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Demonstrating the desired future: performative dimensions of internally displaced Palestinians' return activities

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine the activities of internally displaced Palestinians as performative resistance against the settler-colonial dispossession. Since 1948, when close to 800,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes in the process of establishing the state of Israel, return has been a key political objective of the displaced. By concentrating on the recent activities organized by internally displaced Palestinians, I scrutinize the power of performative practices in challenging present conditions of continuing displacement. Based on interviews, participatory observation, and published source material, I show how the return activities concentrating on the lost villages do not only commemorate the past but also utilize it in performative claim-making in achieving the desired future. I make the argument that the performative dimensions of claiming work to undermine the settler-colonial reality by issuing a call for a right to belong and for a more just future.

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1. Introduction

There is nothing left of Wadi Subala, and nothing replacing it. The sandy field in the northern part of the Naqab desert does not signal that a village once stood there and defined the landscape. But as we arrived there on an exceptionally hot Thursday in May 2016, thousands of people had already gathered for the March of Return. They defined the landscape by carrying Palestinian flags and signs that bore the names of the more than 500 Palestinian villages emptied in 1948. It was a powerful experience to witness Palestinians singing, chanting, and waving Palestinian flags, a sight I had not very often encounter inside 1948 borders.¹ On that hot day in 2016, the corporeal presence of the displaced people who moved on the land and narrated their presence through chants and speeches rendered Palestinian history vivid, reminding the landscape of the past that had been obliterated, of the settler-colonial logic to displace and replace.²

Unlike in imperial expansion driven by economic gains or other sorts of advantages, settler colonialism is marked by a settler logic of elimination, which through dispossession and displacement moves towards the end of the building of a new society without the presence of indigeneity (Elkins and Pedersen 2005; Veracini 2015; Wolfe 2006). As Patrick Wolfe's has famously pointed out, in

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settler colonialism, the colonizers do not only come to stay but to replace (Wolfe 1999, 2, 2006). In the temporal move of replacement, undesirable pasts that are incommensurate of national memorization are erased, the ‘genocidal theft’ (Wolfe 1999, 33), ‘the founding violence of a settler community’ (Veracini 2006, 68) is actively forgotten and the historical and contemporary presence of the dispossessed ‘other’ obscured. Such forgetting extends necessarily to the material environment where settler colonialism inscribes itself on the landscapes it produces: ‘[s]ettlers routinely and programmatically set out to reorganize the landscapes they encounter’ (Veracini 2015, 22; see also Banivanua Mar and Edmonds 2010, 2–3). Hence, the removal of people is followed by the erasure of place, resulting in a gradual obliteration of the traces testifying for the lives lived by those dispossessed. This was brought into full view on the March of Return where the former inhabitants of Wadi Subala protested for a return to a village that has been physically erased from the landscape of modern Israel.

Such material erasure is, in fact, commonplace in Israel–Palestine: forests of pine trees have been planted in places of Palestinian villages, covering the ruins of the demolished houses (Kadman 2015; Long 2009; Leshem 2016); Arabic place names have been replaced with Hebrew ones (Benvenisti 2000); and archaeological sites have been re-designated as solely Hebrew-Jewish (Abu El-Haj 2001). Through these symbolic and material practices, the landscape has been altered profoundly, enacting the claiming of lands exclusively for the settler nation (Järvi 2019) and effecting the continued dispossession of Palestinians. For those dispossessed, as was evidenced in the March of Return at Wadi Subala, recalling history and belongingness to the land becomes a way of challenging the elimination and erasures of settler colonialism and issuing a call for a different future, by reminding the state of Israel of their continuing existence.

The objective of this article is to explore the activism of internally displaced Palestinians, such as the annual March of Return, as performative claim-making that challenge the settler colonial present by demonstrating the future those engaging in them hope to achieve. By leaning on the geographies of performative commemoration (e.g. Dwyer and Alderman 2008; John and Carlson 2016), and Judith Butler’s writings on performative claim-making (Butler and Spivak 2007; Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Butler 2015), I contemplate how these activities performatively re-appropriate the landscapes from which Palestinians have been dispossessed by making, if fleetingly, the Palestinian past and present being visible, and claim a right to history, present and future in those spaces. I draw from three cases of such activism: the March of Return already referred to above; the *Oudna*-project [our return]; and the return to the village of Iqrith. Each of these activities engage with the landscapes of dispossession in diverse ways: the *Oudna*-project by virtually regaining a destroyed village with a plan for return, the return to Iqrith by bringing life back to an emptied village, and the March of Return by corporeal assemblage of Palestinians to a destroyed village site. Focusing on the activities at these sites by placing them in the context of performative geographies, I argue that attending to their performative dimension enables us to acknowledge the potential of political claims for return Palestinians are making in the context of settler-colonial elimination. I stress further that by appropriating and making visible their past places of dwelling, future-oriented demands for Palestinians’ right to belonging are established.

The paper proceeds in three sections. First, I introduce the historical context in which the internally displaced Palestinians live and claim rights. In the second part, I place the activities within the discussions of commemorative practices in theorizations on performative geography. In the third and final section, I turn to the aforementioned return activities and scrutinize how they exemplify the performative potential of re-appropriating landscapes of dispossession in claiming the right of return.³

2. The position of internally displaced Palestinians

The historical background for Palestinian claims for return is formed by the events of Nakba, ‘the catastrophe’: in 1948, close to 800,000 Palestinians were dispossessed from their homes in the process of creating the state of Israel (e.g. Masalha 2012). By mid-1949, the majority of the ~500 emptied Palestinian villages⁴ were either completely demolished or at least partly in ruins (Morris 2004,

342). The majority of those who were forcibly displaced became refugees as they crossed to adjacent countries or were left behind just created and enforced borders, but displacement happened also within the 1948 borders that comprise the areas that became recognized as Israel by the international community. In a 2013–2015 survey, the number of internally displaced within Israel stood at around 384,200, out of the ~1.5 million Palestinians within the state (BADIL 2015). All Palestinians within the borders of 1948 experienced the drastic reconfiguration of their lived environment and rapid disintegration of Palestinian society due to Nakba (Sa'di 2002), but for the internally displaced, the rupture was – in many ways – even more intense as they also had to carry the consequences of being displaced. The Palestinians who remained within Israel's 1948 borders were granted citizenship in 1952, but already before that, they were placed under a military rule and the villages emptied in 1948 were declared closed military zones and movement between the remaining villages was restricted until the military rule ended in 1966 (Pappé 2011; Robinson 2013). To this day, internally displaced Palestinians are prevented by the Israeli state from returning to live in their ancestral villages.

Until 1966, Israeli Independence Day was the only occasion for the internally displaced to visit the sites of the emptied villages, as on that day, the restrictions of movement imposed by military rule were momentarily lifted. When military rule ended in 1966, visits became more commonplace, and were facilitated somewhat by the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967 after which more displaced Palestinians were able to gain access to the lost areas (Ben-Ze'ev and Abur-iya 2004). Similarly, Palestinian refugees living in southern Lebanon were able to apply for visit permits between 1982 and 2000, when Israel occupied the southern part of its northern neighbour. Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, in turn, have had the chance to visit Israel-Palestine since 1994 when Jordan and Israel signed a peace agreement.⁵ At present, however, the possibilities to visit villages have again declined due to the checkpoint system and Separation Wall built within the West Bank, the isolation of Gaza and an ever-stricter and laborious permit regime (Berda 2018). Those with most access to their villages of origin, then, are the Palestinians of 1948, the internally displaced Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship.

According to a representative of ADRID, the Association for the Defence of the Rights of the Internally Displaced Persons, a turning point in the relations between the internally displaced and the wider Palestinian political movement was the Madrid Conference in 1991. The case of the internally displaced was not raised by the Palestinian delegation, which alarmed the community. Hence, a network was created in 1992, and a few years later, ADRID was established to represent internally displaced Palestinians. The Oslo Agreements signed with Israel in 1993 and 1995 further eviscerated the collective nature of Palestinians' political struggle, as the established Palestinian Authority came to officially represent only those living in the occupied areas, and the right of return, earlier at the centre of Palestinians' political actions, was effectively suspended from negotiations by postponing it to the final status agreement, which until this day has not materialized. Recent years have witnessed further overriding of the call for the return on the macropolitical level: the Palestine Papers, leaked to public in 2011, revealed that the Palestinian leadership was ready to abandon the refugees subjective right of to return (Al Jazeera 2011), while in 2012, the president of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas publicly denounced his personal right to return to live in his ancestral village (Sherwood 2012). Furthermore, for many Palestinians, the political talk on return feels unanchored to their everyday concerns that are more related to economic survival, living in protracted rightlessness and/or enduring the violating occupation than to claiming a right that, unfortunately, feels ever more distant in its actualization. The political centrality of the return has thus been compromised by the precarious conditions in which most Palestinian refugees live as prolonged refugeehood combined with the deadlock situation has directed attention to solutions that could 'bring immediate relief of their dire living conditions' (Allan 2014, 210). While refugees do maintain their claim for return, their immediate attention is often directed to more achievable futures (Järvi 2021). It is in this wider political context that grass-roots actions of the internally displaced have been organized.

3. Performative claim-making: challenging the settler colonial with commemorative presence

Here, I turn to explore the ways academic discussions on performative practices and corporeal engagements with landscapes connect with the activities displaced Palestinians engage in. The geographical literature on performativity (e.g. Rose-Redwood and Glass 2014; Gregson and Rose 2000) reveals possibilities for actors to (re)make space. In the context of this paper, I find thinking with the literature on performativity of memorial practices useful (Courtheyn 2016; Dwyer and Alderman 2008; John and Carlson 2016; Alderman and Inwood 2013), as they help in highlighting how spatial commemoration becomes a strategic component of the activities discussed in the next section, but also as they often stress the future-orientedness of such activities (e.g. John and Carlson 2016). In fact, the justification for the chance can be derived precisely from the past injustices that are evoked in commemorative practices (Courtheyn 2016; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004).

I further anchor my analysis on performativity as political practise, deriving from Judith Butler's writing on performative claim-making (Butler and Spivak 2007; Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Butler 2015). I suggest that via return activities Palestinians are claiming the right to place and belonging (Butler 2015, 60), challenging the settler-settler-colonial dispossession by making their presence visible and thus demanding greater justice (Butler 2015, 25). In these activities, space becomes a mean 'through which [...] political action may be enacted' (Jeffrey 2013, 31): spaces of dispossession are appropriated for claiming a right to belonging (Butler 2015, 59–60; Butler and Spivak 2007, 30–31, 58–60) by reactivating prior political spaces through socio-spatial performances (Glass and Rose-Redwood 2014, 254). These socio-spatial performances occur 'within the conditions of possibility brought into being by the infrastructure of performativity' (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007, 408). It is thus important to note that performativity is not the same as individual performance, but performativity is 'the citational practices [...] which enable and discipline subjects and their performances' (Gregson and Rose 2000, 434). In this article, again, the attention is on plural political actions that constitute embodied performances that, following Butler, in themselves can issue performative claims for social and political chance.

For Palestinians, the centrality of performative commemoration is enforced by the absence of material mnemonics: the majority of the emptied villages were physically destroyed, the ruins are left unmarked, and obscuring the Palestinian history in the land is a well-documented tactic in Israel (Benvenisti 2000; Kadman 2015; Leshem 2016; Peled-Elhanan 2012; Ram 2009). Lorenzo Veracini (2006, 69) notes that before the emergence of the voices of the so-called Israeli new historians in the late 1980s, 'Palestinian existence was practically denied, the history of Palestinian prior to Zionist settlement and Israeli-Arab conflict overlooked, accounts of Palestinian dispossession systematically disregarded'. Though commemorative monuments exist within Palestinian localities (Sorek 2015), destroyed villages remain unmarked. When material monuments and official memorial sites are incompatible with Israel's erasure of Nakba, corporeal performances, such as marches and visits, become an important means for Palestinians to animate a silenced history of the landscape. As Gareth John and Kelsey Carlson have noted,

[m]emorial practices in unmarked and unremarked landscapes, in everyday or banal places, present the potential for memorialization and counter-memorialization independent of the need for permanent and monumental material markers and untethered by the limitations of their site-specific geographies. (2016, 994)

This 'untethering of limitations' took place, for example, at the March of Return, where the thousands of people who gathered, waved banners and chanted political slogans made the landscape anew, (re)asserted an embodied presence on the land by animating its Palestinian history.

Though Mandate Palestine had gone through gradual urbanization in early twentieth century and also urban Palestinians were displaced in 1948 (see Hasan 2019; Taraki and Giacaman 2006), it is the landscapes of emptied and often destroyed rural Palestinian villages that have occupied a central position in Palestinians' national and political ethos. Though generations internally

displaced have grown up without ever living in them, they have been reproduced as the symbols of both dispossession and belonging, and are invoked in the claim for return. In adjacent countries, the connection to the village of origin has been maintained in the Palestinian refugee camps by spatial and discursive practices of commemoration (Culcasi 2016; Davis 2011; Khalili 2004; Peteet 2005; Ramadan 2009), but for the internally displaced also corporeal encounters with lost lands has been a way to maintain the bond. For them, the villages constitute ‘commemorative landscapes composed of social and physical landmarks’ that ‘provide spatial and temporal coordinates for remembering’ (Davis 2017, 71). The March of Return, and the visits to the destroyed villages in general, can thus be considered as performative memorial practices that create the landscapes that are ‘constituted, shaped, and made important through the bodily performance and display of collective memories’ (Dwyer and Alderman 2008, 173–174).

Efrat Ben-Ze’ev and Issam Aburaiya (2004) have noted that for Palestinian refugees and internally displaced travel to a village of origin can take the form of a pilgrimage. They discuss how such visits began as family events, organized to meet acquaintances, eat, and hear stories from village elders, but that in more recent years, the visits have become a way of mobilizing internally displaced people in a form of activism (see also Gutman 2017, 27–41). Manal, an employee of *Baladna*, an Israeli-Palestinian youth organization that is one of many NGOs organizing the visits, emphasized during an interview, how it is extremely important for people to visit the places and ruins of the destroyed villages, to ‘bond’ with the land.

All the Palestinian issues [are] about the place, about the land. You can’t talk about this without living it, or seeing it, building a direct relationship with this place, the land. So, it’s so important to go there, to bond with this land, with its memories, to rebuild and to listen. Even to smell the smell there.

It is made clear here by Manal that the connecting with the land is a central element of the return. In fact, this was most starkly illustrated to me during an interview in a West Bank refugee camp where I was told a story of an old woman who asked a person to bring soil from her village of origin to be buried with on her death. The relationship with landscapes is thus central in commemorative forms of performativity. When material appropriation is impossible, a more abstract uptake on landscape is used to articulate belonging (such as in the desire to be buried with earth from one’s village of origin). This was evident further in an interview with Yasser, a man living in Arroub refugee camp in West Bank, who described how the faces of Palestinians testify that they belong to the land: he saw that the wrinkles and furrows on their faces of elderly Palestinians, as well as their complexion, resemble the landscapes of Palestine. This equation between the facial features and the Palestinian landscape is used to restate indigeneity and belonging, and thus narratively perform the connection to the land violently denied by the state of Israel.

The majority of displaced Palestinians do not have the opportunity to engage in corporeal commemorative practices on the landscaped of depopulated villages, and thus to challenge Israel’s reconstruction of the landscapes, but a representative of *Baladna*, Manal, nevertheless insisted that it is precisely the corporeal relationship with the land that forms the basis for a ‘holistic Palestinian identity’, connecting all Palestinians regardless of their current locations. Manal saw that the material encounters with village landscapes, a privilege of the internally displaced, are especially important for the third and fourth generations. As she stated, ‘you can’t create a bond with these youth groups [with whom *Baladna* works] ... and talk about bonding and creating a holistic Palestinian identity without seeing [the villages]’. In addition to corporeal bonding, the visits have an educational dimension as those who lived through Nakba share their personal experiences and tell stories of the everyday life in the villages. The representative of ADRID whom I interviewed at their office located in a Palestinian city near Haifa explained that

They [those visiting the villages] listen stories from the old men and women, how life looked like in the village, what did they do in the past, what did they eat, what they planted. The social and economic life, and sometimes about the political life there before Nakba.

The storytelling that occurs in the destroyed locales animates ‘the lives and works of the past generations’ (Ingold 2000, 189) back to the landscapes from which their dwelling has been obliterated. These practices of storytelling enable the younger generations who have not lived in the villages themselves to connect with the life that unfolded in them before Nakba. The stories perform *spatial narratives of history* (Azaryahu and Foote 2008), taking part in the commemorative place-making by providing snapshots of the lives that were lives in those settings in which the stories are performed.

While these visits to villages can be considered educational and communal as they teach Palestinian history and help in constructing a Palestinian identity, they are also made visible to a wider audience, and it is this dimension in which the performative claim-making is amplified. The claims for change always direct towards the future, and Owen Dwyer and Derek Alderman have noted that memorial landscapes reproduce ‘social ideas about the past’ and hence reflect to how future is shaped (Dwyer and Alderman 2008, 167). This type of spatial memorial practises are, by no means, inherently emancipatory nor do they necessarily enhance social justice, as memorialization can naturally be utilized also by those, whose objective is to justify exclusive or racist politics by performing the past from a perspective that serves their aims. In settler-colonial settings, official memorial landscapes are usually produced by the settler state that needs to perform its sovereign over the territory (Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Mountz 2010; Salter 2011), but simultaneously for Palestinians, spatial commemoration can provide sites for resistance. The activism around the right to return, I argue, utilizes such forms of counter-commemoration and in doing so does not merely stay with the past but utilizes it by performing a desired future. Alderman and Inwood (2013, 187) stress this temporal dimension when they underline how the aim of commemorative performance is not only to change narratives of the past, but to articulate an alternative social future. They continue that

landscapes of memory can be arenas for challenging and potentially redefining the lines of belonging for marginalized groups and are but one avenue activists can take in the continuing struggle for social and economic justice. (Inwood and Alderman 2013, 195)

The emphasis on the future directs our attention to the transformative power that spatial performances can hold. In grasping this dimension of performative commemoration, I find Judith Butler’s writings on performative politics of claim-making particularly useful. Butler has, in fact, argued that a radical politics of chance requires a performative contradiction that poses the challenge to the authority that would preclude the freedom and equality of those who demand them (Butler and Spivak 2007, 66–67). Performative practices thus function as claims, through which the marginalized practice the right they do not yet possess (Butler and Spivak 2007, 63–64), in the case of Palestinians, their inclusion in the recognized history of the land and their equal belonging to its present and future. In discussion with Athena Athanasiou, Butler has further stressed how the performative can enact new, desired conditions for being (Butler and Athanasious 2013, 102), and that performative ‘emerges precisely as the specific power of the precarious – to demand the end to their precarity’ (121).

Hereon, I concentrate on this dimension. By engaging with the villages, Palestinians are not only commemorating the past that is not included to the Israeli version of the land’s history but also performing the right of return on a grass-roots level. In fact, the visits to villages can serve as temporary returns that reaffirm the ‘Palestinian-ness’ of the landscapes (Ben-Ze’ev and Aburaiya 2004) and challenge the ‘Judaization process’ that has been implemented by different state actors (Abu-Saad 2008; Falah 2003; Yiftachel 1999). It is the right of return, I claim, that is brought forth by the interplay of the corporeal presence of the visitors and the destroyed village landscapes. By being in the landscape from which their being is denied, they perform a claim for belonging and call for a right to future in that place. To demonstrate this, I now turn to the three return activities and explore how they perform the desired future by engaging with the landscapes of the lost villages.

4. Performing the return: marching, planning, living

While I have suggested that the return is often anticipated by engaging with the ancestral villages, it should be noted that the role of the villages for the return is not by no means uncontested nor homogeneous, nor are the views on the return in general (Richter-Devroe 2013). For my interlocutors in Palestinian refugee camps, return does not only connote with the past village spaces; it has broader connotations with freedom and justice; to enjoy the basic rights and to be encountered as a human being. Nassim, a third-generation refugee living in Doha, a refugee municipality that has grown next to Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem, defined his view specifically in relation to the traditional role of the villages:

For the elders, they want to be back [in the villages] because they have the image in their minds what is there, but for us [the younger generations], we don't have [that]. We want our right of return. From my perspective, how I define it, it is that I want Palestine to be free, I will choose to stay here or go back. But the right of return means free Palestine and that's it.

For Nassim, return is not only the right to decide where to live after return but to do so in freedom. Nassim's position exemplifies the ongoing negotiations on the meanings of the return, but also for him, the village remains a site to relate to. To further highlight the perpetual nature of the village in demonstrating the return, I now turn to the three case studies that through commemorating the destroyed landscapes by marching, visualizing, and embodying the return, perform a claim for right to a place and belonging from the present-day realities of elimination and dispossession, and call for the end of the settler-colonial rule via a performative implementation of the right of return.

4.1. Marching for recognition, marching for rights

The March of Return is the most important event in every year. The event where people are just going without thinking and being afraid of the police forces or something. It is not a demonstration ... it is an event for every Palestinian; it has now a symbolic meaning. Even though we just go and talk and that's it. Being there in this large number, it is saying something. (interview with Manal, in Baladna).

As mentioned, the tradition of internally displaced Palestinians visiting the villages annually has existed for several decades. It was, however, only in 1998 when ADRID established it as a nation-wide event that has been organized annually on Israel's Independence Day. This synchronized March of Return on an obviously symbolic day transformed the personal visits into a collective performance that now highlights, instead of individual family histories, the shared experience of dispossession. For most families, the March of Return did not replace family visits altogether but became an additional and more politicized event. Each year, a different destroyed village is chosen as a destination and in 2016 that was *Wadi Subala* in the northern part of the Naqab desert.

One reason for the growth of the March of Return is that for the tens of thousands of participants, the day is a national holiday in Israel, and they are thus free of other obligations. The performative importance of organizing the March on Israeli Independence Day, however, transcends the visibility gained by the amount of people. The organizers recognize that the significance of appropriating the day is that it is 'stating mainly: *your* day of independence is *our* day of catastrophe, Nakba'. Furthermore, marking Independence Day as a day of mourning is criminalized in Israel with the so-called Nakba Law that enable reducing state funding and support from institutions that are 'rejecting the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state' or 'commemorating Independence Day or the day of the establishment of the state as a day of mourning'.⁶ By defining how the Independence Day can and should be commemorated, the state attempts to regulate the ways it can be represented and who is included in the national body. With the March Palestinians thus challenge the narratives of official independence celebrations and assert that the state is founded on dispossession and that Israeli landscape is built on Palestinian ruins. Thus, the March of Return challenges those ways through which the state aims to present itself and can thus

work as a 'performative contradiction' (Butler and Spivak 2007, 66–67) that can – over time – facilitate a political change and challenge the exclusions that are constitutive for the state.

Wadi Subala was the first village in the Naqab to host the March. The representative of ADRID who I interviewed noted that the decision to organize the March in the more remote region was taken regardless of the fact that it would reduce the number of participants. The historical destruction of destroyed Palestinian villages mostly took place in the northern and central parts of Israel, but the current front of dispossession exists in the south, where many Bedouin villages are under threat (Abu-Saad 2014; Nasasra 2012; McKee 2014; Kedar, Amara, and Yiftachel 2018). Gathering in the Naqab was a way to bring attention to Israeli policies – taking place both inside the recognized borders of Israel and in the occupied territories – described as the 'ongoing Nakba' – that the displacement of Palestinians is continuously implemented through Israeli policies of land confiscation, demolitions, and the discriminatory allocation of resources and building rights. The term underlines the structural nature of Israel's settler colonialism, that the 'elimination of the native' is not a one-time event in the past but a permanent component of state structure (Wolfe 1999, 2) – and that not only is the dispossession of 1948 unresolved, but new rounds of displacement are constantly being implemented (Figure 1).

While marching together does not have to imply monovocality, as the assemblage 'holds together so long as the threads that unite are stronger than the tensions that divide' (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2017, 5), The March of Return, and the right of return in general, was described to me as something on which Palestinians have consensus. To underline this, the organizers of the March stressed that no symbols of political parties are allowed in the marches. While some youth wore political t-shirts with communist emblems on them, the only signs one could see in addition to Palestinian flags and official posters of the event were the names of the villages of origin written on



Figure 1. People marching towards the event site of 2016 March of Return. Photo by the author.

pieces of cardboard and carried by the descendants of those dispossessed Nakba. The March itself was only a short walk from the parking lot to a nearby field where a stage had been built and plastic chairs lined to face it. Stalls were selling food, refreshments, Palestinian handcrafts, and postcards that had the names of Palestinian villages written on them in Arabic calligraphy. There were enough people to fill the whole area, mainly Palestinians but also small groups of Israeli Jews and internationals. The atmosphere was electric. People walked around the event site, chatted with each other, and were having a good time. Many had *kufiyahs* wrapped around their shoulders, and some wore t-shirts with Palestinian map and the words 'Nakba day' (*yoom an-Nakba*) on them. The previous evening, I had witnessed people celebrating Israeli Independence Day in the streets of Tel Aviv with parties and fireworks, but in the March of Return, Palestinians had their own celebration. Albeit commemorating the place of dispossession, the march was, in fact, a celebration of their continuous presence in the settler state. In the word of Butler, they were still there, persisting, and demanding a greater justice (Butler 2015, 25).

In *Wadi Subala*, there is hardly anything that would testify for an existence of a village. In many other locations, the sites for previous Marches, ruins still stand as unnamed reminders of the past and can thus be used in proving autochthony and belonging to the land, but the landscape of the 2016 March was empty of such material testimonies. However, memorial practices in such unmarked landscapes present a potential counter-memorialization (John and Carlson 2016, 994). The March of 2016 thus had an even greater impact as a performance as it temporarily marked a landscape that could not be identified as a historic place of dwelling in any other way. Palestinian dwelling was further animated with a leaflet that was distributed in the event. The leaflet describes Wadi Subala's history, location, economy, and the details of displacement of its residents, and tells that the village lands belonged to the Altaiaha tribe and the families living there got their livelihood from agriculture, trade and raising livestock (ADRID 2016). Similar leaflets are published every year, and they are central to recreating lost landscapes. The leaflets continue the tradition of storytelling on village sites and function in a similar manner, describing everyday life in the villages and sharing information that imagines and relates to the destroyed places. Mundane details bring the landscape closer to the people who have not lived them but who are now assembling there to remember and make claims for recognition and rights. The importance of marching to a destroyed village – on top of bringing attention to the ongoing nature of dispossession – was thus that it teaches 'more about Nakba' and about the scale of destruction it brought upon Palestinian lands and dwellings, as was phrased by one of the organizers.

The performative power of the March of Return is that it, albeit temporarily, makes visible the Palestinian past, and brings to the fore the continuing existence of Palestinians on the land. By assembling for the March, Palestinians are exercising the performative right to appear (Butler 2015, 11). By appearing *en masse*, they claim rights that extend even beyond those articulated in the speeches given in the event. The relationship between the landscape and the people, who have gathered to the March, brings forth a claim for history and a recognition. It issues a call for a right to exist as a Palestinian under a sovereignty that discriminates against them and where a mere identifying of a body as a Palestinian undermines its integrity (see Kubovich 2016). By claiming a landscape through the March of Return, the people participating do not merely ask to be included in the current structuring of the state but try to redefine it, to create it anew, and thus introduce an alternative future without the settler-colonial structures. In another settler-colonial context, John and Carlson stress that for Dakota people 'the [Dakota Commemorative] March provides a means for ... not only remember and honour their ancestors ... but actively bear witness to and seek healing and justice from the historical trauma' from an event that is 'tragic and hugely consequential' (John and Carlson 2016, 990). Similarly for Palestinians, while it might not be accurate to speak about healing from a trauma as it is still ongoing, the annual event of March of Return does provide a means to bear witness to the consequences of Nakba by appearing in the places Palestinians were erased from and claim the right to return to those places by enacting the future in which also healing and justice could be possible.

4.2. Planning the return: a blueprint to a desired future

I felt that mentally the return has been implemented just by the existence of such a youth group that did not forget their homeland, their ancestors' homeland, and will never forget it. (Salma Haybi, in *Baladna* 2014, 29)

Planning is 'an inherently optimistic and future-oriented' practice (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011, 3) that aims to change a current situation for the better. I would also describe planning as an inherently performative practice: in plans, a desired version of future is performed with figures, statistics, and blueprints with a hope of their actualization. In the past decade, different organizations in Israel/Palestine have started to address the right of return in this way, by replacing the past-looking commemorations and mourning with more forward-looking activities of planning that centres on contemplating the practicalities. In these practices, the past is not an idealized paradise to be recreated through the return but is used as a ground to build on. Here, I will concentrate on the performative dimension of *Oudna-project* that is executed in co-operation by *Baladna*, ADRID, *Zochrot*, and Arab Association for Human Rights, but similar projects concentrating on the practicalities of the return are initiated also in West Bank by organizations such as BADIL and Campus in Camps.

An important aim of *Oudna-project*, as described by its coordinator Manal, is to change 'the way of thinking about the right of return' and 'to see your village in a different way from seeing it ... to cry about it and seeing demolished houses, it's now like seeing it with a little bit of hope or a vision for the future'. The project objective is 'to train internally displaced youth from 3rd and 4th generation of Nakba to conceptualize, visualize and implement return to their ancestral villages' (Baladna 2015). Youth groups from different villages that took part to the project activities approached the theme from different perspectives, and for some, it proved to be difficult to imagine the future and overcome the traditional ways of thinking the return as an abstraction. Some of the groups succeeded in visualizing how the villages would be after return and produced final assignments that explored their ideas. While in interview with Manal, we discussed how the youth consider that right of return is not going to be easily reached, 'at least in this period, in ten or twenty years', thinking practicalities is a way of taking the initiative in the current political deadlock. It draws the desired future to the present, as is suggested in the words of Salma Haybi quoted above. By preparing for the return, the youth groups are anticipating its implementation and thus performing a condition for it to become reality. Anticipatory actions 'prepare a groundwork for the future to occur' (Bryant and Knight 2019, 28), and while they are part of being in general, here they take a form of political claim. Same as with the March of Return, by planning the return internally displaces Palestinians are performing a right they do not yet possess (Butler and Spivak 2007, 63–64) and in doing so call for its actualization.

While planning can be a tool that in the hands of the colonizer is used in fostering Israeli-Jewish belonging, which in many occasions impoverishes Palestinian communities (Fenster 2004; Yiftachel 1995), it can also be a political action that contests the status quo. By engaging in alternative planning, Palestinians are challenging the official plans executed by the state and, furthermore, performing the desired condition and provoking those in charge to include them to the planning processes. This method was successfully used by Palestinians of 1948 in gaining recognition to the unrecognized Palestinian villages,⁷ which as such were not benefitting from the infrastructures of the state (Schechla 2001). According to the representative of ADRID, these villages were under threat of eviction and destruction, but the villagers gathered together engineers, architects, and other experts and prepared alternative plans, which they submitted to local and national administrative bodies and courts. Planning was part of wider political struggle of demonstrations and other actions, and as a result, many villages, especially from the northern part of the country, managed to gain recognition, after which they got access to basic services, such as electricity and water.

In like manner, planning is used in the struggle to achieve the right to return. The representative of ADRID considered the drafting of plans to be an important form of resistance because they make it possible to show that the implementation of the right of return is possible: 'it's legal, it is legitimate ... its natural, but it's also possible on the ground'. Claims for feasibility of the return has been

introduced also by scholars, who have discussed on possible state models (Abu-Sitta 1997; Shenhav 2012), and civil society actors, who have drafted plans on how the villages, and the refugee camps, would look after the return. Though they might not be able to overcome the ideological obstacles that exist in Israel for implementing the right of return, the plans still create visions on how it could become a reality and, furthermore, negate the abstractness that has characterized the political discussions on the right of return among Palestinians (BADIL 2019).

In *Oudna*-project, a video produced by a group of displaced youths from destroyed village of *al-Ghabsiyya* demonstrates how planning can perform the return by visualizing how the landscapes would take shape. On the place where the village once stood is now a forest planted by Jewish National Fund,⁸ and thus, its lands have remained unpopulated since the villagers' eviction. The Israeli court has ruled in favour of allowing the internally displaced to return to *al-Ghabsiyya* (Wakim 2001), but the army has intervened to prevent the implementation of the ruling, as has happened also in the villages of *Iqrith* and *Kufr Bir'im*, which have gotten similar rulings from court (on these cases, see BADIL 2006, 42–52). As a final assignment for the *Oudna*-project, the youth from *al-Ghabsiyya* produced a video-clip⁹ that visualizes in detail the landscape of the village after the return. The 3D modelling of the village includes rehabilitated old buildings, which are still present in the landscape, but adds also modern infrastructure, green spaces, fountains, and outdoor cafes. The villages are thus not imagined only through the past but include the modes of life that characterize the present and are thus included into the visualized future.

In planning the return, Manal saw that the issue of cohabitation proved to be the most difficult for the youth groups to address. If the village lands have remained uninhabited by Israeli-Jewish communities, as in *al-Ghabsiyya*, the answer was 'simply to return there and that's it'. With the groups from villages that used to be on the lands now occupied by the city of Askelon, the return was imagined happening to those areas which have not been resettled: 'there are Jewish groups and we will be on the other side' was how Manal described the youth's views. The most challenging situation was faced by those, whose village lands are now totally taken by Israeli towns and cities. For some participants, the idea of an Israeli-Jewish presence was so unsettling that they refused to visit their ancestral villages all together.

I have encountered the same reluctance also in Lebanon, West Bank, and Jordan, where it was, understandably, difficult for the refugees to overcome the idea of Israel as an enemy. Rather than interpreting this attitude as denying 'an equal right to inhabit the earth' (Butler 2015, 114, also 111), it should be considered in its rightful context. The situation in which internally displaced Palestinians currently live in cannot be equated to 'a normal' form of coexistence but is defined by settler colonialism that, more often than not, breeds antagonism and hostility (Butler 2015, 121). As Israel is, in many ways, 'fundamentally committed to not recognizing them' (Butler 2001, 97), it would be unreasonable to expect the internally displaced Palestinians to embrace 'the other' who is denying them the recognition. On the contrary, embracing the cohabitation in conditions of dispossession and oppression practiced by the sovereign that privileges those with whom you are expected to share your everyday spaces, can feel unjust and even violating. Nevertheless, the practicalities of return performed by the youth groups aim to visualize a reality in which it would be possible to address also the issues that at the current reality of continuing dispossession and discrimination feel too painful to confront. By viewing planning as a performative practice, it is possible to highlight how Palestinians are not merely trying to gain 'access to what already exists' (Butler and Athanasious 2013, 24), that is, to the settler-colonial state built on multiple hierarchies, but rather to transform the place by challenging the idea of exclusiveness that now defines Israel as a state.

4.3. Performing the return by dwelling

The villagers are not waiting for Israel to respond to their grievance, they are actively showing Israel what the return would look like. (Mohammad Zeidan, interviewed by Jonathan Cook 2013)

The third case through which I show the relevance of a performative approach is the return to the village of *Iqrith*. In August 2012, a group of internally displaced youth, tired of waiting for the actual return to be implemented, ‘returned’ to live on its lands. The expulsion of the *Iqrith*’s inhabitants in 1948 was implemented within operations aiming to create an ‘Arab-less’ border zone in which villages near the borders of Lebanon and Jordan were targeted and emptied from their inhabitants. The residents of *Iqrith* had already surrendered to Zionist forces when they were forced to leave with a promise that they would be allowed to return after the situation had settled. When the promise was not kept, together with other border villages in comparable situations, they appealed to Israeli authorities, and in 1951 Israel’s Supreme Court ruled in favour of their return. Nevertheless, a few months after the ruling was passed, the Israeli army destroyed all buildings in *Iqrith* except for the village church. Since then, the villagers have continued to appeal to the Israeli court system to get leverage for the implementation of the first ruling.¹⁰ It is hence important to acknowledge that *Iqrith* does not represent a claim for the return merely on a level that concerns all refugees but is a more specific right granted by Israeli legal bodies. ARDID’s representative explained that though several political leaders have endorsed the rulings, the army and state continues to deny it in a fear that it would set a precedent which would encourage other internally displaced Palestinians to claim similar rights. Since the 1970s, the village has been a locus of political activities, which try to pressure for implementing the made decisions (Gandolfo 2017; Ryan 1973), and the recent action of return is a continuation to this struggle.

Since the return to *Iqrith* was initiated, the case has gained fair amount of international attention, as journalists have become interested in the activities organized in the village (e.g. Kestler-D’Amours 2013; Sherwood 2015; Strickland 2015). The international visibility has strengthened the significance of the action since it is crucial for bodies to assemble in ‘a zone visible to media coverage’ (Butler 2015, 9–10) for then they hold a greater potential for change than a purely local action. However, the location is of great importance in challenging dispossession, and in *Iqrith*, it is clear that the relation between the bodies and locality in which they assemble is crucial for the claim they are making. Nevertheless, the media coverage has helped in making their presence known, which is central for the activities organized by the internally displaced as their struggle is for the right to exist (Wakim 2001). The gained publicity can also ease the travelling of the event: *Iqrith* can encourage other communities to mimic its action in other locations. The ‘proliferation of event-spaces’ (see Kaiser 2012, 1048–1049) enforces the transformative potential cases like *Iqrith* hold. If an increasing number of villagers adopt the strategy introduced by the community activists from *Iqrith*, then the return becomes a lived reality, rather than an abstract right that can only be longed after while waiting the official implementation. This potential was recognized also by Manal, who saw that *Iqrith* gave the other internally displaced hope, that there could be other villages besides *Iqrith*.

Though the commemorative aspect plays its part in return to *Iqrith* in the same manner as it does in the activities discussed above, what becomes more important from a performative perspective is living itself. Organizing summer camps and religious festivities in *Iqrith*, and the corporeal presence itself, brings life back to the landscapes that were formerly defined by dispossession. In *Iqrith*, Palestinian presence was never entirely removed as former residents continued to bury their deceased to the village cemetery even after their eviction, and burial can be a powerful statement of belonging to the land as it performs the connection between the body and the soil (Fontein 2011). Nevertheless, with the return activities, the descendants of those dispossessed from *Iqrith* transfer the claim for belonging from the inanimate presence of remains to more active presence of moving and working bodies that infuse the landscape with life through their everyday practices.

The presence of Palestinians in *Iqrith* has not been silently accepted by the settler state, and the activists have faced problems from the Israeli Land Administration, which has repeatedly destroyed built structures, confiscated belongings, and uprooted crop and trees. Furthermore, it is only possible for the activists to stay in the church lands, not in the whole village area. Notwithstanding the clear challenges, in *Iqrith*, the right of return is performed in the most concrete sense, by dwelling.

By dwelling in *Iqrith*, Palestinians are marking out ‘a specific region of relations’ (Rose 2012, 759), one that is based on their inclusion to the process of world-building. The performative force of living in *Iqrith* is precisely that it questions the rules imposed by the settler-colonial state that would rather see the villagers to disappear than to be reminded of their continuing presence.

In her article contemplating return to *Iqrith*, Dafta Ben-Shaul (2016, 36) ponders if it is reductive towards activists’ intention to see them as mere performances of return. In contrast, and from the perspective of performativity discussed here, I consider that when performativity is understood as a way of making political claims to counter precarity, dispossession, and forms of elimination, it becomes a creative way of resistance rather than a mere theatrical performance without political connotations. The corporeality of the actions, were it dancing *dabkeh*, planting trees, sitting in the village and listening stories of the past, or just being there, are all performing the Palestinian belonging back to the landscapes. The bodily presence of Palestinians in the village is in itself a form of resistance to elimination, as it claims a right to belong to the landscape from where they have been dispossessed: when your dwelling is denied, the most radical thing you can do is dwell. Through their presence, the descendants of the original villagers are practicing the right they hope to gain, and thus paving way to the actual implementation of their rights, and of right of return in general.

5. Conclusion

For settler colonialism, the main premise is that of elimination. The implementation of elimination has its negative and positive dimensions (see Wolfe 2006, 388) as it is executed by both dissolving the native society and by replacing it with a new one: settler colonialism destroys to replace. Hence also in Israel–Palestine, not only were Palestinians displaced, but their history on the land was obscured and replaced with the one that stresses Israeli–Jewish belonging. The relevance of performative resistance arises from this context of elimination and denial. Through practices covered in this paper, Palestinians oppose the settler society that hopes to see them to disappear: they perform their past, present, and future presence on the landscape, and thus refuse to be eliminated. These performative practices create the contradiction that Butler talks about that by claiming the right to appear challenges the eliminatory exclusiveness of the settler society.

As I have highlighted throughout the paper, return activities do not only commemorate the past but use it in pursuing a more just future. The year 2020 marks the 72 years of the continuing dispossession of Palestinians and the current political reality, quite frankly, does not encourage hope. Nevertheless, in 2016, the atmosphere in the March to *Wadi Subala* was positive, people singing and chanting while carrying Palestinian flags. They were there to challenge their dispossession, to show that Palestinians once dwelt in those same landscapes, and to make it visible that they are still there living on the land. The performative force is not only in their articulated actions; they pose a challenge to the settler-colonial regime by merely being there, by making themselves visible. The power of performance is precisely in its potential to show us how to do and be otherwise as ‘performative is the gap, the rupture, the spacing that unfolds the next moment allowing change to happen’ (Dewsbury 2000, 475). The internally displaced Palestinians are doing precisely that by engaging in practices that through performative claim-making commemorate the erased past, challenge the status quo, and present alternative futures.

Of course, as Judith Butler rightly reminds us, exercising the rights that one is lacking does not mean that one will inevitably achieve them (Butler and Spivak 2007, 64), and in the context of protracted displacement and recurrent injustices that characterize the situation in Israel–Palestine, the transformative power of performances should not be overstated, nor should the intensity in which performative claims for return define Palestinians’ political being. Nevertheless, by calling for return in multiple ways, Palestinians are resisting their exclusion and elimination, and claiming their right to history and future on the land. Landscapes play an important part in this, as the meaning of the actions does not lie only between people, as noted by Butler (2015, 77), but also between people and the places in which the actions are performed. The connotations and power of return

activities would not be the same were they not re-appropriating the places from where Palestinians were once forced to leave. By utilizing those landscapes, either by bodily presence or visual redefinition, the historical presence of Palestinian life is marked back to them and claims for present and future belonging are performed.

In addition to considering Palestinian return activities from a performative perspective, the aim of this paper has been to widen the discussion on Palestinian resistance by bringing the focus on the internally displaced Palestinians living inside the internationally recognized borders of Israel. Though not facing a same level of violence and abandonment as their peers in occupied areas and in the refugee camps in surrounding countries, internally displaced Palestinians nevertheless live under a sovereignty hostile towards them and their presence. The actions of the internally displaced are thus part of the same struggle against settler-colonial dispossession as those of Palestinians' living under occupation or in exile. Notwithstanding the obvious challenges in overcoming Israel's discriminating practices, forms of performative resistance described in this article show a proactive and nonviolent way of confronting the rightlessness and dispossession Palestinians are facing in the present situation.

Notes

1. 1948 borders refer to the borders defined in 1949 armistice line yet in everyday speech, they are referred with the year 1948 as that is the year of Nakba, of Palestinian expulsion. Furthermore, Palestinians living within the internationally recognized borders of Israel are at times referred as Palestinians of 1948 as they are the ones who remained on the areas that became Israel in 1948.
2. The details here taken from the author's participation in the 2016 March of Return.
3. The paper draws from participatory observation to the 2016 March of Return, interviews with activity organizers and published material related to the projects. While not the main material, this article also draws from a wide ethnography conducted in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and West Bank between 2015 and 2016, which explores Palestinian refugees' views on future.
4. The exact number of emptied villages is not agreed on. Benny Morris (2004, 342) and Walid Khalidi (1992, xvii–xx) talk about ~400 villages. Both Salman Abu-Sitta (2004, 71) and Ilan Pappé (2006, xiii) give the figure of 531, which includes the emptied Bedouin villages not counted by Khalidi.
5. However, in my experience, many still refuse make the visit as it would be interpreted as condoning that Israeli officials have the right to regulate the entry.
6. Nakba Law refer to the amendments made in 2011 to Budget Foundation Law and Administrative Affairs Courts Law (Knesset 2011, Budget Foundations Law (Amendment No. 40) 5771–2011. Available in English <http://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/Discriminatory-Laws-Database/English/33-Budget-Foundations-Law-Amendment40-Nakba-Law.pdf>).
7. Unrecognized villages refer to those rural Palestinian localities that were not counted as existing or projected build-up area in Planning and Building Law passed by Knesset in 1965 but whose lands were considered as agricultural and where, thus, dwelling was illegal (see Schechla 2001, 23–24). Summary of the law available at <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/1998/Pages/Planning%20and%20Building%20Law-%201965.aspx>, the whole law (translated in English) at <https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/Discriminatory-Laws-Database/English/07-National-Planning-Building-Law-1965.pdf>.
8. On the role of JNF in erasing Palestinian presence, see e.g. <http://nakbafiles.org/2016/08/31/the-jewish-national-fund-as-a-colonial-entity/>.
9. Oudna-project, [Tašawar al-'awda al-qariyya al-Gabsiyya al-muhajarah – Visualization of Return to the Displaced Village of Ghabsiyya], 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sm3b9HbrjQ>.
10. Iqrit community Association has compiled a chronicle that includes summaries on the court rulings. While in the first three rulings (64/51, 238/51, and 239/51), the High Court of Justice recognizes and orders for implementing the villagers right to return to the village, in the fourth (141/81) and fifth (840/97) rulings, the appeals made by Iqrit representatives did not get backing. The chronicle available at <http://iqrit.net/en/iqrit-case/chronicle> [accessed 23 April 2020].

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