

Virtual Reality Encounters at the Israel Museum

Palestinian Homes and Heartlands

Sabrien Amrov

Abstract

This essay discusses the relationship between intimacy and violence in the context of colonial oppression. Drawing from geographical literature on spatial intimacies, the article delves into the specific ways Israel targets socio-spatial entities while deploying and targeting intimacy. It does so through an analysis of *Visitors*, a virtual reality installation at Israel Museum that abolishes the social and political realities of Palestinians, which are juxtaposed with the settler colonial violence that daily targets Palestinian homes outside the borders of the Israel Museum. The author argues that home as a site of analysis can shed light on how political representations become mapped out and framed in the case of Palestinians, making explicit the relationship between the geography of home and the politics of representation. While Landau's exhibition is meant to bridge a social gap between two people, his ideological assumptions, seemingly divergent from the state of Israel, remain infused by settler colonial politics of fear and racial superiority.

Keywords

Intimacy; scale; home; virtual reality; museum; Daniel Landau.

It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely....

– George Steiner, *Extraterritorial*

Between May 2018 and April 2019, Israeli artist Daniel Landau curated an encounter. He sliced a room in half inside the Israel Museum in West Jerusalem, turning the space into a virtual reality (VR) installation entitled *Visitors*, and recreated two living rooms of two different families – one Palestinian and one Israeli – facing each other. The museum pamphlet identifies them as one ‘Jewish’ family, the Avidan-Levis, and one “Arab” family, the Sabatins. Two families living just a few dozen kilometers apart from each other but never meeting, separated by the apartheid wall that divides the West Bank and Jerusalem. The Sabatins live in the village of Husan in the West Bank and the Avidan-Levis reside in Modi‘in, an urban settlement between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. *Visitors* brings together the interiors of their homes, inviting museum guests to experience an artificial intimate encounter between a Jewish settler family and a Palestinian one.

As part of their *I to Eye* exhibition series, the museum advertises the installation as an opportunity for guests using VR headsets “to ‘meet’ members of both families up close and hear from them about what connects and divides them. This installation allows you to examine the gaps between the families, to imagine a meeting between them, and to cross the boundary between the real and the virtual.”¹ This entails watching prerecorded sound bites through the VR headset. Family members from each household share thoughts about music, family, and their perceptions of the other; as guests move from one side of the room to the other, they leave one home to enter the second.

The artwork is conceived of as a rare opportunity to think through the possibilities of “being together.”² Via the curation of home, Landau attempts to highlight cultural similarities between the two families through an encounter he hopes to be “transformative.”³ Transformative experience theory, upon which Landau bases his work, posits that artworks ought to provide “meaning and value to future experience. They modify our ways of perceiving the world, thus leaving us and the world itself irrevocably changed.”⁴ Guests of the Israel Museum, then, should leave *Visitors* not only enchanted by the piece’s aesthetic qualities, but fundamentally transported into another person’s everyday life. By visiting the rooms, hearing the family members speak, or touching the furniture, Landau understands the encounter brought by the VR installation as transformative because it should theoretically generate an embodied experience for self-reflection for museum guests. Landau wants guests to relate differently to their everyday lives and how they perceive themselves and others.

Here, he uses the home as the locus of encounter to produce an image of the Palestinian that will allow for an intimate encounter, albeit protected and curated, for the majority Israeli guests inside the Israel Museum in West Jerusalem.⁵ Meanwhile, outside the doors of the state-funded museum, which stretches fifty thousand square

meters over the hills of Jerusalem,⁶ real life encounters between Israeli authorities and Palestinians are not difficult to *imagine*. They occur daily and often involve the home: evictions, bombings, home demolitions, and arrests of Palestinians, as young as six years old, in their sleep. For the Israeli settler colonial state, Palestinian homes are treated as extensions of its occupation and ergo subject to state violence. Beyond the physical infrastructure of home, Israel's nation-state project relies on the constant erasure and denial of a homeland for Palestinians.⁷

Considering the VR installation inside the Israel Museum together with the systematic state violence against Palestinian homes occurring simultaneously outside its walls, I examine how the emphasis on home, even as a site of mutual understanding and “coexistence,” allows Israelis – including the Israeli left⁸ – to lay claim to the Palestinian private sphere, while they remain subjects of a broader condition of settler colonialism. Through the lens of intimacy, I argue that home as a site of analysis can shed light on how political representations get mapped out and framed in the case of Palestinians. In order to engage in this line of inquiry, it is crucial to think about the simultaneity of one site inside the Israel Museum, consisting of a VR installation that stars a Palestinian home beside an Israeli one, and a constellation of sites – Palestinian homes outside the confinement of the museum – as they entail a mediation on everyday life of Palestinian homing.



Figure 1. Museum visitors viewing Daniel Landau's *Visitors* media installation, 2018. Photo by author.

How can the concept of home be utilized as both a political and cultural tool by an Israeli artist and what are the ideological underpinnings and social-political impacts of this brand of “being together” through a curated encounter? To answer these questions, I build on a conception of spatial intimacies grounded in cultural and

feminist geography to make explicit the relationship between geography of home and the politics of representation. While Landau's exhibition is meant to bridge a social gap between two people, his ideological assumptions, seemingly divergent from the state of Israel, remain infused by settler colonial politics of fear and racial superiority. Israeli representation of Palestinians often entails containing and confining the figure of the Palestinians to imageries palatable to Jewish citizens of Israel. I start with an overview of the intention of the installation at the Israel Museum, followed by an overview of the relationship between home and intimacy. I conclude the paper with a mediation on how the understanding of home as target, cultural trope, and lived experience sheds light on the politics of representation of Palestinians.

Spatial Intimacies and the Home

“Home is the heart of a person's identity, that is where it is constructed. That is where, I believe, despite all the challenges we have, it is a place where you nourish so much about who you are,” explained Landau when I asked him why he chose home as the locus of encounter for his installation. He continued:

95 percent happens at home . . . It is a place where your culture [manifests], in terms of how you invite people who come to your home. There are not enough metaphors to describe how meaningful a home is, be it a womb, be it a place where nurture is.⁹

In this psycho-spatial description of home, Landau assumes that the physical space in which people live is necessarily a place where an individual or family feels safe enough to be laid bare and receive visitors. The home is heartland – the center of a person's vital support system. The artist also insists here on the fundamental role home plays in shaping a person and how a person receives the self and Other.¹⁰ For Landau, the productive work that home generates as both metaphorical concept and as an art interface is primarily affective – concerned with the embodied subjectivity of people in their various modes of attachments in social life.¹¹ A transformative encounter entails a moment that pulls you to see differently, to engage the Other in a novel way, a way that would otherwise seem impossible to consider. For Landau, that type of possibility can be promoted through simulated spatial intimacy.

Similar articulation of the home can be found in critical feminist literature. Ethnographic work by Palestinian scholars Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Sarah Ihmoud, for example, reveals how “the home space and the homeland are critical places of being and becoming. Homing works as a powerful force that gives voice, spreads love, and maintains continuities.”¹² In her essay “Homeplace,” bell hooks writes about the ability of home to be a place where all Black people can be “subjects, not objects . . . where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.”¹³ The lived experience of Black Americans outside the home fundamentally shaped the social practices of nurture and care inside it, which

allows them to once again go back “outside” and face white supremacy. Similarly, Ara Wilson’s research on homes and suburbs marries the concept of intimacy and infrastructure to draw attention to how material-symbolic assemblages are produced, managed, and interrupted by and through intimate social relations in fields of power.¹⁴ Wilson makes visible the ways in which bathrooms, garage doors, and other elements of suburban domestic architecture are part and parcel of the global circulations of power and reveal the work of neoliberal capitalist ideology at an intimate level.

The crucial distinction between Landau’s formulation and feminist writers like Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Ihmoud, hooks, and Wilson is how the latter convey the importance of the dialectal relationship between home and power. When hooks writes, for example, about the nurture and care that Black women like her grandmother ensured inside the home, she highlights that these practices are not a natural course of human inscription. These roles are assigned through patriarchal and racial power dynamics at a specific historical conjuncture. Black women lived, understood, and identified the inequalities at home, but also engaged in practices of care, grappling with the power dynamics inside and outside the home and their desire to provide for their loved ones. Similarly, seeing Palestinian homes as sites of resistance, as Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Ihmoud suggest, need not fetishize Palestinian spaces, but rather highlights the political reality that Palestinian families and individuals face. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Ihmoud write: “As the Zionist state continues its logic of elimination, invading and destroying our homes in its attempt to destroy our social fabric and family ties and erase our memory and identity as a people, we center home as a site of the struggle of memory against forgetting.”¹⁵ Homes are not born as sites of resistance out of natural design, but out of a necessity to preserve what is under attack – and that work is a burden of colonialism, labor that could be otherwise directed. In other words, the *raison d’être* of Palestinian homes is not to be sites or infrastructure of resistance; however, they are made such by Israel’s imposition of settler colonial violence that extends into Palestinians’ physical homes. In addition, for Palestinians inside the West Bank, Gaza, Apartheid Israel, and beyond, the experience of home does not stop or start with themes such as *hospitality* (the direct translation of the Hebrew title of the exhibition, *hachnasat orchim*) and *visitors* (the English title). Palestinian homes are also sites of celebrations, declarations of status, family feuds, competitions over who has the bigger home or garden, and so on. They are also places of distance, far away and, for many in exile, unapproachable. They are intimate sites of fragmentation and unification.

Home is a vessel into which individuals and societies breathe meaning, but also a site that reflects and manifests the circulation of power across different scales. As a vernacular term, intimacy describes relationships that are (or give the impression of being) physically or emotionally close – personal, sexual, private, caring, loving. But the emergence of intimacy as an analytical frame, at least in recent feminist and critical geography, attempts to unsettle this fixing of the scale of the intimate.¹⁶ A process-based view of scale (in which scale is produced, not given) allows us to think about social relations, power struggles, and resistance in different sites rather

than hold a deterministic view that assigns to home an apolitical and fixed character. Contrary to what is suggested in *Visitors*, the settler colonial power dynamic cannot be suspended as a prerequisite for “transformative encounters” through spatial intimacy.

Intimacy relies on social and spatial relations that are fundamentally relational. By delinking intimacy and domesticity, it is possible to trace the reverberations of intimacy without limiting its manifestations to the body or the household or to the here and now. Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner highlight how intimacy – sexual, familial, and other types of attachments – is not limited to personal or private affairs: social, economic, and political worlds are built around personal attachments and are thus equally part of the formulation of the intimate.¹⁷ How these types of attachments make people public and create multilayered identities and subjectivities is part of the work intimacy fulfils.¹⁸ Laurent Berlant argues that intimacy “poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective.”¹⁹ These trajectories (toward past, present, and future conditions) must include the political, social, and cultural conditions of the collective.

Intimacy, in such a reading, is not locked down to a specific time and place but is an analytical lens that allows greater sensitivity to how material and non-material aspects work in concert in the production of social relations. Affect theory allows us to move from obsessing over a public versus private binary to investigating what work is done by relegating the intimate as a category to the private sphere, shifting attention “to structures of bifurcation rather than binaries.”²⁰ Doing so allows us to think about the reverberation and circulation of power through an affective dimension – humans are not interpellated only through and with their minds, but through their senses, feelings, and emotions – and challenges the romanticization of personal space as necessarily safe.²¹ Instead, intimacy is about intense engagement with the different modes of attachment that produce social life at various scales.

The genesis of *Visitors* was in many ways intimate for Landau. Initially, the exhibition was meant to showcase a story of childhood friendship with a Palestinian from al-‘Isawiyya, a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem, across from French Hill, where Landau grew up. “We grew up as friends, before the First Intifada. There were a lot of divides, and finally we weren’t able to maintain our relationship as friends.”²² Ultimately, however, Landau explained that approaching this personal story was “too painful” and “did not feel right.” Instead, Landau chose to represent two families that did not hold any personal connections to each other. In his curation, Landau resorts to identity politics to make the case for a personal experience that is stripped from a narrative that highlights the intimate relationship between colonizer and colonized. In his story, there is an important connection between intimacy and violence. A settler colonial state impedes the ability to relate at different levels, including in friendship. It interrupts the ability to forge relations the same way its Apartheid wall cuts through Palestinian towns and cities. This relationship between violence and intimacy, which Landau attempts to stifle, comes back in an alternative form in this installation.

The installation is curated so as to eliminate any point upon which the reality of

Palestinian lived experience can intrude. By aiming to set politics aside, there is a deliberate attempt to produce a definition of the cultural that is apolitical. Landau falls into two fundamentally dangerous readings of the intimate and of culture. On the one hand, he pits private life against public life and pushes the fantasy that private life is the real, the authentic, the untouched against “collective life: the surreal, the elsewhere, the fallen, the irrelevant.”²³ He also attempts to redefine the relationship of Arabs with Jews, replacing one category of identity (Palestinian) for another (Arab) in order to negotiate a sense of familiarity that upholds, or at least doesn’t unsettle, the ideological underpinnings of colonial power in defining the borders of the human.²⁴ In other words, there is a desire to see the Other only on terms already violently established.

Home, Intimacy, and the Other

Visitors simultaneously employs a logic of sameness and attempts to demonstrate a clear physical separation between the more “modern” Jewish home and the “traditional” Arab home. This is done through an almost perfect spatial symmetry in the two homes: the placement of chairs, the carpets, the cabinets are the same in each. It is as though the two homes are architectural mirrors of each other except for the material-symbolic markers of cultural difference. Cultural diversity within the Palestinian home is reduced to three nargilas on a mantle and a wall of stone (the same size and shape as a wall of wood in the Jewish Israeli home). Relying on Orientalist tropes of what the Arab home should look like, Landau creates a sense of familiarity not with reality, but with already existing ideas that Israelis hold of Palestinians.

This presentation rearticulates the problematic imaginary of a two-sided, balanced conflict, rooted in ignorance of the other. This discourse posits that Palestinians and Israelis do not know each other and this lack of knowledge creates fear and distance. This liberal fantasy supposes that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is solvable if the two peoples just learned to know one another. It thus erases the intimate and violent encroaching of Israeli military occupation of Palestinian everyday life. It also denies the productive and political work that intimacy, as a lens through which to access social life, does in order to understand the circulation of power. It presents Israeli and Palestinian difference as one of cultural distinction, rather than a difference of power and a relationship of a colonizing state to an indigenous population, thereby foreclosing more robust possibilities for exploring the cultural, historical, and political difference that we might actually find in Palestinian and Jewish Israeli homes. Sameness is emphasized only in the limits of the kinship (family) and the ability to be hospitable. Sameness is promoted when lived experience is stripped from the curation.

Through this symmetrical presentation, *Visitors* avoids addressing Israeli settler colonialism and instead pushes forward the idea that if Israeli Jews look close enough in the Palestinian heartland that is the home, they can see themselves: “Their family isn’t different from our family.”²⁵ This sameness offers the safety to relate. Inviting a majority Jewish audience to understand Palestinians as an extension or an alternative

reading of their Jewishness also suggests obliquely that Palestinians are not human unless Israeli Jews see themselves inside of them. This is done, in part, by centering the Arab in Palestinian Arab identity to remind Arab Jews of their own Arabness. Landau believes it is important for Israelis to recognize: “More than half of us are actually Arab and there are anxieties people feel when you remind them of this.” That Landau sees the home space as capable of provoking this reminder is in part based on a reading of home as personal or family space, and therefore a kind of depoliticized space where sameness can emerge. It is only when we emerge from these spaces that politics act upon us and make us different. While home can indeed be sanctuary, it is not a refuge from politics; instead, as hooks notes, home is produced by (and produces) politics. An art practice of “solidarity” that refuses to acknowledge this in order to emphasize “sameness” is ultimately an art practice of erasure.

In the installation, for example, the father of the Avidan-Levi family further emphasizes the Orientalist trope of the hospitable Arab:

First of all, regarding hospitality, I was hosted by Arab families and I know what hospitality is like for them. It is about receiving guests, in a very warm, embracing, and accepting manner and I think I learned more from them about hospitality than I learned at home.²⁶

Raji Sabatin, too, is invited to talk about the difference between an “Eastern Jew” (*yahudi sharqi*) and a “Western Jew” (*yahudi gharbi*). He shares:

In all honestly, I see a difference between the social interaction with the Eastern Jew versus the Western Jew. You can say that the Eastern Jew is close to you, in some respects, in terms of your norms and way of life. For example, you can work an entire day at the house of the Western Jew, and he will never invite you for a coffee. The Eastern Jew will maybe invite you for food.²⁷

By asking the patriarchs of both families to speak about this Eastern-Western distinction, *Visitors* recycles an Orientalist trope, using imperial categories of differentiation to evoke the Arabness of Jewish Israelis. This reinforces the very ideological underpinnings that sustain Zionism.

The process of divorcing Arabness from Jewishness and pitting each against the other is indeed a colonial legacy, and one that has served the Zionist project since its inception. Zionism is a product of European ideologies of racial superiority, and it appropriated European racial formations and re-articulated them inwardly toward different groups within the Jewish community.²⁸ These racial formations denied many Jews their Arabness; but how can this violence, and its temporality and spatiality, be examined without also accounting for Palestinian lived experiences?²⁹ Today, these colonial formations continue to hold material consequences for Palestinians that they do not for Israeli Jews of Arab origin. As Lana Tatour reminds us, “Palestinians – as opposed to all Jewish populations regardless of their marginal position in Israeli society – are neither part of the settler collective agency, nor the multiethnic make-

up of Israeli society.”⁷³⁰ Questions of perpetual homelessness, homes besieged and demolished, exile and denial of return to home are at the heart of the Palestinian political struggle and interpersonal dealings of Palestinian life at all levels. Homelessness is not a metaphor for many Palestinians, nor can it be relegated to the personal, private, or individual; it is collective, historically contingent, and persistent. In this sense, censoring parts of Palestinians’ lived experiences of home to produce a narrative of sameness allows Israelis to claim ownership over Palestinian representation. There is no room to appreciate both the richness and the incommensurability of cultural and social differences between families.



Figure 2. Still image from drone footage of the exteriors of both homes; on the left, the Jewish settler family’s home; on the right, the Palestinian family’s home. Daniel Landau, *Visitors*, 2018.

This lack of consideration is also demonstrated in the installation’s use of drone footage of both homes side by side. On the main wall of the installation, the exterior of the Avidan-Levis home presents as a modern looking structure sitting on a well-maintained street while the Sabatin home is topped by a makeshift roof held together with the help of old tires (see figure 2). Like the room divided in perfect symmetry, the footage on the backdrop wall of the installation showcases the materiality of the two homes from their exteriors without acknowledging the settler colonial context. Husan, where the Sabatins reside, is situated 6.5 kilometers west of Bethlehem, adjacent to the 1949 Armistice Line (the Green Line). After the Oslo Accords, Husan was divided into areas B and C – with 12.6 percent of the land under shared Palestinian Authority and Israeli control, and 87.4 percent under full Israeli security control, respectively. It is constantly subject to home invasions and night raids by the Israeli military. Its residents face a 40 percent unemployment rate, and 60 percent of Husan’s economy relies on the Israeli labor market. Husan also suffers from a lack of proper water supply

and sewage infrastructure. Yet no element of the installation – the spatial separation, the bird’s-eye-view of the exterior of the homes, the pamphlet presentation of the installation – links settler colonialism and the experience of home; thus, the interiors and exteriors of its homes are divorced from the larger infrastructures in which they are embedded.

The decision to decontextualize is not unfamiliar in cultural and archival representation of Palestinians. Edward Said and Jean Mohr, for example, published *After the Last Sky* to protest the conditions imposed on Said’s proposal that Mohr’s photographs of Palestinians be exhibited at the Geneva site of the 1983 United Nations International Conference on the Question of Palestine. The display was approved on the one condition that “no writing can be displayed with them. No legends, no explanations.”³¹ Palestinians could only be represented without context.

Visitors adds a virtual reality element to this dynamic, turning the intimacy (and violence) of the gaze into the intimacy-violence of a multisensory experience. Museum guests are invited to *hear* the Other, to *feel* as though inside their home, and promised an *authentic* experience of intimacy. Landau posits this as essential to the experience of the (Jewish Israeli) museum-goer:

My virtual reality is not driven by escapism, to go to fantasy or to escape realities. I think about it as a travel ticket to maybe some places that sometimes are not possible in reality . . . The fact that you, in such an accessible way, in such a cultural way, get to be invited into an Arab family’s home in the West Bank, is not something that can happen every day. And so, this encounter is supposed to raise important questions and, hopefully, help reflective and reflexive process[es].³²

Yet, museum guests are offered access without accountability. Virtual reality is often sold as an opportunity for *real* participation because of its ability to stimulate the senses simultaneously: you hear, you see, you feel the objects. But as Ariella Azoulay writes, “Active participation should mean to resist the assumption that the insecurity of the lives of those photographed is unrelated to your own status and mode of being as a citizen of a given political regime.”³³ There is no confrontation here as Palestinians are present in representation, but absent in conversation. What does it mean to have permission to experience the Other without reciprocity and engage in a one-sided negotiation of belonging? What kind of privilege is denied and foreclosed to the Other? These questions are at the center of colonial relationalities.

Colonial Relationalities and Withheld Humanity

This flattening out of the power dynamic is further articulated in the narrative arc of the Palestinian family. Guests meet the Palestinian family on Israeli terms. It is only by articulating a kind of Palestinian identity denuded of politics that Landau curates an intimate space between the two people. Raji Sabatin, a fifty-six-year-old Palestinian,

has, according to Landau, a long history of resisting Israeli military occupation:

There is a lot of material that could [be] very explosive from Raji Sabatin: he was in prison, his sister is paralyzed from a shot by an Israeli sniper, [his] brother was a terrorist, he also has what we call blood on his hands. There is a lot of bleeding leads there . . . that I could have pushed . . . but I came with very little intentions.³⁴

Instead, Raji embodies the trope of the redeemed Arab: a native who had been embedded in a culture of violence and savagery but was able to leave it behind. As Landau explains:

Raji is a very special person. He was a terrorist but became a peace activist. So he lives behind the wall, but he kind of has a special position in the Palestinian society where everybody knows that he has Jews and Arabs meeting at his home promoting coexistence. And so, we got to meet him.³⁵

In Landau's description, racial, Orientalist, and colonial logics mingle: Raji was once a "terrorist" (embodying the racialized criminalization of Palestinian insurgency) but became a "peace activist" (illustrating the ability of Arabs to ascend toward enlightenment, civilization, progress). Spatial intimacy – both in the installation and outside it – is permitted because of Raji's "transformation." Landau exceptionalizes Raji and his story, presenting him as the token Arab who extended a hand, choosing peace and demonstrating kindness, and who therefore, hopefully, can be a beacon of hope. Raji is allowed attention and offered spotlight because he fits the liberal idea of the Arab who left violence for peace. The museum-goer is offered intimacy with Raji because of the safety represented by his redemption from a violent past.

There is no attempt to question, by contrast, the affective impacts of being a settler in Israel for the family in Modi'in. The intimate, here, is not only the sphere of individual subjectification, but also a site of ordering populations, dividing the modern world into those areas from which "modern liberal subjects" emerge and those that are deemed irrelevant because "they do not produce 'value' legible within modern classifications."³⁶ In neither instance is there an attempt to unsettle the colonial relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. Instead, the colonial violence that subjugates Palestinians, and which allows Israelis to become rights-bearing citizens of liberal democracy and global renderings of humanity, is subsumed within narratives of hospitality, kindness, and progress.³⁷

The installation invites Israelis to see themselves in Palestinians (as Arabs) – not just their homes, but their culture and their identity – abstracted from material political reality. Landau's reading of spatial intimacies suggests that culture can be disentangled from class, structural oppression, environmental context, and myriad other factors from which Palestinians must be removed in order to be brought close. Landau reasons:

My understanding of the forces here . . . it's really [as] much about West, East, technology, backwardness, postcolonialism. You know, you have to read Frantz Fanon, you have to understand Edward Said, to understand that there are a lot of forces to diminish the Arab identity within Israeli society . . . Really, half of us – our parents, our grandparents – spoke Arabic, enjoy Arab culture, are practically much more connected to the East as opposed to the West, which, by the way, a half a century ago was on the verge of terminating the entire Jewry of Europe.³⁸

Landau understands that the path to decolonization in Palestine requires undoing Zionism's Orientalism, but remains primarily focused on how that impacts Jews as citizens of Israel. Raji, his family, and their home serve to reassure museum guests of their humanity without pushing them to think about the Palestinian experience. Despite identifying the importance of anticolonial writers such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, Landau's installation perpetuates the ethos of colonialism and reaffirms an essentialized East/West dichotomy.³⁹

Decolonization is, in a sense, not just about highlighting how Palestinians are being identified, but the social, political, and cultural conditions that bring people to represent us in particular ways. Decolonial work is not just about revealing what the colonizer does to the colonized, but about understanding the underlining ideologies that guide their mode of being in the world. Stuart Hall writes that identities “actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others gives us.”⁴⁰ As social beings, we do not have full control on how we are being perceived and read. Landau's attempt to alter the ways in which Israelis understand themselves ends up reinforcing the logic of elimination and civilizing mission with which he seems to be grappling. This is not to suggest that Israelis' attempts to relate to Palestinians is necessarily doomed to fail. Rather, the teleological matter in which Landau narrates the story of Raji shows how affective concepts such as “transformative experience” and “reflexivity” can leave intact the racist ideologies and logics of elimination that permeate colonial relationalities. Ultimately, Landau presents a story of a Palestinian man saved from his violent past, creating a sense of security for the Jewish audience, but at the same time, producing a particular kind of Palestinian worthy of intimacy: the ex-terrorist, the redeemed Arab, the compliant moral subject.⁴¹

State Targeting of Intimacy

Unlike the latent racial superiority present in Landau's exhibition, the Israeli state has openly targeted – in policy and practice – Palestinian homes. Israeli state violence against Palestinian homes is motivated by an implicit understanding of the fundamental affective role homes play.⁴² Israel targets Palestinian homes because of their ability to produce and generate intimacies that extend beyond the narrow conception of home as domestic space. An attack on home is also an attack on the possibilities of collective

life.⁴³ This attempted annihilation also illuminates the connection between the spatial and the temporal: an attack on home as a spatial site is also a violation of Palestinians' visions of their past, present, and future. Irrespective of where a Palestinian home is located, a process of alienation takes place when Israelis knock on your door to warn you of the demolition, when you have to live in the house knowing what is coming, when you witness the demolition, and when you stand after the fact. Or when Palestinians in Gaza received an SMS message announcing that they are about to be bombed. And for Palestinians living in the global diaspora, whose number is estimated at more than six million and many of whom are forbidden to enter Palestine by Israeli authorities, this alienation reverberates transnationally.

Destruction of these infrastructures and the violent interruption of their relationship with Palestinians is part of a systematic process of de-homefying – destroying, rupturing, harassing, fragmenting, and defamiliarizing – spaces of intimacy that is part and parcel of the making of the Israeli state. Israel systematically targets Palestinian homes via evictions and demolitions. Israeli bureaucracy orders Palestinians to demolish their own homes if they cannot afford demolition by the state. From 2004 until 30 April 2020, under the “No Permit to Build” policy, 1,007 Palestinian residential units were demolished in East Jerusalem, just twenty minutes from the Israel Museum.⁴⁴ From 2006 until 30 April 2020, Israel demolished at least 1,552 more Palestinian residential units in the West Bank (not including East Jerusalem). The Civil Administration demolished another 1,630 non-residential structures in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) between January 2012 and 30 April 2020.⁴⁵ The Israeli army and Israeli settlers frequently invade and take over Palestinian homes for operations, for annexation, and for extrajudicial killings. Jewish settlers target Palestinian homes and subject their residents to daily bullying and intimidation in so-called “price tag” (*tag mechir*) attacks.

In the West Bank, a Palestinian home can be demolished if owned by a Palestinian suspected of a crime. In Gaza, the right of civilian's homes to be sanctuaries has been eroded during a siege that has now lasted over a decade. Israeli military forces put out infographics that identify Palestinian homes as spaces of violence and war-making.⁴⁶ In Jerusalem, paramilitary police frequently invade Palestinian homes to conduct violent arrests, even making it into a reality television show. Recently, one of these shows – *Jerusalem District* – was cancelled after one of the producers planted weapons inside a Palestinian home.⁴⁷ Here we can see Israelis' sense of entitlement to impose and (re)create their collective psycho-social obsession with the danger of the Palestinian home onto real life. Against this backdrop, when Landau invites Israelis to visit a Palestinian home (virtually), he asks them to simulate entry into a place otherwise identified *as a threat*, while never acknowledging that it is, in fact, constantly *under threat*. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the use of VR – like watching reality television – offers a form of protection.

In working to build a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine, the Israeli state paints Palestinian homes as violent places. *Visitors* suggests that curating a gaze inside a Palestinian home will allow museum guests to see it as a safe place, thereby

making its Palestinian inhabitants worthy Others. While the state is interested in stripping Palestinians of their homes, the artist experiments in stripping the home of Palestinian lived experience in the name of “transformative encounters.” The practice of violence is different, but the source is the same. Disappearance, in this sense, is not only about dispossession but also about a long process of extermination that entails making Palestinians feel like foreigners in their land and in their homes. State policy is interested in making what Henri Lefebvre calls habitation – or being together – difficult. It ruptures intimacy at different scales. While this logic of elimination is clear and unrestrained in state practices, it travels within Israeli society and infuses it at different levels. Landau is indicative of a broader narrative that emerges from liberal Israeli circles of welcoming Palestinians as though they are *visitors*, denying in subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways the relationship of Palestinians with the land. Landau is not wrong to evoke the psycho-emotional aspects of home – what he fails to acknowledge is that by stripping the story from the collective realities of both subjects in the exhibition, he engages in a false exercise of empathy that denies the multifaceted political and social realities at play.

Home as Target, Cultural Trope, and Lived Experience

The concept of home is a powerful metaphor, yet home is also a profoundly material site. Its material importance has been magnified not just in Palestine but around the world, as people were urged to shelter inside their homes to avoid contracting or transmitting the novel coronavirus COVID-19. Governments – democratic and otherwise – urged citizens to “stay home, stay safe.” This takes for granted the notion that sheltering at home is an option equally available to all, and that, in a world overtaken by unmanageable uncertainty, home is the safest place. Now more than ever, home takes on a visceral quality.

Introducing intimacy as both a subject targeted by state violence and a lens through which to read this state violence unsettles the reduction of Palestinian homes to sites of threat and disaster in the representation of Palestinian subjectivity. Thinking about intimacy not as the absence of political realities, but rather as a fundamental hermeneutic tool to understand the category of the human in relation to the circulation of power, allows for multiscale analysis of the circulation of power. All forms of violent oppression exert control through intimate emotional and psychological registers. And violent oppression can come in crude manifestations – geographical exile, house demolitions in East Jerusalem, bombing entire family compounds in Gaza, evictions from family homes followed by Jewish settler take-over – but it can also come in the form of commitments to a symmetry that does not exist in the name of creating a simulation of intimacy formulated through a narrow and limited definition of identity. By abstracting the Palestinian home from its socio-political conditions, *Visitors* represents a version of the Palestinian that is palpable for the Israeli museum guest. The installation sees the Palestinian population only

if they are remorseful and acknowledges the worthiness of Palestinians as humans only in relation to how close (or far) their social-cultural material ways are to those of Israel's Jewish population.

Israeli state practices and popular culture produce an entire psycho-geographic world – an entire representational map of Palestinians – through and against Palestinian homes. By this I mean that there is a systematic process, state-sanctioned and otherwise, of laying claim over Palestinian homes without the consideration of the lived experiences of Palestinians, let alone their right to rights. Landau is not naïve to describe the home as a foundational infrastructure for a person. Engaging conceptually with intimacy not as the absence of political realities in encounters with the Other, as Landau's VR installation entices us to do, but rather as a foundational hermeneutic tool to understand how actors (re)produce the category of the *human* in relation to the circulation of power, as Lisa Lowe suggests, can prove to be both a productive analytical rubric and catalyst for a progressive anti-colonial relationality.

The connection between Israel's systematic targeting of Palestinian homes – through settler colonial ownership laws, military violence, and representation – and the various mode in which it gets picked up by different actors (journalists, artists, academics) in their reading of Palestinians and their home – is a site of important future inquiry. Some critics might argue that *Visitors* is merely a poorly executed art piece. Others might suggest that devoting time and energy to such projects is a waste of time, which only gives further exposure to what is evidently problematic. However, as Ilan Pappé suggested at a recent conference on Palestine held in Istanbul, taking the time to examine and evaluate, in anthropological terms, the work of Israeli liberals provides us a lens to understand the “overall moral rhythm of a society.”⁴⁸ Notably, Landau's work was also picked up by international media outlets such as the *Guardian*, BBC, CBC, and al-Jazeera,⁴⁹ who all suggested that *Visitors* was an interesting experiment in empathy through an intimate encounter – without critical inquiry into the underlining ideological assumptions.

In her essay on homeplace, bell hooks quotes Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Han who said that “resistance, at root, must mean more than resistance against war. It is a resistance against all kinds of things that are like war So perhaps, resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system.”⁵⁰ The framing that strips Palestinians of their lived experience in order to make them palatable is a kind of thing that is like war, with material reverberations. Daniel Landau may genuinely take seriously the idea of “being together.” Yet it is this sincerity that is dangerous. If Israelis like him can only *see* Palestinians, and accept them as human, in museum-protected installations, guarded by a VR headset, what hope is there for genuine, reciprocal, and intimate respect that is so necessary for the transformative futures of both peoples. If the anticolonial project is one not limited to establishing symmetry between colonizer and colonized, but fundamentally invested in reconfiguring the relationship between them, then the work for transformative futures cannot reduce the home to a cultural trope or a target, but must consider it in all its complexity and contradictions.

Sabrién Amrov is a PhD candidate in Human Geography at the University of Toronto. She would like to thank: Daniel Landau for taking the time to speak with her; Emily Gilbert for assistance with an earlier version of this article; the two anonymous reviewers for providing great feedback on earlier versions of this article; and Alex Winder for his continuous assistance in making the article stronger. A special thank you to the 2019 New Directions in Palestinian Studies workshop.

Epigraph

Quoted in Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2000), 174, excerpt online at granta.com/reflections-on-exile/ (accessed 11 October 2020).

Endnotes

- 1 “I to Eye, Together or Alone,” Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2019, online at imj.org.il/en/content/i-eyetogether-or-alone (accessed 22 June 2020).
- 2 Author interview with Daniel Landau, February 2019.
- 3 Author interview with Daniel Landau, February 2019.
- 4 Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 33.
- 5 Landau explains that most of the museum visitors were Jewish Israelis; for the few Palestinians from the West Bank who did visit, namely the Sabatin family, he had to request special permits from Israeli authorities allowing them to attend the showcase.
- 6 The architect behind the Israel Museum appropriated the design pattern specific to Palestinian culture for his design. On the museum’s domination of culture and land, see Eran Neuman, “Al Mansfeld and the Interpretation of the Israel Museum,” *Journal of Architecture* 20, no. 5 (2015): 803–30.
- 7 See, for example: Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020); Walid Khalidi, ed., *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991); Ilan Pappé, *The Forgotten Palestinians: A History of the Palestinians in Israel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Times Books, 1980); and Magid Shihade, “Settler Colonialism and Conflict: The Israeli State and Its Palestinian Subjects,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 108–23.
- 8 I refer to the Israeli left in general terms to encompass the various organizations and individuals committed to ideals of social justice.
- 9 Author interview with Daniel Landau, February 2019.
- 10 Landau’s view here is consistent with geographers like James Duncan and David Lambert, who write that home is “perhaps the most emotive of geographical concepts, inextricable from that of self, family, nation, sense of place, and sense of responsibility toward those who share one’s place in the world.” James S. Duncan and David Lambert, “Landscapes of Home,” in *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, ed. James S. Duncan, Nuala C. Johnson, and Richard H. Schein (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 395.
- 11 Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 12 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Sarah Ihmoud, “Exiled at Home: Writing Return and the Palestinian Home,” *Biography* 37 (2014): 377–97.
- 13 bell hooks, “Homeplace (a Site of Resistance),” in *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)*, ed. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 383–90, quote at 384.
- 14 Ara Wilson, “Intimacy,” in *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*, ed. Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 31–56.

- 15 Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Ihmoud, “Exiled at Home.”
- 16 See, for example, Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- 17 Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, “The Global and the Intimate,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1–2 (2006): 13–24
- 18 Lisa Lowe specifically also uses intimacy to emphasize a sense of self in close connection to others, or as Natalie Oswin and Eric Olund put it, “It is the sphere in which we become who we are, the space in which the self emerges.” Challenging the normative definition of the human brought by liberal colonialism and imperialism, Lowe wants readers to think about residual forms of intimacy (the ones that are documented as banal, if even considered) in a way to “reveal this proximity” of what might appear to be geographically and conceptually distant sites. For Lowe, a conversation about intimacy is a conversation about both spatial and temporal proximity to reveal the formation of powers. See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), quote at xx; and Natalie Oswin and Eric Olund, “Governing Intimacy,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (February 2010): 60–67, quote at 60.
- 19 Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 282.
- 20 Hiba Alhomoud, “What Does Affect Theory Do? Or, How to Pay Attention to the Possibilities of Attending,” *eTopia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* (2017), online at (etopia.journals.yorku.ca) bit.ly/34OOoYd (accessed 24 September 2020).
- 21 Lisa Lowe and Ann Laura Stoler’s work on the colonial archives and bureaucracy also show us that to study the intimate is not to turn away from structures of dominance but to relocate condition of possibility and relations and forces of production outside the structures of the state. See Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*; Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 22 Author interview with Daniel Landau, February 2019.
- 23 Berlant, “Intimacy,” 283.
- 24 On the epistemic violence that such a move entails, see Silvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.
- 25 Author interview with Daniel Landau, February 2019.
- 26 Video sound bite from David Landau, *Visitors*, 2018–19, multimedia installation, Jerusalem, Israel Museum.
- 27 Video sound bite from Landau, *Visitors*, also available online at www.daniel-landau.com/visitors (accessed 25 September 2020).
- 28 Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 29 See, for example, Ariella Azoulay’s ethnographic take on archives as she writes about redeeming her Arabness denied by her Algerian father: Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).
- 30 Lana Tatour, “The Israeli Left: Part of the Problem or the Solution? A Response to Giulia Daniele,” *Global Discourse* 6, no. 3 (2016): 487–92, quote at 490.
- 31 Edward W. Said and Jean Mohr, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 3.
- 32 Author interview with Daniel Landau, February 2019.
- 33 Miki Kratsman and Ariella Azoulay, *The Resolution of the Suspect* (Santa Fe, NM: Radius Books, 2016), 28.
- 34 Author interview with Daniel Landau, February 2019.
- 35 Author interview with Daniel Landau, February 2019.
- 36 Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 17–18.
- 37 On the epistemological legacies of colonialism in present understandings of humanity, see Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality.” Randall Williams, in his critique of human rights and rights-bearing citizens, writes, “As long as the power to confer or withhold the recognition of the Other’s humanity remains a decision made elsewhere, there will be no substantial alteration of the material conditions that serve as the basis for the very possibility of a distinction between the human and the inhuman.” Randall Williams, *The Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 100.
- 38 Author interview with Daniel Landau,

- February 2019.
- 39 Williams, *Divided World*.
- 40 Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," *New Left Review* 1, 209 (January/February 1995): 8.
- 41 See articles on Intimacy by Mary Poovey, Deborah Grayson, Elizabeth Povinelli, and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998).
- 42 On the affective dimension of home destruction, see Marshall Berman, "Falling Towers: City Life after Urbicide," in *Geography and Identity: Living and Exploring Geopolitics of Identity*, ed. Dennis Crowe (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1996), 187.
- 43 Kanishka Goonewardena and Stefan Kipfer suggest that the affective implications of colonization and urbicide are not only about destruction of the built environment, but a fundamental annihilation of a certain kind of (heterogenous) urban life. Kanishka Goonewardena and Stefan Kipfer, "Postcolonial Urbicide: New Imperialism, Global Cities, and the Damned of the Earth," *New Formations* 59 (2007): 23–33.
- 44 B'Tselem, "Statistics on Demolition of Houses Built without Permits in East Jerusalem," updated 6 November 2020, online at www.btselem.org/planning_and_building/east_jerusalem_statistics (accessed 28 September 2020).
- 45 These include fences, cisterns, storerooms, farming buildings, businesses, and public buildings. B'Tselem, "Statistics on Demolition of Houses."
- 46 See, for example, the Israeli Defense Force's infographic tweeted in English during the Israeli onslaught on Gaza: Israel Defense Forces, Twitter post, 24 July 2014, 3:40 am, online at (twitter.com) bit.ly/373V1bJ (accessed 25 September 2020).
- 47 Nir Hasson, "Producer of Israeli Reality TV Show Apologizes for Planting Gun in Palestinian Home," *Haaretz*, 12 August 2019, online at (haaretz.com) bit.ly/3lH7iqQ (accessed 28 September 2020).
- 48 Ilan Pappé, "Can Israeli Settlements Be Dismantled," paper presented at The Question of Palestine: Examining History, Geopolitics and Future Prospects, Istanbul, 28 April 2019, online at (youtube.com) bit.ly/33SFHwE (accessed 28 September 2020).
- 49 See Daniel Landau's website, online at www.daniel-landau.com/press---media (accessed 28 September 2020).
- 50 hooks, "Homeplace," 385.