# Uncanny returns in settler colonial state: return, exile, and decolonisation in Palestine/Israel

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Abstract:

In this article, I propose uncanniness as a defining characteristic of return as I explore the settler colonial context of Palestine/Israel, where return has starkly ethno-nationalistic connotations. For Palestinians, return is associated with the liberation of Palestine, while for Israelis, it is part of Zionist foundational narratives. By explicating academic research and biographical literature, I consider how the concept of uncanny can further our understanding of what it means to return in this context, and beyond. Uncanniness brings attention to feelings of disorientation, strangeness, and not-at-homeness, and by approaching return as uncanny, I suggest, it is possible to tap into the volatility of 'being-at-home' and thus unsettle exclusive and essentialist notions of belonging that define settler colonialism. Consequently, the article offers a way to consider return in a manner that gets from nostalgia to a new beginning and, in the settler colonial context of Palestine/Israel, from settler anxiety to decolonisation.

Keywords:

uncanny, return, belonging, Palestine/Israel, settler colonialism, decolonisation

word count: 8964

## Introduction

In the mid-90s, as part of the Oslo Agreements – a peace deal negotiated in secrecy between the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel – some Palestinian refugees and exiles were allowed to return to the West Bank and Gaza Strip to participate in the state-building project. Among them was the writer Hassan Khader, who had left Gaza some twenty years before to join the Palestinian resistance. To do so, he had relocated from Gaza to Beirut from where he had fled to Tunis when PLO evacuated from Lebanon in the wake of Israel's invasion in 1982. When he was allowed back to his native Gaza in 1994, he was disoriented by the place he returned to, writing: 'I did not find my homeland in the homeland. I had changed. The place had changed' (Khader 1997, 88). Upon his return, Khader witnessed how the years of occupation, experiences of the First Intifada, and the turn from leftist nationalism to political Islam had changed Gaza. In those who returned with him, Khader saw the ideals nourished in exile evaporate into fancy titles and a newly acquired sense of self-importance. The Gaza Khader encountered did not correspond with the image built in exile. He continued: 'Exile requires that the homeland be an ideal – perfect beyond endurance. Exile defines the nation. The longer we are away from our homeland, the more memory plays its never-ending game of selection and deletion' (Khader 1997, 88).

What Hassan Khader experienced upon his return is certainly not uncommon. Research has shown that feelings of disorientation, strangeness, unfamiliarity, and even upset often accompany those returning after a prolonged absence (King and Christou 2010, 2011; Morse 2017; Ralph 2012; Wylie 2017). This literature highlights that questions of home and belonging are rarely straightforward among returnees, partly because return does not necessarily fulfil expectations placed on it. As philosopher Janet Donohoe (2013) has suggested, a return can feel disorienting because in commemorative narratives we tend to treat place as

ideal and unchangeable whereas in the actual experiences of return, it becomes evident that place is defined by temporal change that manifests as both inner and outer transformation (see also Risser 2012; Trigg 2012). In one's absence, the spatial reality has altered, and memories have faded and morphed to accommodate the transforming sense of self that has been moulded by the time in exile.

The complexity of return in Palestine/Israel is further amplified by the settler colonial context (Busbridge 2018; Gordon and Ram 2016; Salamanca et al 2012), and it is this connection of settler colonialism and return that I aim to focus on. Palestinians have not only been dispossessed from many parts of historic Palestine and barred from returning, but Israel's actions have created new material, social, and political realities on the ground (Braverman 2021; Falah 1996; Long 2009). This transformation has been part of settler colonial nation-building, in which Palestinians have been replaced by Jews whose emigration to Israel has been facilitated by 'the Law of Return', allowing them to acquire instant citizenship upon arrival to the country (Hochman and Raijman 2022) and, importantly, suggesting Jews to be 'the returning natives' (Mamdani 2020, 266–268). In Zionist narratives, this return has been framed as a negation of exile, as a return to the homeland, or simply as a return home (Pappé 2016; Piterberg 2008; Raz-Krakotzkin 2013; Shohat 2003).

However, as Hagar Kotef (2020) has noted, Israeli-Jewish at-homeness – and even sense of self – is fundamentally based on the violence of Palestinian dispossession and colonisation of Palestinian spaces. Oppositely, for Palestinians, return is a political call that seeks to undermine that colonisation. While research has paid attention to various meanings of Palestinian return and how it has been narrated and claimed for in different locations of exile (e.g., Abu Hatoum 2021; al-Badawi 2021; Hardan 2012), in this article I want to bring Israeli and Palestinian returns, as asymmetric as they are, together and consider the experiences of return from a more theoretical perspective: namely, by proposing uncanniness as its defining characteristic. With the uncanniness of return, I mean the often unsettling feelings of strangeness, estrangement, and disorientation that emerge when it becomes evident that places are not as one thought or remembered them to be. This uncanniness, as per Martin Heidegger (1996), tells of our ontological not-at-homeness and I propose that by acknowledging return as uncanny – or unhomely as the German term *unheimlich* suggests – it is possible to provide another reading of return in the settler colonial context of Palestine/Israel where return traditionally has starkly ethno-nationalistic connotations. Uncanniness taps into the volatility of 'being-at-home' and thus unsettles the zero-sum and essentialist understanding of belonging that defines settler colonial claims on land and belonging. Concurrently, I show how uncanniness can help in making further sense of settler anxiety which has been extensively discussed in relation to settler colonialism (Franks 2023; Martin 2021; Slater 2019; Spoonley 2015; Tuck and Yang 2012; Veracini 2008).

Despite the specificities that define return in Palestine/Israel, there is a certain generality in the uncanniness of return that, I claim, gives the case a wider relevance in thinking about belonging, at-homeness, and exile. In this frame, I first explore Palestinian returns to elaborate on the complexities of return and belonging; after which I turn to consider how the concept of uncanny can further our understanding of these questions. In the fourth section, I explicate how return emerges in Zionist narratives on colonising Palestine and how and why uncanniness has not been acknowledged in them. In the final section, I propose uncanny return as a decolonising force. In Palestine/Israel, Palestinian return has been suggested to hold the potential for decolonisation (Abourahme 2017; Weizman and Estefan 2017), and only by acknowledging its inherent uncanniness, I argue, can return lead to such an outcome. In other words, it is only by recognising the 'unhomeliness' of return that we can get beyond zero-sum and essentialist claims for belonging. In constructing the argument, I draw from existing academic discussions and Palestinian biographical literature, with a short reference to fieldwork conducted in Palestine/Israel[1].

[1] The quotes are from a two-month ethnographic fieldwork conducted for a doctoral dissertation (Järvi 2021b). At the time, ethics approval was not required by Tampere University, but a discussion on research ethics can be found in the monograph.

## Returns in Palestine/Israel

Questions of home, belonging, and return have gained increasing attention among academics, and have been discussed, especially in relation to return tourism and return migration, by considering return's motivations (Fittante and Barry 2022; Jain 2013), role as homecoming (Jansen 2007; King and Christou 2010), and by elaborating the experiences of return in case of both first-generation migrants and their descendants (Blachnicka-Ciacek 2018; Tsuda 2019; Wessendorf 2007). While in this literature it becomes evident that return can be driven by practical concerns rather than by a search of at-homeness (Fittante and Barry 2022; Jain 2013), questions of home and belonging are nevertheless prominently present. Russel King and Anastasia Christou's often-cited study on second-generation return, for example, shows that while return can be a 'profound homecoming' there are nevertheless ambiguities in the sense of belonging and that the experience of return can be defined by disillusionment and rupture, as the actual return 'clashes with the imagined notions of a mythico-historic homeland' (King and Christou 2010, 111). Return can even undermine one's sense of belonging, especially in the case of second-generation returnees who might be treated as outsiders in the society they return to (Blachnicka-Ciacek 2018). Consequently, the experiences of return are rarely as straightforward as those returning initially assume.

Return features prominently in both Palestinian and Zionist national narratives and it carries meanings beyond the movement of return itself. For Palestinians, return connotes liberation of Palestine whereas in Zionism, return to the land of Israel is what fulfils the objective of building a homeland for the diaspora of Jewish people. These returns are structured on an ethno-nationalist basis and in relation to the settler colonial configuration of the state of Israel they constitute opposing forces: Jewish return as colonising and (future) Palestinian return as decolonising. Israel as a Jewish state has been built not only on the Jewish emigration that has been conceptualised as a return but, importantly, on the denial of Palestinian return (Piterberg 2006). The return of Palestinian refugees is considered an existential threat and equated with the destruction of Israel as a Jewish state (Abourahme 2017), because it would mean losing the Jewish demographic majority created by expulsions of Palestinians.

In 1948, the majority of the Palestinian population in Palestine was driven from their homes by Zionist militias and thereafter have been barred from returning to the so-established state of Israel (e.g., Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). Palestinians refer to these expulsions as Nakba, the catastrophe. Those displaced in Nakba became recognised as the Palestine refugees when the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) began to register the displaced in 1950, and by today their number has grown from (circa) 875 000 to over six million[2]. The refugees' right to return to their pre-exile homes was recognized by the United Nations at the end of 1948 with Resolution 194, which, however, has never been implemented by Israel. For the refugees, return continues to be a political claim that demands 'for righting the moral wrong' (Abu-Lughod 2011) and that would allow Palestinians to understand 'what exactly happened, [and] why it happened' (Said and Rose 1998).

The traditional way to narrate Palestinian refugees' return revolves around the peasant lifestyle and the villages from which the majority of those who became refugees in 1948 were displaced – most of which do not exist anymore due to their intentional destruction by Israel. This type of nostalgic narration can create an expectation that the refugees 'have a home in the past and in a place' (Donohoe 2013, 178), and thus take a form of restorative nostalgia, which assumes that temporal distance and displacement can be cured by the return (Boym 2001, 44). The narratives can create a sense of belonging as they restore the origin by maintaining the connection and by transferring it to new generations of refugees who are born in exile and

[2]In addition to the refugees displaced in 1948, there is a multi-layered Palestinian exile whose possibility to return can be as precarious. However, their return does not hold similar national sentiments of liberation as that of the 1948 refugees, whose would return to places that currently constitute the state of Israel. In this article, while discussing return in general, the focus is on the transformative force associated with the return of 1948 refugees.

are thus without a personal connection to the villages. This notion of return was discussed by Munir, an employee of a Palestinian refugee organization based in the West Bank, whom I met in 2016. He stated that 'Palestinian people are still stuck to 1948' and elaborated how the villages and the image of a farmer have become an integral part of Palestinian refugees' identity, adding that it is through this image that even the younger refugees imagine the return. He saw that framing return in this manner created a sense of security because the past way of life is so inscribed to the idea of return: 'We don't want to think the return as a return to modern life, as much as it is a return to the old life and then starting from the beginning from there. To not lose the right itself, you will say that I go to [live in the village]'.

While some have had the chance to visit the places from where they or their families have been dispossessed, many Palestinian refugees have been able to maintain only a narrative connection to their ancestral homeland, which, for its part, fosters the past-directed notion of return described by Munir. Consequently, the lack of corporeal relation has created, Palestinian writer Mourid Barghouti suggests, 'generations of Palestinians strange to Palestine… knowing nothing of the homeland except stories and news' (Barghouti 2003, 61–62). For the first-generation returnees, it is possible to find fragments of the past as their prior presence allows them to reach *something* familiar upon return. This was the case, for example, for Lila Abu-Lughod's father, the prominent Palestinian scholar Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, who despite initial disorientation after his return visit to Yafo was able to see the traces of the familiar landscapes of his youth that still lingered behind the settler colonial destruction (Abu-Lughod 2011). Those born in exile inevitably experience return differently because they have no similar mundane connection to the places they return to. Some second-generation Palestinian exiles have even experienced feelings of alienation upon their return. While many have visited Palestine since childhood, they were still brought up in exile, which marked them apart from those who had always lived in Palestine, making them feel like outsiders or 'inauthentic' as Palestinians (Blachnicka-Ciacek 2018; Brocket 2020).

Palestinian memoirs depicting experiences of return (e.g., Barghouti 2003; Karmi 2015; Said 1995, 175–199; Turki 1994) have further testified that even for the first-generation returnees, a return can be a confusing or even upsetting experience rather than a heart-warming homecoming. This is because the social, political, and material reality they encountered upon their return was not as they imagined or remembered. Consequently, the memoirs acknowledge the disorientation embedded in return or even the heart-breaking finality of both spatiotemporal and settler colonial change (see also, Hass 2011). When on his first return visit to Jerusalem Edward Said was denied access to his family house, for him it symbolised 'the eerie finality of a history' (Said 1995, 181) that stood between his childhood memories and the place he encountered on his visit. While return can be invested with great hopes – the end of exile and insecurity –, the place one returns to can turn out to be strange and disorienting (Boym 2001, 307). It can fail to correspond with the nostalgic notions of what life would be like in the home country (Dora 2006; Trigg 2018) and even reveal the total impossibility of returning home (Brah 1996, 188; Probyn 1996, 114).

## Uncanny Return

In his essay *Heimat und Sprache*, philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer notes that a return is always defined by 'an air of strangeness' (Gadamer 1993, 367). In the passage of time, both the place one returns to and the one who returns have changed, shaped into something different than what they used to be before departure. Hence, when Palestinian writer Fawaz Turki returned to Palestine for the first time since 1948, searching for a 'sense of at-homeness', he found that the years of exile had created a rift between him and the Palestinians who had remained in Palestine (Turki 1994). His experience of return showed to him that he had been moulded by the years spent outside Palestine and that he was thus unable to feel the univocal belonging he came to look for.

End of exile can create hopes for re-entering the place of belonging, or a 'homeground' as Turki (1994, 13, 84) phrases it: a realm in which one is oriented and feels understood, knows what to expect and how to act and has a sense of connection to the people and place. When a return fails to fulfil these expectations, a

feeling of strangeness can arise, not only from temporal change but from the expectation of familiarity that is shattered in the experience of return. In this sense, return evokes the feeling of uncanny, in the way Sigmund Freud understands the concept. For Freud, uncanniness emerges specifically from the tension between unfamiliar and familiar and he suggests that we feel uncanny when something that appears to be unfamiliar evokes something that 'was once well known and has long been familiar' (Freud 2003, 124). Freud dissects the etymology of uncanny, *unheimlich*, to demonstrate the particular nature of uncanny as 'a species' of frightening in which something familiar yet repressed is detected in something that at first sight appears to be unfamiliar (Freud 2003, 127–137). Freudian uncanny is thus never completely strange but rather a return *of* something that is on some level already familiar to us. However, when discussing return as a return *to* a place, the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar turns the other way around. Here, it is the assumed familiarity that creates the uncanniness when what one encounters upon return has – due to the passage of time that puts its mark on places and people – turned unfamiliar. In capturing this, Nicholas Royle (2003) has noted that uncanny can be both 'something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or […] something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context'. In this regard, he continues, uncanny 'can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of heart and home' (Royle 2003, 1).

Freudian concept of the uncanny has been utilised especially in the exploration of 'haunting' (Buse and Stott 1999; Gordon 2008), also in the context of settler colonialism where it is the presence of the indigenous that haunts the settlers (Franks 2023; Gelder and Jacobs 1998; Ginsburg 2018). Those displaced by the settlers, on the other hand, experience uncanniness because in building the settler society, the settlers reconfigure spaces by demolishing, re-naming, and rebuilding to 'shift the ground beneath natives' feet' (Obert 2016, 87), which in a short temporal frame renders the formerly familiar as strange and disorienting. This has taken place also in Palestine/Israel, where Palestinian dwellings have been destroyed and obscured from the landscape, places renamed, the social and political realities redefined, and a Jewish materiality installed in place of that of the Palestinian (e.g., Abu El-Haj 2003; Falah 1996; Long 2009). These manifestations of colonial power reshape the frames of being and 'make familiar space seem uncannily foreign' (Obert 2016, 87) for the dispossessed. Consequently, when Palestinian doctor and political advocate Ghada Karmi returned to her natal Jerusalem, she witnessed how this transformed material reality of the city had made Jerusalem 'an ever more strange and unfamiliar place', which, nevertheless, had hints of familiarity as it brought back memories of the places she used know as a child (Karmi 2015, 110–111, 115).

Freud's take on the uncanny is useful in theorising the return precisely because it draws attention to the uneasiness emerging from the commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar. Its relevance becomes underlined in settler colonial contexts, such as Palestine/Israel, where the transformation can be so fast and so total that it becomes difficult to comprehend. In this article, however, I also draw from another German-speaking thinker of *unheimlich*, namely Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, uncanny means fundamentally a sense of 'not-being-at-home' (Heidegger 1996, 176–177, 255–257), and while I connect it here to the experience of return, for Heidegger it is an inherent part of Being itself. Uncanniness relates to what for Heidegger reveals our thrownness to everyday familiarity: uncanniness emerges when we momentarily encounter the finiteness of existing, and when the familiar significance becomes replaced with an uncanny sense of '*not-at-homeness*' (O'Byrne 2010, 26). Therefore, in Heideggerian reading, we experience uncanniness when 'our comfortable dealings with the normatively contoured everyday world are disrupted' (Kukla 2002, 9), and in uncanniness, we have 'genuine insight into what we are, not how we feel when our lives break down' (Withy 2015, 69). Uncanniness is, thus, 'the fundamental kind of being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1996, 256), which is, however, usually lost from us as it becomes 'covered over in everydayness' and everyday familiarity (ibid). Therefore, according to Katherine Withy (2015, 69), what distinguished Heidegger's deployment of uncanny from the ways others use the term is that it is associated with being itself, rather than with an experienced loss of meaning.

How, then, this type of uncanniness of being can help us understand and theorise the return in general, and specifically in the settler colonial context of Palestine/Israel? Following Heidegger, Janet Donohoe (2013, 178) has suggested that it is the return that puts us face to face 'with our own temporality, […] mortality, and […] homelessness'. A return is an 'anxious' (Jackson and Everts 2010) disruption of everyday familiarity and homeliness that reveals that no matter how vigorously we try to maintain belonging through narrative and cultural practices, places are ultimately indifferent to us and our memories (Donohoe 2013). Return reveals our not-at-homeness, that places do not remain familiar to us and there is no home waiting for us nor an inherent place of belonging. Rather, the return shows that we exist, as thrown and temporal beings, in a world that is fundamentally not our own and which moves on and transforms regardless of us. Hence, the home(land) does not remain as we used to know it (Risser 2012, 27–44; Wylie 2016), even when narratives can create the expectation of belonging and familiarity. Consequently, a return can be seen as a moment that reveals our ontological not-at-homeness, the uncanniness of being.

Concerning Palestine/Israel, uncanniness can provide a way to unravel the ethno-nationalistic understanding of return. Facing the uncanniness of being happens through the mood of angst (Heidegger 1996, 255–256; Withy 2015, 49) and I find that it is specifically the intersection of angst, uncanniness, and return that offers a useful ground for considering return and belonging in the settler colonial reality of Palestine/Israel. For Heidegger, angst has a methodological role, as angst 'is the mood that brings us to our authentic being' (Withy 2015, 49). In angst, 'one has an *"uncanny"* feeling' because it fetches out of everyday familiarity and reveals the existential 'mode' of not-being-at-home (Heidegger 1996, 176–177, italics and hyphens in original). As for Heidegger uncanniness plays an ontological role in forming being-in-the-world, he pays little attention to the political realities in which that being takes place. Questions of homeliness and not-at-homeness, however, are emphatically present in certain contexts, making also uncanniness of being more explicit. This is the case in the political reality of settler colonialism, which according to Lorenzo Veracini (2008, 364) creates precisely 'lingering anxieties over settler legitimacy'.

It is the presence of the indigenous people – those who were already dwelling in spaces that were colonised – that makes the settlers anxious, as the indigenous remind the settlers of the founding violence of the settler state and of the incompleteness of the settler colonial project of displacement and elimination (Franks 2023; Martin 2021; Slater 2019; Tuck and Yang 2012). The corporeal, or narrative, presence of the indigenous and their 'autonomy and political will' (Slater 2019, 2) undermine settlers' sense of belonging, and hence settlers wish to deny them to justify their own at-homeness. Consequently, a settler society has an amplified need to flee from the uncanniness of being. Encountering the uncanniness would, on an ontological level, underline that despite settlers' aim to build roots and claim for privilege, there is no basis for the exclusive claims for the land. In the case of Zionism, I suggest, the need to emphasise their belonging by considering the establishment of the new state as a return to an ancient homeland can be seen as an attempt to deny this uncanniness. I now turn to elaborate on this in more detail.

## Denying the Uncanniness: Return as a Negation of Exile

While an everyday understanding of the term 'return' connotes past presence, it has been evoked also when the idea of return is based on ancestry and ethnicity (Huang, Ramshaw, and Norman 2016; King and Christou 2011; Tsuda 2019), also in settler colonial settings (Mamdani 2020, 266–267). This was – and is – the case for the Zionist notion of establishing the Jewish homeland in Palestine – the locus of their theologico-cultural longing – which was conceptualised as a return despite the absence of two millennia. Mahmood Mamdani has noted that this notion made Jews 'the genuine natives' upon whose return the non-genuine ones, Palestinians, 'must get out of the way' (Mamdani 2020, 254). In Zionist foundational narratives, the millennial absence was reduced to an 'interim period' (Piterberg 2006, 178), during which Jewish existence was somehow 'abnormal, incomplete, and inauthentic' (ibid). In these narratives, return negates the interim period as it 'fuses a continuum between the ancient past […] and the present, which perceives itself as the renewal of that same entity' (Raz-Krakotzkin 2017, 393). Therefore, by returning to the land of Israel, Jews

were thought to be able to redeem their place among the nations and shed off the passivity of exile (Piterberg 2008).

Rather than considering the return as a new beginning (Risser 2012, 32) or a new mode of exile (Shohat 2003), Zionist narratives maintained a mystified belonging of Jews to the land. As a settler colonial initiative, the settler nation had a need to justify their right to the land and to deny it from those they displaced, and therefore, the flight from uncanniness was their default modus operandi[3]. Here, however, a difference should be recognized between actual, individual experiences of return and the political narratives of the return. Those who emigrated to Israel often encountered a reality different from what they had expected (e.g., Baskin 2017), and even some early Zionists were shocked by the conditions they encountered in the place they considered their historic homeland (Abu Zaida 2007; Dowty 2019). However, upon their arrival, Zionists embarked on transforming the landscapes to fit their narratives and to build roots for the Jews as the rightful inhabitants of the land (Abu El-Haj 2003; Long 2009; Piterberg 2006). On a level of these narratives, it was possible to evade the uncanniness of being and the uncertainties it would have imposed on the project of nation-building.

In maintaining a sense of mythical and ahistorical belonging, political Zionism did not incorporate the diverse experiences of exile as the basis for the new state. Rather, the return was considered a *negation of exile*. Alongside the idea of return, this understanding is part of the Zionist foundational narrative (Piterberg 2006, 2008; Raz-Krakotzkin 2013), and it deprives the time of exile of its historical significance: according to the narrative, exile could not provide more than partial or transitory existence, during which the Jewish communities were simply waiting to return to the land of Israel to live as a wholesome, authentic nation. Only by abandoning the exile by returning to territorial sovereignty, Jews, according to Zionism, could re-enter history (Piterberg 2008; Raz-Krakotzkin 2013). This disregarding of exile led to the valorisation of *sabra* – those born in Mandatory Palestine and, later, Israel – and to considering the diaspora Jews as passive and inferior (Baskin 2017, 4–5; Lentin 2000; Zerubavel 2002). The diaspora cultures were to be abandoned upon arrival to Palestine/Israel and to be replaced by the Hebraised (Ashkenazi) culture of a 'New Jew' (Shohat 2003). Yiddish, Arabic, and other languages of exile were suppressed in favour of the resurrected Hebrew (Safran 2005; Shohat 2015), and differing experiences of Jewish communities evaporated into 'the Jewish history' of 'universal Jewish experience' that built on the specific histories of the Eastern European Jews (Shohat 2006, 341–345).

Instead of accepting and celebrating the different traditions, languages, and experiences that came together, the Zionist narrative of return ended up doing violence not only to Palestinians and the material landscapes that were subjected to a violent transformation but also to the multiplicity of Jewish experiences and to Jewishness itself that is in many ways defined by exile (e.g., Dubow, 2021). Such an understanding of return actively hid the uncanniness, as it aimed to make the return correspond with the narrative of what the return would be like and what type of community it would establish. Consequently, the establishment of Jewish sovereignty was not considered as an encounter with a spatial configuration that is necessarily unfamiliar but as a return to the rightful place of belonging which ended up denying the change of place and people – namely, that what makes a return inherently uncanny.

While the Zionist notion of return cannot be exhausted by a single denominator, as it surely tells of multiple things, inter alia nationalist nostalgia (Yadgas, 2022) and redemptive nationalist narratives (Bashir and Goldber 2019), I suggest settler colonial anxiety as one rational on why these narratives took the form they did. As is the case with the Heideggerian notion of angst, so too in the political context of settler colonialism anxiousness relates to not belonging to a place, not being at home: settler anxiety emerges precisely from the fear that the settlers' genuine and legitimate at-homeness can be denied (Franks 2023; Veracini 2008). In Israel, the anxiety is accentuated by the fear of losing the Jewish demographic majority (Amit 2019), which would, for its part, delegitimate the existence of the state as 'a Jewish state for the Jewish people' and reveal

[3] Flight from uncanniness is, to be exact, a modus operandi for everyone (see, Withy 2015, 96–98), as for Heidegger, it is part of the ontology of being. Here, however, I hope to underline how it defines the political reality of settler colonialism.

the founding violence the settler colonial claim on lands is based on; namely, the elimination of the native. This makes the question of return, both 'the Law of Return' and the apprehended possibility of Palestinian return, a highly volatile issue. In this light, it is not surprising that in justifying their presence and declaring their ownership over the land, the Zionist narratives effectively deny the uncanniness of the Jewish return. Embracing the uncanniness would mean accepting unfamiliarity and not-at-homeness. It would make evident that the land was not waiting for the Jews to return (Piterberg 2006), but that there had been several other people who had lived their everyday lives there and called the land their home in their absence. It would have further underlined that Jews had no deeper connection to the land than Palestinians, whose violent displacement forms the prerequisite for Israeli-Jewish at-homeness (Kotef 2020).

Unlike the Zionist negation of exile asserts, all those who return do so from the specific grounding of their exilic experiences and to a place that has moved on in their absence. This is what makes return uncanny, as it reveals that there is no inherent place of belonging where we could feel at home by default. On the contrary, to be at home in this world, as Janet Donohoe phrases it, 'one must affirm the homelessness that is essential to us' (Donohoe 2013, 177). Because uncanniness underlines that there is no home waiting for us it has no need to deny the exile. Accepting the uncanniness of return would thus not only reveal the volatility of at-homeness but also, I claim, allow us to acknowledge the significance of the exile and appreciate its formative nature. It would allow us to consider a return not as a restorative but as a generative situation from which something new can emerge. Scholars studying Palestine/Israel have, in fact, stressed that return should be seen as an entrance to a new condition. In this line of thinking, Palestinian return would not be a return to the past but 'a creation of a new situation' (Weizman and Estefan 2017, 112). Furthermore, it would not be 'a departure from diaspora, the restoration to a pure origin, but instead involves a homecoming in which exile shapes the meaning of home' (Weaver 2007, 12). Accepting this not-at-homeness revealed upon return, I suggest, can offer a more egalitarian and less ethno-nationalistic take on belonging, and thus in a settler colonial context of Palestine/Israel, a way toward decolonisation.

## Decolonization through Uncanny Return

To decolonise is to truly end the disparities of colonialism (Kohn and McBride 2011), and to achieve this in a settler colonial setting requires addressing the material realities and questions on land (Tuck and Yang 2012) but also questions on knowledge production, identities, privileges and belonging (Bashir and Busbridge 2019; Todorova 2015; Zreik 2016). Teodora Todorova has suggested that in Palestine/Israel, it requires rethinking the relationship between 'Jewish' and 'Israeli' and the role of 'Jewishness' in Zionist settler colonialism manifesting specifically in relation to Jewish and Palestinian returns (Todorova 2015, 1368). For Israel's settler society, Palestinian return is a source of anxiousness because it would alter the demographic balance Israel anxiously guards – and thus reconfigure the fabric of the society that currently maintains Jewish privilege. This is why the return of Palestinian refugees has been equated with decolonisation (Abourahme 2017; Weizman and Estefan 2017), as 'the return of the millions' (Barghouti 2003, 38) would undermine the exclusive Jewishness of the state that is at the core of political Zionism. However, because decolonisation is not only undoing the demographic exclusiveness of settler society but includes dismantling the 'zero-sum logic' in which settler and native are ontologically posed against each other in the structure of elimination (Busbridge 2018; Wolfe 2013), the return itself is not enough. On the contrary, a return that aims to negate the exile or recreate the origin will only maintain the zero-sum logic and create another displacement by reversing the structures of privilege and exclusion. Therefore, for return to be decolonising, it must recognise its uncanniness, because only as uncanny can return escape exclusive and supremacist notions of belonging.

As uncanny return momentarily ruptures the relationship with place and exposes our temporality, mortality, and homelessness (Donohoe 2013, 178), it reveals that there is no a priori homeliness nor unchangeable relation between self and place. By revealing the temporal thrownness of being, it further shows that at-homeness and homecoming are not essential but constant processes, which allows belonging to be malleable, shifting, and multi-dimensional. Therefore decolonising 'ethno-exclusive statehood and sovereignty' (Bashir and Bushbridge 2019) through the uncanny return enables getting from competing and fixed notions of belonging to a mode of being-with in which one's at-homeness does not imply the homelessness of the other (Kotef 2020; Said 2001, 457). This type of return has been advocated, for

example, by Edward Said, who has said he would prefer 'a rich fabric of some sort, which no one can fully comprehend, and no one can fully own' (Said 2001, 457). Said's return is not a return 'to the origin' (ibid.), nor a declaration of ownership, but it would still demand Israeli Jews to carry the responsibility of the displacement of Palestinians (Said 2001, 455). Similarly, while uncanny return unsettles exclusive notions of belonging and, importantly, challenges categories of 'settler' and 'native' by revealing them not as immutable relations to a place but as products of the structure of settler colonialism (e.g., Tatour 2019; Zreik 2016), the return itself cannot solve all issues, such as past injustices or historical responsibilities. Therefore, while the return can be the beginning of decolonisation it cannot be seen as its culmination but rather as the first step from which onward the process of addressing difficult questions concerning, inter alia, land ownership and historical reconciliation can start to unfold.

However, it is clear that implementing the return is not an easy task. As decolonisation aims to rectify the power imbalance and address the demands of those who have suffered in the process of elimination, colonisers are seldom eager to embark on the process that would mean relinquishing both social and material power positions and accepting the responsibility of past violations and injustices. As Bashir Bashir and Rachel Busbridge (2019) have noted, 'decolonising relationships demands structural changes that often encounter significant resistance from settler constituencies'. In Palestine/Israel, the process is further complicated by the fact that decolonisation would force to reconstruct of both the Israeli-Jewish sense of self built around the process of colonisation (Kotef 2020) and the fragile national identity that necessitates winning every war (Zreik 2016). While there is no escaping the discomfort and anxiousness that decolonisation inevitably produces, framing the return as uncanny can, for its part, ease the settler colonial anxiousness created by uncertainties of belonging and fear of retribution. Because uncanny return acknowledges the change of place and self, that there is no returning to the precolonial past, it does not suggest that another exile is needed to solve the current situation (see e.g., Kotef 2020, 21, 134). Decolonisation through Palestinian return is not 'an inversion of time' (Weizman and Estefan 2017, 112) nor a 'naive return to pre-settler-colonial times' (Abu Hatoum 2021, 410), but rather a momentum for undoing the settler colonial structures of violence and thus the distinction between settler and the native it has produced. While decolonisation demands radical restructuring and rethinking, the return in its uncanniness does not imply reversing the power positions but rather maintains the openness of belonging, which leaves room for copresence.

Scholars have considered what could come after decolonisation in Palestine/Israel (e.g., Abu Hatoum 2021; Bashir and Busbridge 2019; Farsakh 2016; Hassouna 2022), and while uncanny return, by definition, does not know where it will lead, it does suggest frames for being. Thinking through uncanniness can thus offer a conceptual tool for envisioning what return as a decolonising force could mean. It would mean a return that does not aim to recreate the origin but rather introduces a new beginning emerging from both the change of self and place. It would mean a return that does not aim to negate the exile but would rather 'bring it to the land', as Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish has famously stated (Yeshurut 2012). Furthermore, accepting the uncanniness would force not only the settler society to let go of their position as a settler but also require those who return to reorientate, as it dissolves the expectation of familiarity and inherent belonging. Facing the uncanniness of return would mean abandoning the nostalgic narratives of home and belonging, and building a home anew in a new community that encompasses the dispersed experiences that come together as a result of the return.

## Conclusion

Hassan Khader, quoted in the introduction, acknowledged in the last pages of his essay the futility of building a homeland on nostalgia. He writes, '[t]he homeland cannot be remolded into a lost paradise. The homeland is right here in front of us; it is divided and distorted, awaiting salvation' (Khader 1997). While in the frame that I have elaborated in this article a homeland cannot be 'awaiting salvation', as a returnee, Khader, recognized that the place one returns to cannot be an ideal place of belonging. The return constituted not an end, but a beginning, something to start from. To consider the return as uncanny implies precisely this: that a return is a movement that reveals our ontological not-at-homeness by making it evident that there is no home waiting for us – no lost paradise. Therefore, return reveals that home is a process that takes place in

the everydayness of being. It is the everyday life that it is possible to feel oriented, and the familiarity of it allows us to feel at home. A return, on the other hand, is an encounter with a changed reality that makes evident our mortal thrownness. Therefore, as Amy Kaplan has noted, a homeland built in exile can be longed for but never really returned to (Kaplan 2003), which makes a return a 're-discovery' (Wylie 2016) rather than a nostalgic homecoming. The place where we once belonged has moved on in our absence; it has changed and so have we. Return is thus a movement not towards a pre-existing home but a possibility to build a home anew amid this change. Attuning to the return as uncanny allows us to acknowledge this as an inherent quality of return, and not as something that would signal its failure.

In this article, I departed to consider the return in the settler colonial context of Palestine/Israel by theorising it with the concept of uncanny. While there are clear specificities in this context, acknowledging the uncanniness of being that comes forth in the experience of return has a wider resonance in how we understand at-homeness and belonging. Uncanniness can also help in theorising the feelings of strangeness and disorientation that a return might evoke. In settler contexts, it taps into the anxieties of belonging and unravels it by providing a basis to question exclusiveness that is at the core of settler societies. While there is no denying the desire to belong or even the experience that one belongs, what, I claim, return reveals is that there is no inherent place of belonging and thus no basis for exclusive claims for belonging. While for Heidegger being lost in everydayness means fleeing from the authentic moment of existing, on an experiential level it means having a sense of connection and a feeling of being oriented. This is possible in the familiarity of everydayness, in places one has not only cultural but also a mundane connection to. Return, on the other hand, is a change in the settings of everydayness and thus brings forth a question of what it means to belong.

That the return makes evident our inherent nonbelonging should not be taken as an abandonment of the idea of return. Consequently, the Palestinians' claim for their right to return should not be taken as a claim for an ancient homeland but as a demand 'for righting the moral wrong', as Lila Abu-Lughod (2011, 124) phrases it, in other words, a demand for decolonisation. By reconfiguring our notion of belonging, the uncanniness of return can lead the way toward this decolonisation. While it is clear for anyone even vaguely familiar with the context of Palestine/Israel that the process of decolonisation is not around the corner, preparing and planning for the return can also be considered a step toward its implementation (e.g., BADIL 2019; Järvi 2021a). The specific benefit of underlining the uncanniness of return in this context is that it can help in dismantling the zero-sum logic on belonging – that there would be room only for the 'settler' or for the 'native' – and thus alleviate the settler anxiety that, for its part, inhibits the process of decolonisation that could begin with the return of the Palestinian refugees.

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## Statement of Ethics

See footnote 1.

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