# Repopulating the Emptiness: A spatial critique of ruination in Israel/Palestine

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## Abstract

This article critically examines the notions of spatial emptiness and ruination through their unsettled appearance in the archive of colonization. Focusing on the history of Zionist colonization of Palestine/*Eretz Israel*, it illustrates how the encounter with the land fractures the ideological construct of emptiness and foregrounds the ambiguities found at the heart of the self-assured discourse of Zionism. Though there is an established corpus of scholarship that deconstructs the colonial fallacy of 'the empty land', the actuality and materiality of emptying *processes* and *acts* of ruination remains on the margins of this critical effort. Through a re-reading of key Zionist texts from different historical moments, the analysis sheds light on the contradictions and ambiguities that lie at the heart of the Zionist territorial project and the inherent weaknesses of the hegemonic production of space.

On the night of 9 October 2000, shortly after the violence of the second Palestinian uprising (*Intifada*) engulfed Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, a little known incident took place in Kfar Shalem, a working-class Jewish neighborhood on Tel Aviv's southeastern periphery. Armed with metal bars and hammers, hundreds of Jewish residents from the area began tearing down one of the walls of a derelict mosque at the heart of the neighborhood. A squad of 20 police officers armed with clubs was sent to surround the structure to shield it from the crowd. Buried among thousands of incidents recorded during the violence of October 2000,[1] the Kfar Shalem riot is easily overlooked. Yet this event sheds new light on some of the conventions through which spatial ruination and extreme historical transformation in Israel/Palestine have been analyzed.

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[1] The events were sparked by the visit of then-Knesset Member Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount. A chronicle of events throughout Israel was compiled and analyzed in the Or Commission of Inquiry report (Or, Hatib and Shamir 2003). The events in Kfar Shalem are noted in the Committee's report, vol. 2 chap. 5.

The mosque targeted in the attack is a remnant of the Arab-Palestinian village of Salama, whose residents were forced to flee their homes ahead of an Israeli attack at the end of April 1948. Like other depopulated Arab villages in Palestine, Israeli authorities settled Jewish immigrants in Salama, partly to alleviate the severe housing shortage of the time and to physically block the return of Palestinian Arab refugees to their homes (Morris 2004). In 1949, Salama was incorporated into Tel Aviv's municipal boundaries (Golan 2001), and three years later the Israeli Government Names Committee assigned it a new, Hebrew name – Kfar Shalem (Kadmon 1994). A youth club was opened in the Salama Mosque, but was relocated in 1981, after which the building was gated and locked. According to one strand of critical analysis examining Israeli spatial politics, the transformation and eventual closure of the mosque are yet another example of Zionism's orchestrated effort to radically alter the physical and symbolic Arab landscape of Palestine, to erase and reconstruct its history and memory according to strict ethnonational principles (as argued, for example, in Benvenisti 2000; Dalsheim 2004; Masalha 1997; Ram 2009). What, then, triggers such an onslaught against an abandoned building, a presumed locus of erasure and amnesia?

While the Salama Mosque may have stood abandoned and disused, the decades that passed, as well as clear efforts by official bodies to transform it did not erase its Arab history and cultural significance.[2] The Jewish rioters had no doubt about the building's Arab history, and they experienced no collective amnesia about its symbolic meaning. In field work I conducted in the neighborhood in 2006-2009, interviewees repeatedly identified the building as 'The Mosque', and could identify its history with the pre-1948 history of Salama (Leshem 2010a). The unsettled presence of a vacant building that attracts such fierce and violent emotions illustrates the deceptive nature of seemingly-empty spaces: despite being the subject of physical ruination and

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[2] This official effort was directed primarily at Israel's Jewish population. Palestinian-Arab communities, both those displaced within Israel after the 1949 Armistice Agreement and those made refugees in the West Bank, Gaza and neighboring countries, have developed counter forms of commemoration and documentation of historical knowledge, which are not discussed in the framework of this article (See: Davis 2011; Khalidi 1992; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Slyomovics 1998).

efforts to re-inscribe their cultural significance, such places often continue to haunt dominant spatial discourse and politics.

Critical scholarship of spatial transformation in Israel-Palestine is laden with references to the Zionist trope of the empty land, its numerous variations and diverse articulations. Though this trope has been factually discredited, notions of emptiness and erasure continue to linger in critical scholarship revisiting the formation of ethno-national space in Israel-Palestine and the fate of Arab cultural and physical geographies. As violent and extensive as this process may be, I would argue that the notions of emptiness, erasure and spatial annihilation cannot be taken at face value if we wish to better understand the complex ideological and discursive forces that take part in the production of space. Looking beyond the skewed rhetoric of a settler society, this article analyzes concrete spatial technologies of power employed to shore up what is inherently an unstable and contested foundational fantasy. It sets off by revisiting key Zionist texts documenting the colonization of Palestine/*Eretz Israel* in the 19th and 20th century.[3] This return to the Zionist archive traces instances in which the encounter with the land fractures the ideological construct of emptiness. It exposes the ambivalent discourse regarding Arab spaces seized by Israel in the 1948 War, in which the notion of 'empty space' appears increasingly unstable, often conveying contradictory meanings and exposing deep ideological and political uncertainties. This critical revision illustrates the paradox of Zionist efforts to eradicate physical presences in a land that was supposed to be empty in the first place. Understanding emptiness as an *ongoing process* and replacing the ruin by the *acts* and *outcomes* of ruination highlights the unfinished effort to produce a homogeneous ethnonational space in Israel/Palestine and consequently, the fractures which appear in this hegemonic power structure.

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[3] Although some references are made here to contemporary spaces in Israel, this article does not deal directly with the most obvious expressions of contemporary ruination in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. There are clear correlations and interrelations between the spatial discourse of early Zionist colonization and the practices employed in the solidification of Israel's occupation in the West Bank and Gaza since 1967 (e.g. Kimmerling 1983; Shapira 1992). However, it is beyond the limited aims of this article to fully account for the geographical, historical and political contingencies that dominate these environments.

**Ruins and Emptiness: An analytical framework**

Though closely interrelated, ruination and emptiness, the two notions that stand at the heart of this discussion, are not synonymous. The common designation of ruins as desolate spaces provides the quintessential image of what has vanished and has long decayed. In some cases, the ruination of matter and meaning goes hand in hand, disuse gradually leading to the erosion of historical and cultural significance. Yet at least since Romanticism, ruins are also evocative remnants of a grand past, a sign of ancestry and heritage. The ruined object, Kathleen Stewart notes, takes on a meaningfulness or presence more compelling than the original, fusing the mythic with the everyday (1996, page 93). Indeed, material decay can become a trigger for renewed interest in a site's historical significance (Hoorn 2009). What makes ruins so pivotal to ideologically-driven processes of spatial transformation is their seeming "elastic" quality, their availability to be de-signified, emptied of their previous meaning and in turn, designated new meaning. In this sense, emptiness is not simply a result of a building being in ruins, but itself becomes a form of ruination, a mechanism that relegates to insignificance certain spatial phenomena and particular histories associated with them. As several cases discussed here show, emptiness is also an awkwardly indeterminate phase in the ideological and political reorganization of space. Viewed as a failure rather than an opportunity, empty space attests to unfulfilled productive potential, not only in economic terms, but also when considered as part of a national-territorial mission founded on ideals of land redemption and the renewal of territorial sovereignty. The tensions and contradictions apparent within these terms are indicative of the struggle to neatly situate them in a coherent narrative aimed at establishing the cultural foundations and political agenda of Zionism.

The opening of Israeli archives since the late 1970s produced a series of seminal historical accounts that challenged hegemonic Zionist historiography of events surrounding the establishment of the State of Israel and the 1948 Arab-Jewish War. But this article's particular critique of Zionist spatial politics and discourse owes much of its analytical impetus to two

bodies of scholarship that significantly expand the epistemological and methodological scope of historical-political research. The first situates the Zionist project in Palestine and the state of Israel within a settler-colonial framework. Distinguished from metropole colonialism, settler colonies were not primarily established to extract surplus value from indigenous labor. In Patrick Wolfe's formulation, they are rather "premised on displacing indigenes from (or *re*placing them on) the land" (1999, page 1). This typological distinction significantly sharpened the analysis of Zionist ideology, institutions and policies from the late 19th century and well into the present day. Despite its relations to both Ottoman and British imperial metropoles, Zionist colonization never relied on a narrow bureaucracy governing a large indigenous population, but sought instead to expand its control of land, encourage mass Jewish immigration and to provide employment that ensured settlers a European standard of living.

The settler colony paradigm proved especially useful for scholarship probing the structural logic of Zionism and its territorial rationale.[4] As a settler society, Zionism cultivated a unique attitude toward the land, which exceeded the functional dimensions of territory, labor relations and governing institutions. Gabriel Piterberg's (2008) thought provoking work shows that the material facets of Zionist colonization cannot be fully understood without considering their reliance on discursive and ideological realms, which gave intellectual credence to the Zionist political agenda and assisted in solidifying its hegemonic status. The master narrative of Zionism, he contends, is based on three intertwined tropes (2008, page 94): The first of these is the 'negation of exile', which establishes continuity between an ancient past of biblical Jewish sovereignty, and a present that renews it in the resettlement of Palestine. The second is the 'return to the land', which enables Jews to re-enact the biblical story of Exodus and salvation of a desolate land. This presumed emptiness of the land was not physical, but signaled a Zionist view that refused to acknowledge any meaningful or authentic history that was not related to a Jewish

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[4] See for example Gershon Shafir's (1996) analysis of the early phase of the Jewish Labor Movement in Palestine, Oren Yiftachel's (2006) critical exploration of the ethnic foundations of Israel's political geography or Meron Benvenisti's (2000) evocative account of the eradication of Palestine's Arab cultural geography.

past. Finally, only through the return to the land will Jews be able to resolve the anomalous state of exile and 'return to history'. In other words, territorial sovereignty becomes the condition for rejoining the history of civilized peoples. In this settler narrative there is little room for an indigenous presence; Palestinian Arabs, Piterberg posits, were treated as part of the natural environment, relegated to passive objects to be freely acted upon. Importantly, this discursive and physical erasure of Arab presence was not only a consequence of particular historical contingencies, but the very condition for the creation of a stable Zionist historical identity and a coherent sense of collective purpose. Given the immense political and ideological investment in the creation of such spatial emptiness, recognizing the persistent indigenous presence within the narratives of colonization suggests that the foundations of Zionist settler discourse and its spatial politics were far less rigid than often portrayed in critical analyses of the Jewish national project.

The relationship between settler colonial critique and postcolonial theory is not obvious. Both postcolonial and settler critics opposed the coalition of such different (post-)colonial entities, citing historical, political and structural differences that set the two models apart. Piterberg seeks an even sharper distinctions when he argues that the "study of settler societies is not at all a subaltern studies project. It does not seek to salvage and reassert the voices of the dispossessed, nor does it adhere to a post-colonial methodology or register" (2008, page 57). Johnston and Lawson (2000) rightly warn against the exclusion of settler colonialism from postcolonial analysis, and the dismissal of postcolonial critique by settler critics is equally unhelpful. I would argue that in fact, the overlap between these two critical projects offers important insights into the formation, perpetuation and contestation of settler space. Methodologically, postcolonial scholars have paved the way for a unique reconsideration of settler colonial archives as sites of epistemological and political anxiety, rather than merely skewed and biased sources that establish and preserve rigid hierarchies.[5] This contribution

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[5] The work of Ann Lauran Stoler (2008; 2009) was especially pertinent in the formulation of this paper's analytical framework. There is a well established corpus dealing with the inherent anxieties and fantasies that make up settler

expanded the available reading of colonial texts and our consequent understanding of power relations within these ideological and political projects. Similarly, a critical reconsideration of colonial authority has been a hallmark of postcolonial theorists who challenged simplistic portrayals of an omnipotent colonizer. This was not only an effort to draw attention to multiple forms of resistance to colonial hierarchies, but a refined understanding of the ambiguities and contradictions that were inherent to the colonial condition itself. Exploring the unfinished production of space and the inherent instability of settler narratives through the analytical prism of postcolonial theory need not blur the distinguishing characteristics of settler colonialism. Indeed, as I demonstrate, reasserting the persistent presence of the colonized at the heart of settler narratives heeds to one of the main critiques of settler-colonial logic, which rejects the hegemonic effort to deny the indigenous role in shaping the collective identity of the settler nation.

Zionist narratives consistently struggle with the notion of emptiness, and efforts to define ruins with any degree of consistency prove equally frustrating. The texts analyzed here illustrate a repeated effort of Zionist thinkers and officials to resolve, or at least find ways to circumvent these inherent paradoxes. The sources drawn upon in this paper widely range in style and historical periodization, and their individual authors are often associated with opposing poles of the Zionist ideological spectrum: For example, the deep philosophical and existential misgivings of early Zionist figures like Ahad Ha'am and Yossef Haim Brenner, which I discuss in the first part of this article, seemingly share little with the practical determination of political figures like David Ben Gurion or the bureaucratic language of clerks debating the fate of Arab villages emptied in the war. Similarly, the analysis explores texts and speeches that constitute the canonical pillars of the Zionist archive, but also includes sources that document the seemingly parochial dimensions of colonization, like a 1950s propaganda booklet or a mid-level Foreign Ministry memo. Covering a variety of registers and historical periods, relatively unknown sources

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colonial archives, covering diverse geographical cases from German South West Africa (Noyes 1992) to Australia (Carter 1987; Jacobs 1996) and Canada (Mawani 2009).

alongside major ideological statements, expands the analytical spectrum and enables a more comprehensive appreciation of the pervasive nature of these unresolved categories across the Zionist archive. At the same time, this return to the archive of Zionism ought to help critically assess some of the prevailing scholarly accounts of the Zionist project in Palestine, which too often overlook the complexity and contradictory nature of these spatial categories.

**Encounter**

'Land without a people, for a people without land': this slogan has become a popular target for critical accounts of Zionism's territorial aspirations and its attitude toward the Arab population of Palestine. Yet this slogan has long been a crude political cliché; its circulation in the first decades of the 20th century among Zionist enthusiasts was part of an attempt to gloss over one of the shaping experiences of Jewish immigration to Palestine, namely, the shattering collision between idealistic pioneering dreams and the mundane actualities that make up the experience of colonization. Indeed, in the writings of those who sought to realize the Zionist settlement dream, the sentiment of the slogan (though rarely the slogan itself) already appears as battered propaganda, scorned for the false impression it helped create. As early as 1914, Moshe Smilansky, a Zionist farm owner, writer and one of the founders of the agricultural colony of Rehovot, described how "from the first moment of the Zionist idea, the Zionist propaganda described the land to which we were headed as desolate and forsaken, impatiently waiting for its redeemers". Smilansky, who later worked closely with Zionist institutions like the Jewish Agency, noted that this propaganda created a false "feeling that Palestine was a virgin country" (quoted in Shapira, 2000, page 58).

Similar sentiments are also traceable in the writings of more prominent Zionist figures. In a compelling confession-like account, the Jewish writer Yosef Haim Brenner captures a critical moment that has often been marginalized in the accounts of the Jewish immigration to and colonization of Palestine:

Who can imagine the pain of the unfortunate intelligent Jew who comes here, desirous of a different life, more wholesome, filled with physical labor, the fragrance of the fields – and who, after a few days, realizes that the dream was false, that the land already belongs to Arab Christians, that our farmers are but farmers in the abstract, and that there is no hope here for our people? (Brenner, 1924, page 153)

With typical candor Brenner describes the awakening from the false dream shared by Zionist idealists who came to Palestine only to realize that the biblical 'land of milk and honey' was already owned and farmed by others. What is striking about this passage is not so much the sober awakening but the bleak portrayal of the distance between a collective fantasy and the concrete reality Brenner encounters, the gap between the physical experiences of the land and those 'farmers in the abstract'.

Brenner was not alone in admitting to this devastating contradiction between ideological fantasy and material reality. As early as 1891, one of the forefathers of the Zionist movement, Asher Zvi Ginsburg – often known by his Hebrew penname *Ahad Ha'am* ('a man of the people') – returned from his first journey to Palestine, which inspired the writing of his famous polemic essay, "Truth from Palestine". The essay, which appeared in the St. Petersburg Hebrew paper *Ha-Melits*, openly disavowed the imigrationist premises that dominated early mainstream Zionism. The essay was met with fierce rejoinders; some even accused Ahad Ha'am of defaming Jewish national efforts in general and the Jewish colonizers in Ottoman Palestine in particular. Indeed, the essay sets off by shattering readers' expectations, contrasting the hope of a dreamt 'wonderland' with the despair of settler reality:

After many years spent contemplating and imagining the land of our fathers and the rebirth of our people in it, I have now finally been privileged to see with my own eyes the subject of my dreams, this land of wonders which captivates the hearts of multitudes from all peoples and all lands. I spent about three months there. I saw its

ruins, the remnant of its life in the *past*. I observed its miserable condition in the *present*, but I paid particular attention to its *future*, and, everywhere I went, one question was always in the forefront: in the end, what is our hope here? (Ahad Ha'am, 2000, page 160, emphasis in the original)

The moment of encounter between dream and land appears as a moment of crisis, in which the powerful prism of biblical Orientalist fantasy famously described by Said (1978), Rabasa (1993) Mitchell (2002) and others, is shattered by a place that bears no resemblance to such imaginings. It is not simply a realization that the dream – the bucolic space waiting to provide the stage for a romantic national play – proved false. What is perhaps more alarming for Ahad Ha'am is the fracturing of a teleological historical course that leads the progression of Jewish life from a biblical nation ("the land of our fathers") to diasporic decline, and finally a revival of Jewish national life in the Land of Israel. The reality of life in "the land" – or more precisely, "its ruins" – undermines the ability to fulfill Zionism's fundamental settler ethos of 'returning to history' through the return to the land. As briefly noted above, the physical return to the historical homeland of the Jewish people was more than a colonial search for productive spaces for the extraction of material resources. The very fundamentals of the Zionist narrative of redemption were at stake: In temporal terms, the promised future is supposed to deliver one from the miseries of the past and the present. As Shai Ginsburg noted in a brilliant reading of Ahad Ha'am's essay, the three temporalities merged into "a continuum marked by ruins and a wretched existence" (Ginsburg 2009, page 185). Furthermore, the spatial antithesis posited between the *here* of Ottoman Palestine and the *there* of exilic lands of Jewish residence – the "negation of exile" – is also fractured. The land that was supposed to resolve 'the Jewish problem' of exile eroded the fundamental binaries (past/future; here/there; exile/sovereignty) that supported Zionism's ideology and political agenda.

The tension of spatial representation – the gap between the word and the world – is essential for understanding the distress expressed by these texts. Postcolonial scholarship has often scrutinized the textual construction and sustenance of the colonial *imago mundi*. Edward Said, for example, uses the notion of "textual attitudes" to describe the human tendency to fall back on a text when uncertainties seem to threaten one's equanimity, so much so that the text "acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes" (Said 1978, page 93). Refining Said's formulation, David Bunn suggests that the colonial encounter with landscape generates "an exaggerated form of *anaclisis*, or 'propping' of one landscape paradigm upon another (Bunn 2002, page 144). Despite the terminological differences, both reflect a broader agreement that writing the land (through cartography, travel journals or landscape painting) asserts a system of control long before European colonizers first set foot on the physical ground of 'discovered' territories, and continues to perpetuate similar paradigms of dominance and control long after. Conversely, the writing of Brenner and Ahad Ha'am, I would argue, captures a more complex dynamic in which the authority of the text seems unable to withstand the encounter with the actualities of colonization. The colonial writing of space appears here not as the exorcism of spatial ambiguities (de Certeau 1988, page 134) or as the erasure of contesting images, but as yet another site where such ambiguities leave their mark. Attentively reading the spaces of encounter reveals the actuality of colonial experience: the fragmentation of consistent narratives and the penetration of these complexities into seemingly homogeneous forms of representation, the very texts that lie at the heart of the Zionist archive.

In one of the most important critical studies of spatial transformation in Israel/Palestine, Meron Benvenisti coined the term "white patches" to describe the physical and discursive mechanisms that prevent the Arab landscape from entering the space of Zionist ethno-national discourse: "Arab communities" he writes, "towns, villages and neighborhoods had no place in the Jews' perception of the homeland's landscape. They were just a formless, random collection of three-dimensional entities" (Benvenisti 2000, page 56). But at the end of that same paragraph,

Benvenisti goes on to claim that, "The attitude of the Jewish population toward the Arab landscape – physical and human alike – was a strange mixture of disregard, anxiety, affection, superiority, humanitarianism, anthropological curiosity, romanticism and above all, European ethnocentricity". The reduction of such a plenitude of interests and diversity of motivations to all encompassing notions of 'white patches' or to the common trope of 'empty land', is illustrative of the broader analytical need for a more nuanced approach to the contradictory actualities of colonized space in Israel/Palestine.

**A Densely Populated Emptiness**

The moment of encounter can hardly be confined to the first waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine and repeatedly appears in the archive long after the establishment of the state of Israel.[6] Yet the gradual adoption of the ethno-national state as Zionism's dominant framework[7] demands particular attention to the role of state narratives in shaping cultural perception of national space.

A booklet issued in 1962 by the Israeli Information Administration, an official body that domestically communicated government policies, provides a stark example of a national effort to transform so called desolate space under the guise of productivity and utilitarian exploitation of resources. In perhaps a less obvious manner, this text exposes the potential threat identified with spatial emptiness. The booklet, which was distributed in thousands of copies around the country, describes the reality in Israel's northern periphery after the 1948 Arab-Jewish War. It focuses particularly on the vast tracts seized in the war and the consequent settling of Jewish immigrants in new agricultural settlements. It then continues to argue that after the war,

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[6] In his first visit to the West Bank after its occupation by Israel in 1967, Yossef Weitz, who served for decades as director of the Jewish National Fund and led its forestation activities, echoed similar sentiments in his diary when he witnessed the achievements of Palestinian farmers: "The more I look closely, the more ashamed and embarrassed I feel comparing "our" Jerusalem mountains to their [ the Arabs'] Hebron mountains. We, who use steel (large tilling machines), have training, huge budgets, and expensive water, have not achieved anything so flourishing. We are culturally and practically inferior by comparison, and all because they are people who work the land, and that land is their sole livelihood, and are far from being that" (quoted in Segev 2008, page 426)

[7] As opposed to bi-national or even anti-national visions that emerged in earlier Jewish debates as a response to the rise of Zionism.

An important economic factor – land – was suddenly found in relative abundance. On the other hand, wide spaces were now desolate – which enhanced Israel's security problems. The solution was found in agricultural settlement: land was abundant and could be utilized. New settlements will boost agriculture, provide food for the population and prevent the security risks that emerge from empty spaces. (Israeli Information Administration 1962, Chapter 1)

The Israeli critic Yitzhak Laor describes this text as the "imperative of the national narrative" (1995, page 156), laying down the territorial and discursive conventions on which the Israeli national ethos would be founded – an ethno-national collective of frontier farmer-warriors. On the face of it, the IIA text serves a straightforward purpose of reorganizing a chaotic post-war reality into a comprehensible scheme of progress and productive accumulation. This dynamic closely resembles what Deleuze and Guattari describe as capitalist de- and re-territorialization, i.e. the removal of existing significations as a precursor to their re-definition in terms more conducive to capital accumulation (2004). In the case of the IIA text, however, the extraction of resources from the land is not the primary goal of re-territorialization, but a practical solution to the potential threats empty space poses to territorial control. The emptiness imposed on the Arab landscape links two functions – space as productive resource and its role in an ethnonational political agenda – and seeks to defuse any ability to contest the natural and neutral settler consumption of land. But the process of "inscribing the emptiness" – to borrow Simon Ryan's (1994) phrase – is not a straightforward erasure or a simple disregard. A closer examination reveals, for example, how the IIA booklet refutes one of the fundamentals of settler colonial logic described here earlier. In a rather candid manner, the text portrays the Jewish agricultural settlement in Palestine – long celebrated for its doctrine of productivisation and novel social philosophy – as a colonizing tool in the formation of a settler project. Although this critique has been central to scholars exploring the settler-colonial foundations of Zionism like

Piterberg (2008) and Shafir (1996), its matter-of-fact presence in a government propaganda booklet is noteworthy. Instead of a repressive trope in the service of colonial narrative, emptiness invites a wealth of critical readings into the inherent instability and contradictions of the colonial text.

In their study of radical ethno-cultural transitions in Israel, Hannan Hever and Yehouda Shenhav note that the hegemonic act of erasure is simultaneously a process of re-inscription, and both "leave numerous traces in the broad margins that surround the separation line" between Arab and Jewish space (Hever and Shenhav 2011, page 70). What is exposed in this process is a 'discursive labor' that disrupts the seamless transition from one (political or cultural) category to another. Consider, for example, the way the IIA booklet creates a causal relation between 'desolate' spaces and a 'security threat'. While noting that the territory seized in the 1948 War was "empty of human presence", it says nothing about the material presence of over 400 Arab villages and hamlets that were depopulated during the war.[8] Some were demolished during or shortly after the war, but many, particularly in peripheral regions, were still intact well into the 1960s (Shai 2006). The booklet remains intentionally vague on whether these material remnants were enough to instigate such anxiety and sense of threat. Yet these ambiguities in the narration of empty space testify to the challenge of bridging the gap between the neat national imagination and the complex realities on the ground.

Israeli official discourse in the first years of the state sought to consolidate two seemingly contradictory positions regarding the presence of Arab physical remains. On the one hand, an encryption of the devastation: The country's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, insisted that the Zionist task was to "resurrect the ruins of a poor and devastated land … that stood empty for two thousand years" (Dorman 1986, pages 73-74). For Ben-Gurion, ruins and destruction are meaningful only insofar as they signify the ancient Jewish kingdom and act as a

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[8] The exact number of villages that were depopulated during the war is disputed, ranging from 356 (Kimmerling 1983) to 531 (Abu-Sitta 2000, page 7). The estimates vary because of the differing definitions of what constitutes a village, as opposed to, for example, a seasonal agricultural settlement (Fischbach 2003, pages 3-4; Golan 2001, page 12).

signifier of teleological return to the land after two millennia of exile. This is not a *tabula rasa*, but an effort to dissociate the ruins from their cultural, political and historical context.[9] In other cases, when their Arab origins are acknowledged, the physical remains of villages are widely deemed a 'security threat', which in turn justifies their demolition. Numerous villages were razed to fight Arab 'infiltrators', mostly refugees who tried to make their way back into Palestine from neighboring countries and found shelter in the abandoned houses. Yehezkel Sahar, the first Chief of the Israel Police, stated in his memoirs that his request to demolish approximately 50 villages circa 1952, "considerably eased our war on the infiltrators" (Sahar 1992, page 98). The apparent contradiction between Ben Gurion's "desirable emptiness" and Sahar's perceptions of emptiness as threat highlights the IIA booklet's ability to slyly gloss over this tension by trumpeting the national mission of settlement and appropriation. Even so, the recurring sense that emptiness is never wholly devoid of 'things' that continue to carry an unsettling meaning, illustrates its importance for the critical historiography of colonization.

**Unsettled Ruins**

Early Israeli official descriptions of Arab landscapes seized in the 1948 war often oscillate uneasily between emptiness and ruination. This conflation of terms established the perception that whilst such spaces were not materially void, they lacked human quality that would make them historically and culturally significant.[10] Critical scholarship of spatial transformation in Israel often argues that the re-inscription of the land enabled the erasure of indigenous or subaltern presence by a hegemonic national narrative (Falah 1996; Fenster 2007; Kadman 2008). Yet some of the core examples of the mainstream Zionist narrative illustrate the difficulty of

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[9] The selective dissociation of ruins from their historical origins was certainly not a Zionist 'invention': Rashid Khalidi, a historian of Palestinian nationalism, notes the uproar that followed the 1910 Zionist land purchase in al-Fula, which also included the ruins of a Crusader castle. Two articles reprinted widely in the Arab press of the time protested that the sale handed over a "fortress" supposedly built by Saladin, and as such, a valuable part of the nascent Palestinian national heritage. "The important thing was not whether the ruin had originally been built by Saladin; it was that these newspapers' readers believed that part of the heritage of Saladin […] was being sold off (Khalidi 1997, page 31).

[10] This resembles a familiar colonial practice that de-humanizes rather than categorically ignores native spaces (Noyes 1992, page 196).

reconciling the ruined post-war landscape with an unambiguous sense of emptiness. A speech by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion at a conference of the Israel Exploration Society, a Zionist group formed in 1914 to conduct archaeological and historical research in Palestine, offers valuable insights into this tension:

> We are not complacent about the fate of our land, even the part in our control. Foreign conquerors have made our land a desert; dilapidation is extensive and vast regions have been deserted. The war of independence expanded the emptiness. And we must know: … We will not keep hold of the Negev plains, the costal sands and the bare mountains for long. Maintaining our independence forces us to build ruins, to restore wastelands, to settle abandoned areas and populate them in the nearest possible time. (Bulletin of the Israel Exploration Society 1949, page 120)

Note that the territory gained during the war is not described as an abstractly empty space, but as concrete places that have been subjected to a prolonged process of ruination. The emptiness, as Ben-Gurion describes it, is full of ruins and waste. In another essay two years later, Ben-Gurion described more clearly the selective nature of this ruination process: "The war of independence brought ruin and destruction on thousands of settlements, and when the state came into being *there stood only the Jewish settlements* established in the last seventy years and a few which were not Jewish" (quoted in Kletter 2006, page 46, emphasis added).

Ben Gurion's matter-of-fact depiction of the spatial outcomes of war and its aftermath suggests that contrary to common contemporary criticism of Zionist discourse, there was never a ring of silence around the Arab spaces seized by Israel during the war. In fact, reading 'along the grain' of the archive, rather than against the warped reality of official knowledge (Stoler 2009), reveals a prolific debate about these sites and deep uncertainties about their fate. For example, one official in the Israeli Foreign Ministry warned in 1957 that,

The ruins from Arab villages and Arab neighborhoods, or intact blocks of houses that have stood deserted since 1948, have difficult associations that cause considerable political damage. During the past nine years many ruins were removed, whether by development projects or by climatic factors; but those that survived protrude even more so in contrast with the new landscape. (Dothan 1957)

According to this memo, special attention should be given to highly visible Arab remnants such as those found in "Jewish settlements, in important centers or along major routes of transportation". The dilapidated state of these sites left, according to the letter, a "very depressing impression". To avoid this, "it would be proper to remove the ruins that cannot be restored, or that do not have archaeological value". In most cases, 'removing' meant razing the buildings, though in some cases, those responsible for the process showed some concern as to the consequence of their actions. In a 1963 meeting of the Committee for Locating and Preserving Sites in Jerusalem, one member offered an alternative to the complete destruction of villages:

I suggest that we perform a survey, and act as they do in Switzerland, where, to preserve old cities, a plan of every old building is made regardless of whether it is destined for destruction or preservation. Photographs or plans of each building are filed. Architectonic parts of Arab houses destined for destruction could be entered into an Arab Museum, to be established in the future, after the houses are destroyed. The photographs will show what existed at the place that is going to be destroyed. Otherwise they will say about us that we have ruined all the antiquities barbarically, without even leaving documentation. (The Committee for Locating and Preserving Sites in Jerusalem 1963)

It seems that what separates the 'civilized' Swiss from the barbarian is the inclination – perhaps even obligation – to document, chart and archive the process of ruination. It is not the actual act of demolition or destruction that ought to be reprimanded, but the failure to record and provide evidence of what was and is no more. Placing relics in glass cases and archiving architectural charts are the thresholds of so called civilized ruination, which is inflicted for 'progressive' purposes, as opposed to the random, unsophisticated acts of barbaric violence. At least in its programmatic form, the proposition was never endorsed.

Finally, it is important to remember that Arab space was not only debated in the abstract. In the immediate aftermath of the war, former Arab villages and neighborhoods were one of the first solutions devised to house the masses of Jewish immigrants that arrived in the country. Many of the 'ruins' were made into homes, some by a predetermined government plan and others by Jewish 'squatters' or 'invaders' who sought housing during the severe shortage of the early 1950s. This practical incorporation of the Arab landscape into the 'Israeli space' involved complex legal and political mechanisms[11] and played a key role in shaping Israel's internal system of cultural and social stratification.[12] The focus here, however, is directed at particular instances of ambivalence and uncertainty that accompany the state's effort to internalize these places into the Israeli *spatial discourse* through what is a highly intimate encounter – inhabiting the house of the 'enemy'. Through two examples I wish to argue that even as its inhabitants changed, the Arab ruin – as a physical object and discursive trope – maintains a surprising ability to resist neutralization and absorption into a homogenous national space.

During a 1949 government debate on efforts to encourage Jewish immigration, the Police and Minorities Minister Bechor Shalom Shitreet pointed to the dire condition of Jews

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[11] Several Israeli scholars have extensively analyzed this process, but the work of Oren Yiftachel, Alexander Kedar and Geremy Forman provides both a broad historical perspective and a rigorous theoretical framework that situates these mechanisms in the political context of an ethnocratic regime. See for example: Forman and Kedar 2004; Kedar 2003; Yiftachel 2006.

[12] In the past decade there has been a noticeable increase in scholarly attention to the cultural and social geographies of former Arab space. Though Palestinian writers have led the way from the 1980s (e.g. W. Khalidi 1992), more recently Israeli and international scholars have turned to analyze the fate of Arab architecture and space, and their broader impact on Israeli culture and society. See: Benvenisti 2000; LeVine 2005; Slyomovics 1998; Yacobi 2009.

from Arab and North African descent who moved into former Arab in the northern city of Tiberias in April 1948.

> The immigrants who came to Tiberias live in ruins, without windows or doors. It is currently the warm days, but what will we do in the rainy days? For some reason these immigrants were not fortunate enough, and they are called the Moroccan and North-African immigrants. … The government speaks a lot about immigration and its encouragement, but the result is still that people flee the country. They came here and were let down. (Shetreet 1949)

One can trace in this statement the echoes of Brenner's account quoted above. If Brenner's description exposed the fallacy of the heroic agricultural conquest of the empty land, the minister's statement illustrates how the ruin became part of the Israeli experience of the new land and how the Arab ruin refuses to be neutralized or relegated as the sign of the Other. Resettling the ruins meant that the symbolic division between Jewish and Arab space was being eroded, undermining the national pretence of producing a new spatio-cultural order. As a result, the Arab ruin testifies to the precariousness of the territorial and symbolic order sought by the nation state, questioning the fundamental ability to fuse people and land. The fact that the old city of Tiberias was completely razed soon after, does not undermine the critical value of this sort of investigation. Rereading the narrative of colonization reveals the ruin, even if fleetingly, as site of political ambivalence and ideological tension.

However, while some saw the ruins as embarrassing reminders, decrepit objects that stain the image of a progressive modern space or as a security threat, others 'discovered' a wholly different kind of ruin. The establishment of Ein Hod, a Jewish artists' colony in the depopulated Arab village of Ein Houd, has been cited as a striking illustration of the way ruins were incorporated into an ideological order that obscured the native script of possession. Susan Slyomovics suggests that in the eyes of the Dadaist artists who came to live in Ein Houd, decay

and destruction were acts of nature, and debris were "both primitive and ancient features of the landscape" (1998, page 51). Haim Yacobi further posits that, "the discovery of the oriental architecture successfully produced a neat 'historical collection' that served as a controlled instrument for organization of the collective knowledge and memory" (2008, page 111). While the ruin was indeed pivotal in creating an ideologically-selective anachronism – appropriating Arab landscapes to prove the continuum of Jewish historical presence in Palestine – a closer analysis reveals that this was not a simple case of cultural erasure.

The group of artists that arrived in 1953 was preceded by two failed attempts to resettle Ein Houd by the Israeli authorities. First, a group of Algerian and Tunisian Jews who were directed to the village were transferred to an alternative site, which was more accessible for the establishment of agriculture (Asaf 1953, pages 177-80). Following this, a Jewish group that survived the attack on Kfar Etzion by the Jordanian army in May 1948 resided in the village for a short period until the establishment of a new village in 1950 (The Settlement Department 1949). These failures record the experience of those who did not share the artistic 'discovery' of an archaic, Orientalist hamlet in the semi-demolished houses of Ein Houd. Ostensibly, other needs were prioritized: for the North African immigrants the ability to develop means of livelihood took precedence; and one has to assume that for the survivors of Kfar Etzion, who lost friends and family in the 1948 War, resettling in a depopulated Arab village did not carry a bucolic, romantic appeal. The experiences of groups who were not part of the Israeli political and ideological mainstream suggest that ruined Arab space was not simply "a neat 'historical collection'" as Yacobi claims, but rather a juncture of heterogeneous meanings and associations.

**Conclusion: Rebuilding meaning in ruined space**

Despite the comprehensively devastating impact colonization projects have had on the lived place of many ethnic groups subjected to it, postcolonial critique has equipped us with important

legacies that underlie the critical impetus of this article. The first regards a refusal to accept colonial hegemony as a hermetic power structure. Even in its most extreme manifestations, the practices used to impose and sustain systems of domination and control were, more often than not, "something of a collective improvisation" (Richards 1993, page 3) rather than a neatly organized and faultlessly executed master plan. Numerous settler projects have been shown to have struggled with ideological contradictions, delusional imaginings of failed leaderships, and disenchanted settler communities. It is therefore surprising that Zionism's ideological inconsistencies, political failures and bureaucratic uncertainties remain largely under-theorized and play no substantial role in the ideological and geographical history of Israel/Palestine. Bringing these ambiguities to the fore is a crucial step in articulating a more nuanced critique of cultural hegemony and the landscape of power it produces.

Almost every critical contribution to the debate over Zionism and the production of space in Israel refers to the notion of hegemony. Presumed to be easily appropriated and manipulated, land and landscape were indeed instrumental in building collective identity and political consent. Domestic space, hiking trails and cityscapes were all implicated in a grand ethnonational project. To oversimplify Gramsci's complex argument, such forms of 'common sense' and 'spontaneous' support distinguish hegemony from other forms of repressive coercion (Gramsci 1971, page 323). Yet, as Williams importantly reminds us, the critical challenge is to emphasize that hegemony is "not singular; indeed that its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token, that they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified" (Williams 2005, page 38). Scrutinizing the basic categories used to legitimate the creation of hegemonic regime, as this article has done, is the first step in rejecting hegemony's totalizing pretence. Rather than homogeneous and consensual, the ambiguity of emptiness and ruination exposes the deep uncertainties and contradictions that are inherent in the production and perpetuation of ethno-national spatial regimes. As the analysis demonstrates, the very agents of this hegemonic project

could not agree on the meaning of these fundamental terms or settle their contradictions. The slippages and ambiguities that plague the symbolic domain of spatial production signal the volatility of the hegemonic structure and point to critical instances in which it is forced to defend and reassert its ideological foundations.

With some degree of generalization, the critical corpus addressing the Zionist history and the production of space in Israel/Palestine is still dominated either by a scholarly effort to explore the construction and operation of Zionist hegemony or by an interest in various forms of counter-hegemonic resistance. The critique presented in this article suggests a third dimension for critical inquiry. Challenging the facile notion of emptiness and exposing the unresolved nature of ruined space delineates the boundaries of power and the spaces where its operation remains incomplete. This is not simply a prelude for the emergence of resistance, but a more subtle and nuanced understanding of Israel's ambiguous landscape of power- the symbolic ideological space and the inherently unstable myths on which Zionism was founded, and also the profoundly heterogeneous landscape that still features the traces of the violence involved in the national integration of people and land. The association of Zionism with a pure settler colony may well be traced to formative moments in the development of Zionist institutions in the 1920s (Lockman 1996; Shafir 1996), but the argument here illustrates the immense difficulty of successfully recreating this 'purity' in spatial terms, either in the physical landscape or the discourse surrounding it. Once again, this should not be confused with the familiar postcolonial focus on ambiguity and ambivalence as hallmarks of subaltern resistance, though such acts of subversive opposition may certainly seek to take advantage of these zones of indeterminacy. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the immense analytical potential to illuminate the foundational tensions that shaped a deeply conflicted settler identity and its relation to a space that continues to signify its Arab past and resist the homogenizing forces of the ethno-national state.

Finally, repopulating the emptiness also involves an ethical-political rejection of hegemonic control over the basic terms through which contestation can be articulated.

Anticipating Foucault's emphasis on discursive practices, Gramsci realized that "every language contains the elements of a conception of the world" (Gramsci 1971, page 325). In one of its most complex and effective functions, hegemony seeks to control the available vocabulary and mark the boundaries of permissible discourse, discouraging the clarification of social alternatives and making it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their discontent, let alone remedy it. Emptiness, in this context, operates in a similar fashion: it describes the outcome of violent ruination, but also severely hampers the ability to acknowledge any signs of violence perpetrated. Depriving those harmed from meaningfully articulating their loss or presenting evidence of damage they suffered is perhaps the most extreme expression of hegemonic restriction.[13] Exposing the resilient ambiguities of emptiness and ruination therefore constitutes a scholarly intervention that counters the silencing effects of an ideological vocabulary, and at the very least, maintains the potential for alternative structures to re-appropriate and repopulate these unfinished spatial histories.

## Acknowledgments

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[13] This resembles what Jean-Françoise Lyotard defined as Differend, a "case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. If the addressor, the addressee, and the sense of the testimony are neutralized, everything takes place as if there were no damages" (Lyotard 1996).

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