum of Anthropology in

71. In April 2018, for example, the Palestine Museum USA opened in a business park in Connecticut, the project of a single dedicated Palestinian entrepreneur. The Museum of the Palestinian People found a home in Washington D.C. in 2017 but began as a traveling exhibit in 2015.

72. See De Cesari, *Heritage and the Cultural Struggle for Palestine* (Stanford, Calif., 2019), pp. 21–22.

Vancouver whose welcome plaza had made me uneasy. What I did not realize as I naively interpreted the “recognition” and “hospitality” of the Musqueam people as a sign of their having been made unthreatening to this settler state (a fate I dreaded for Palestinians) was that the new welcome plaza was, like those imperfect recognition rituals of Australia, the result of First Nations activism.

The norms for museological practice put in place in the UBC Anthropology Museum were, I later learned, the result of a contentious struggle that roiled the museum world in 1988, set off by a call from the Cree First Nation to boycott an exhibit called “The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples” at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta. The exhibit was set to coincide with the Winter Olympics, and its mission was, according to Kelsey Wrightson, to “celebrate the richness of Aboriginal cultures and to educate the public” (“L,” p. 39). The objection was that the Shell Oil Company had been invited as the sole corporate sponsor of the largely government-funded exhibit. Shell had been drilling since the 1950s in Lubicon territory. The crux of the problem was the land-based claims of indigenous communities.

The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples was set up to respond to the boycott. The Museum then pioneered the new best practices recommended by this task force in 1992. The three recommendations were: “increased involvement of Aboriginal People in the interpretation of their cultures, repatriation of artifacts and human remains, and improved access to museum collections” (“L,” pp. 40–41). Canadian museums began to seek out Indigenous voices to integrate into display texts and exhibition curation and to honor requests from source communities. Some have hailed this as “the point of departure for the postcolonial project of museum reform” (quoted in “L,” p. 39). Wrightson argues on the contrary that the “exhibition and the institutional responses it elicited can also be read as the nascent settler-colonial politics of recognition in Canada” (“L,” p. 39) and, following Coulthard, charges that museums in Canada still have not recognized the ongoing asymmetries of white settler power embedded in the paternalism of “giving voice” to indigenous groups or inviting community “collaboration” (quoted in “L,” pp. 44, 46).⁷³ Her accusation is “that the task force response to the boycott transformed the Lubicon’s land-based political claims into more easily accommodated cultural claims” (“L,” p. 47).

Unlike the Canadian and other museums that now field demands by indigenous people for inclusion, the Palestinian Museum does not need to give voice or invite community participation, two key recommendations of the

73. See Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*.

task force. Doumani's concept of a "mobilizing cultural project" continues to shape much of what goes on in the museum. The digital platform launched in 2018, called *Palestinian Journeys*, is described as "an online portal into the multiple facets of the Palestinian experience, filled with fact-based historical accounts, biographies, events, and undiscovered stories" highlighting "the active role of the Palestinian people in crafting their own history."⁷⁴ Those who created it are reaching out to the different groups who also are telling Palestinian stories and intend the platform to evolve to include "user-generated content."⁷⁵ The massive archiving project the museum has undertaken is similar—locating and digitizing endangered Palestinian photographs and documents from individuals and organizations.

But in the spirit of imaginative transposition, we might pose a final question as a provocation: What if the Palestinian Museum were to seek to activate the third "best practice" recommended by that Canadian Task Force and itself demand "repatriation"? De Cesari describes the Palestine Archaeological Museum that was set up in Jerusalem during the British Mandate (expanded and renamed the Rockefeller) as the first Palestinian *national* museum.⁷⁶ When Israel occupied Jerusalem in 1967, it appropriated the Rockefeller as a division of the Israel Museum.

This dilapidated and now largely inaccessible formerly colonial museum contrasts with the vibrant promise of the new Palestinian Museum, independent from any form of state control and defying the distinction that James Clifford made in his characterization of Northwest Coast museums in Canada. He divided these museums into two types: cosmopolitan and tribal. The UBC Anthropology Museum is an example of the first, having the goal of preserving human heritage for the public. The second type, he argues, aims at local audiences and is enmeshed in local meanings, histories, and traditions. These are politically oppositional.⁷⁷ The Palestinian museum is both.

De Cesari's poignant description of her visits to East Jerusalem's Rockefeller Museum in recent years opens up the political potential of repatriation

74. The Palestinian Museum, "Palestinian Journeys," www.palmuseum.org/projects/e-platforms-1

75. Faris Giacaman, email to the author, 4 Feb. 2018.

76. See De Cesari, *Heritage and the Cultural Struggle for Palestine*. This was not the first museum in Jerusalem—The Imperial (Ottoman) Museum had opened in 1903, and Charles Ashbee and the Pro-Jerusalem Society established a museum at the Citadel in the early 1920s; see *The Other Jerusalem: Rethinking the History of the Sacred City*, ed. Rashid Khalidi and Salim Tamari (Washington, D.C., 2020).

77. See James Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C., 1991), p. 225.

claims like those now being made by so many native and indigenous peoples. Noting “the yellowed cards in otherwise mostly empty cases, reading ‘Temporarily removed’ or ‘On temporary exhibit at the Israel Museum,’” she explains that “these objects were transferred long ago to West Jerusalem’s Israel Museum, among other institutions” and reframed as Israeli heritage.⁷⁸

Some archaeological objects that appear on the website of the Israel Museum still carry in their labeling evidence of their provenance in military occupation. They are linked to the Staff Officer for Archaeology (SOA) in Judea and Samaria (the Zionist name for the West Bank). This official also jealously guards storerooms in Sheikh Jarrah of artifacts plundered from sites in the West Bank and Jerusalem since 1967. Some are on permanent loan to the Israel Museum; others go on temporary loans elsewhere. Like most of the archaeological objects on temporary loan from the Rockefeller Museum, however, they are exhibited in the galleries of the Israel Museum without indicating their provenance. Despite the Staff Officer’s vague assurances to journalists that Israel is adhering to international protocols for safeguarding, protecting, and nonremoval of cultural artifacts in war or occupation, artifacts that are loaned out for exhibits get absorbed by the Israel Antiquities Authority. They would be hard to distinguish from the rest now, rendering hollow pledges to return this cultural heritage in future final status negotiations, chimerical as they are.⁷⁹

For Palestinians, these archaeological objects are not important to their rights claims, which are based on historical and ongoing presence. But for Zionists, archaeology is a lynchpin of claims to be ancient and biblical and thus to belong. Israeli looting of artifacts from Palestinian territory and incorporation into their museums and heritage is a clear instance of settler-colonial appropriation. That is what would make demands for repatriation of archaeological objects so symbolically resonant.

78. De Cesari, *Heritage and the Cultural Struggle for Palestine*, p. 14.

79. On the return of West Bank and Gaza Strip artifacts, see Ziv Stahl, *Appropriating the Past: Israel's Archaeological Practices in the West Bank*, Dec. 2017, alt-arch.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Menachsim-Eng-Web.pdf. Stahl outlines the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and other relevant conventions; see pp. 7–8. In a July 2007 research paper produced for the S. Daniel Abraham Center for International and Regional Studies, the estimate given of the number of sites excavated in the West Bank and greater East Jerusalem by Israeli archaeologists since 1967 is about nine hundred. They note that the Staff Officer presents Israeli policy as “consistent with the stipulations of the Hague Conventions” and “devoted to the protection and salvage of antiquities threatened with destruction due to looting, construction, military operations etc.,” but they also note the contradictory loan policies (Raphael Greenberg and Adi Keinan, *The Present Past of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Israeli Archaeology in the West Bank and East Jerusalem since 1967* [Tel Aviv, 2007], pp. 17–18). See also Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground*.

Ahmad Sa'di had argued that the commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba showed the "refusal of the victims to disappear and to leave the past buried."⁸⁰ Now, just past the seventy-second anniversary, the embrace of the settler-colonial framework in scholarship and the concomitant activation of multiple projects for and about and in the name of a Palestinian people signal a continuing refusal to disappear or to let the matter of colonial dispossession drop.

A demand for repatriation of the community's archaeological patrimony to the Palestinian Museum could be just one more way to publicize the injustices and illegalities of the settler state. At the same time, it would affirm solidarities with other indigenous groups who are making similar demands from colonial-national museums as they also refuse the jurisdiction of settler states. The demands for full acknowledgment of the founding colonial violences that determined and continue to determine the destinies of prior or native peoples are at the core of the settler-colonial paradigm. It is the way the struggles in Palestine are being refigured and realigned by engagement with the political concept of settler colonialism and its solidarities, then, that makes it so compelling a paradigm for our times. The paradigm invites us, finally, to begin to imagine Alter-Native forms of sovereignty and self-determination at this moment of impasse.

80. Sa'di, "Reflections on Representation, History, and Moral Accountability," in *Nakba*, p. 286.