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Soil, territory, land: The spatial politics of settler organic farming in the West Bank, Israel/Palestine

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Abstract

In settler colonial settings, agriculture is a means of reclaiming territorial sovereignty and indigenous identity. Turning attention to the Jewish settlers in the West Bank and their multiple uses and abuses of organic farming, this article explores epistemic and political spatial operations on the colonial frontier. Applying a relational conceptualization of three spatial modalities—soil, territory, and land—we explore the ways in which these modalities serve as political apparatuses: *Soil* designates the romantic perception of cultivable space, *territory* is concerned with borders and political sovereignty, and *land* is seen as a space of economic value and as a means of production. While agriculture is a well-known instrument of expansion and dispossession, organic farming contributes to the colonial operation by binding together affective attachment to the place, and new economic singularity in relation to environmental and ethical claims. We argue that organic farming practices converge claims for local authenticity, spatial appropriation, and high economic values that are embedded in what we term the *colonial quality turn*. Ultimately, organic farming in the West Bank normalizes the inherent violence of the colonial project and strengthens the settlers' claim for political privilege.

Keywords

Organic agriculture, settler colonialism, Israel/Palestine, Colonial Quality Turn, soil, land, territory

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Introduction

Known as "the father figure of the outposts," as well as "the sheriff of the hills," Avri Ran, the owner of *Givo't Olam* farm, is one of the founders of the notorious hilltop youth—a movement of radical Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Ran's reputation is synonymous with violent land grab of Palestinian property. He is, however, also one of the most prominent organic farmers in Israel/Palestine. In the context of the West Bank, critical consumers often consider organic farming by Jewish settlers as nothing short of greenwashing, meant to conceal the violent land grab by the liberal means of ecological and alternative agriculture. For Ran, however, organic farming is embedded in what he perceives to be religious theology and law. "The entire Talmud [a central text in Jewish scriptures] is all about organic farming. It's a textbook for organic farming!" he told us when we met him in the summer of 2018 at his farm. "Organic farming is preserved in the Jewish genes." Nevertheless, Ran also insisted on a different story of efficacy and quality-oriented agricultural production: "Don't look for slogans here, you shouldn't seek messianic statements [. . .]. Conventional farming is dangerous and poisonous. It would be a crime to use pesticides here. It's suicidal. This farm is about quantity and quality."[1] The intertwined meanings embedded in Ran's narrative on organic farming—environmentalism, religiosity and productivity—reflect the changing economic and cultural structures of Israeli settler colonialism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.[2]

This article discusses how Jewish settlers in the West Bank utilize organic farming to claim territorial sovereignty and indigenous identity. Against the common view of organic farming as profoundly related to universal values such as sustainability, fairness, and ecological responsibility (Barton, 2018; IFOAM, 2008), we contend that organic agriculture in the West Bank is part of the broader political and exclusionary process. We point to the multiple ways in which non-conventional (or alternative) agriculture and colonial spatialization converge.[3]

The article brings into conversation three conceptual fields: the territorial-geopolitical aspects of colonial agriculture; the relations between capitalism and settler colonialism; and the prominence of soil in the philosophical foundations of organic agriculture. It proposes a relational conceptualization of colonial place-making based on three complementary spatial modalities (i.e., three different ways whereby space and place-making are expressed, experienced, and activated): *soil, territory*, and *land*. According to the suggested analytical framework, *soil* is designated as a holistic and romantic perception of cultivable space; *territory* as concerned with defensible borders and political sovereignty (Appadurai, 1996; Elden, 2010); and *land* is conceptualized as a space of economic exchange which seeks to maximize resources and instrumentalize production (Elden, 2010).[4]

While we distinguish analytically between these spatial modalities, in practice they display continuities and are relationally intertwined (on relational geopolitics see Monterescu, 2013; Yiftachel, 2016). Building on these modalities, we show how the depoliticization of land and the commodification of soil normalize the governmentality of territory, and how quality-driven organic farming emerges as a gastro-political platform in settler-colonial settings.

The polysemy of organic discourse and practice lends itself to highly diverse interpretations. From its inception in the early 1980s, organic farming among Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories has undergone several transformations. Initiated as a private Jewish agricultural project, organic farming in the West Bank and Gaza Strip instantiated for over three decades visions of "the redemption of the land."[5] The organic ethos has been embedded in biblical mythology and used as a means to claim Jewish exclusionary autochthony, as

well as to appropriate material resources such as farming land and water (Etkes, 2013; Grosglik, 2021; Kotef, 2020). As we demonstrate in this paper, organic agriculture in West Bank settlements diversified and shifted to a hybrid discourse addressing quality, politics, and philosophies of place-making, resulting in an ongoing normalization of the settlement project and the commodification of its products. Furthermore, we identify a new shift that we term the "colonial quality turn." This turn stems from the global trend in agriculture and food production known as "the quality turn," which refers to the current emphasis of food producers responding to the demand of affluent and reflexive consumers (Galvin, 2011; Warner, 2007). We will show how discourses and practices related to the symbolic value attributed to organic produce are inextricably related to place-making and the commodification of settler products.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork which included visits to 11 organic farms in the West Bank, 12 open-ended interviews with Jewish organic farmers, and content analysis of their marketing materials, this article explores the connections between the violence of colonial territoriality and the "quality space" (Monterescu and Handel, 2020) of organic farming. The article starts by conceptually framing the three modalities of soil, territory, and land. We then outline the contours of the field of organic farming as a historical and political project in relation to Jewish expansion and Palestinian dispossession. Next, we describe the discourses and practices employed by organic settler farmers to solidify their claims. We conclude by arguing that the implementations of these spatial modalities through organic farming normalize the inherent violence of the colonial project and strengthens the settlers' claim for political privilege.

Between soulful soil and commodified land: Settler colonialism and the political spatiality of organic agriculture

The relations between agriculture and settler-colonialism are nothing new. For the colonial state, modernizing agriculture has been a major tool for land possession and dispossession, for creating colonial subjectivities, and for regulating indigenous spaces (Anthias, 2019; Wolfe, 2006). Using monocultural and industrialized farming practices, agriculture contributed directly to the spatial project of settler colonialism. As Rotz (2017) argues, "farmers have played a specific role: the land and freedom their communities gained in the 'new world' resulted directly from the dispossession of indigenous peoples." Largely supported by the state, "agriculture, with its life-sustaining connectedness to land, is a potent symbol of settler-colonial identity" (Wolfe, 2006: 396). As a project of environmental development, agriculture emerges as an enterprise of expansion through modernist economic, scientific, and bureaucratic practices (Davis, 2007; Tesdell, 2017).[6] The case of the Jewish settlement of Palestine can be seen as emblematic of the use of industrial agriculture for signifying modernity in relation to native agricultural practices, as well as for spatial and societal domination of new settler communities (Novick, 2014; Shafir, 1996; Tesdell, 2017). Conventional farming has always represented the contradictions of the Zionist project itself: a modernist project of expansion and an identity work of autochthonous return to the land of the forefathers at the same time.

Disavowing modernist-conventional agriculture, the rise of the organic movement renewed a romantic connection between identity, space, and farming (Barton, 2018). It emphasizes a renewed intimate connection with cultivated spaces, local, small-scale and sustainable agricultural practices, thus reframing the Jewish relation with the land.

The following sections will explore the special place organic agriculture holds in contemporary Jewish settlement in the West Bank.

We highlight the multiple uses and abuses of organic farming in a settler-colonial power arrangement: land grabbing, capital accumulation, and "self-indigenizing" (Veracini, 2015). Veracini (2013) distinguishes between colonialism and settler colonialism, claiming that

> in theoretical terms, one crucial distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism as separate formations is that the first aims to perpetuate itself whereas the latter aims to supersede itself … that is, when the settlers cease to be defined as such and become 'natives,' and their position becomes normalized.[7]

Normalization takes different forms: Jewish settlers in the West Bank draw on the *longue durée* temporality of soil and biblical mythology to argue that Jews inhabited the region long before the Palestinians, thus substantiating their claim for exclusive autochthony. At the same time, the settlers profess environmental care, as opposed to the irresponsible neglect they attribute to the native (*inter alia* repositioning Palestinian lands as *terra nullius*; see also Braverman, 2019). Concomitantly, a process of normalization via the colonial quality turn (namely, a process of depoliticization by means of a discourse on agricultural quality) is taking place. In the process, indigeneity is predicated on unapologetic spatial appropriation, which legitimizes the metamorphosis of a settler into a native by trivializing territorial violence. These forms spell out different connections between identity, history, and space, and by implication, the varying relationships between soil, land, and territory.

We argue that the three modalities of soil, territory, and land play a crucial part in the settler-colonial place-making in Israel/Palestine. The first vertex in our model is *soil*, representing not only roots and belonging (Appadurai, 1996), but also ecology, materiality, and visceral relationality between the human and non-human sphere (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015; Salazar et al., 2020). The affective connection to soil stands against the "violence of abstraction" (Lefebvre, 1991: 289) inherent to both the political production of territory and the capitalist production of land. While the notions of *territory* and *land* are predicated on the "accumulation of space" (Latour, 1986), namely the emptying-out of a given space from its materiality, historical context, and sociality (Blomley, 2003), the notion of *soil* suggests an imagined return to the embodied passion of the place.[8] As soil generation and regeneration usually occurs at timescales well beyond the human life cycle (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015), it is not surprising that they are socially and politically imagined as natural and timeless. This perception is congruent with the myths of autochthony—the idea that people spring naturally from the earth and are directly linked to the soil of which they are born (Elden, 2013)—but also with the desire for self-indigenization as a crucial characteristic of settler-colonial identities (Veracini, 2013).

In the context of organic farming, soil has always been a basic pillar in the philosophical foundations of the global organic movement. As the deepest concept of the philosophy of organic farming, soil forms a holistic ecosystem that embodies relationships between humans and non-humans. It includes all living creatures in a given space, underground and above, bound together in the longue durée. In *The Living Soil*, one of the canonical texts of the global organic agriculture movement, Eve Balfour (1943) argued that there is a causal link between human health and what she terms "soil vitality." Following Balfour and her successors, "soil" assumed a central status in organic discourse: not as an object for economic exploitation but rather as a "living body," where all constituents—minerals, microorganisms, insects, plants, animals, and humans—work in mutual harmony.

The complexity of the soil concept—including humanistic and inclusionary meanings, as well as chauvinistic and exclusionary ("blood and soil") meanings—is inherent to the philosophy of organic farming. The relationships between soil and social health received special political attention early on, with the writings of botanist Albert Howard (1947), who pointed to connections between soil fertility and national resilience. Thus, the interlacing of organic agriculture and parochialism (religiosity and right-wing nationalism) is not new, and certainly not unique to the Israeli/Palestinian case. Looking at the political affiliations of organic agriculture from a historical and global perspective, one notes that many of the early practitioners and advocates of organic farming were associated with an anti-liberal worldview affiliated with conservative groups and eco-fascism (Reed, 2001; Sayre, 2011).

As a political space produced by various state apparatuses, *territory* is long considered the central concept in scholarly debates on the Occupied Territories (Handel, 2009; Yiftachel, 2002). *Prima facie*, the struggle is always over territory as part of a constant attempt to achieve the highest degree of control and sovereignty over the space at stake (Kimmerling, 1989). In this case, territoriality is not only formally exercised by the state, but also by the settler farmers, who function as private entrepreneurs claiming sovereignty over the disputed territory. Thus, they sustain a long Zionist history of seizing land and setting boundaries through agriculture (Neumann, 2011; Novick, 2014). Nevertheless, as we demonstrate below, the territorial struggle is not the sole determinant in the case of agriculture in the West Bank, as the economic and the cultural aspects of settling the colonial frontier are equally consequential.

Land, which embodies property relations and means of production is the third vertex in our triadic analysis. The notion of land recalls that modern agriculture—organic or conventional—is also an economic business in a competitive capitalist system. The rise of "corporate organic" in the Global North beginning in the early 1990s is the result of processes of industrialization and standardization of organic agriculture. Subsequently, contemporary organic agriculture—in Israel/Palestine and elsewhere—seeks to be profitable, and therefore must reckon with land as a means of production, as well as with the exploitation of labor for profit, marketing, and branding (Grosglik, 2021; Guthman, 2014; Johnston et al., 2009). As we describe below, pragmatic considerations of efficiency, profit, and marketing strategies are also an important part of organic agriculture in the West Bank. Like other settler economic initiatives in the West Bank, organic farming is heavily subsidized by the state and the occupation authorities due to the strategic role of agriculture in land grabbing (Etkes, 2013). Nevertheless, organic farmers in the West Bank also compete in a segmented global neoliberal market for economic reasons and adjust themselves to its logic.

The history of organic agriculture beyond the green line: Space and national ideology

Since 1967, agriculture has increasingly served as a central tool by which the settlement movement consolidated control over large areas in the Occupied Territories. Over 103,000 dunams (25,450 acres) in the West Bank are currently designated for Jewish agriculture. This area is much larger than the actual built-up area of the settlements and outposts, which is about 60,000 dunams (14,826 acres). Between Jewish agricultural expansion and sprawling settlements, the last decades have seen a decline of about one-third in cultivated Palestinian agricultural lands in the West Bank. Since 1997, settlers have taken over about 24,000 dunams of land through agricultural activity of which about 10,000 dunams are on privately

owned Palestinian land (Etkes, 2013). These agricultural activities can be seen as motivated by three interrelated factors: agro-religious ideology striving for an unmediated connection between people and place, economic considerations striving to maximize revenues, and territorial expansionism striving to extend Jewish control over Palestinian land. Organic agriculture in the West Bank and Gaza Strip emerged in the late 1980s, and played a relatively minor role in this broader project. However, due to its symbolic identification with locality and sustainability, as well as its commercial value in local and global markets, it has become an important sector within the colonial project. The critical juncture in incorporating organic agriculture in the settler movement was spearheaded by Mario Levi, known as "the pioneer of organic agriculture in Israel" (Grosglik, 2021). In 1983, while serving as the CEO of the IBOAA (Israel Bio-Organic Agriculture Association), Mario began to promote the project. The transformation of the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and West Bank into a hub of organic agriculture and a major force in the Israeli agro-economy was accompanied by several discursive frameworks—most of which included an agricultural–scientific perspective in relation to the quality of the soil. When we asked Mario about the early days of organic agriculture in the Occupied Territories, he argued that the development of organic agriculture was particularly suitable for these "uncontaminated" soils:

> [The soils] were cultivated [prior to the Jewish settlement] in primitive ways. Many of these lands were 'virgin soils' ['*adama betulit'* - uncultivated soil], these were soils that were not cultivated using conventional methods. It is first and foremost a scientific matter.

Here, the scientific-agrarian and nationalist discourses converge. Echoing the old Zionist slogan "a land without people to people without land" (and thus referring to the Palestinian space as *terra nullius*), Mario's notion of "virgin soils" goes beyond its scientific-agrarian meaning. The place is portrayed as empty and undeveloped, and thus should be redeemed by the Jewish settlers, particularly by organic farmers.[9]

Contemporary relational modalities of organic farming tie together material and non-material components such as soil types, human labor, water regimes, agricultural practices, land regulations, ideological discourses, and local expertise. Understanding the mutual co-constitution of soils, land regulations, and modes of territoriality in the West Bank requires a brief introduction to the 1858 Ottoman Land Code that still guides the land regime in the West Bank.[10] Article 78 of the Ottoman Land Code states that the sovereign can seize ownerless and uncultivated lands (Btselem, 2012). While the original purpose of Article 78 was to encourage agriculture in the areas that were distant from the center of the Ottoman Empire and for the purpose of eliciting taxes, the state of Israel has largely used it as a means of land expropriation. In its new apparatus, non-cultivated lands have been declared "state lands," an act that opened the path to use them for settlement expansion.

While the Ottoman Code states that anyone who has cultivated land for 10 consecutive years without appeal is entitled to continue cultivating it, it does not specify what are the exact types of cultivation that grant this right (Amara, 2013). The British Mandate authorities, followed by the Jordanian ones, ruled that agricultural cultivation is "reasonable cultivation" that complies with the conditions of the cultivated area (Amara, 2013). Also, grazing was considered as a means of common cultivation, granting land rights to local farmers (Btselem, 2012). However, the Israeli interpretation of the concept of "reasonable cultivation" is much stricter, not recognizing grazing as cultivation and demanding a cumulative cultivation of more than 50% of the entire area in question, regardless of the type of soil. Thus, areas that were perceived as uncultivable—or not cultivable enough—were

declared "state lands," including vast areas on the "desert threshold" (the line of 200 mm of annual precipitation; see Weizman and Sheikh, 2015), as well as many hilltops in the West Bank that have been traditionally less cultivated due to the rocky soil. These lands have become easy prey for land grab (Kedar et al., 2018). Thus, the conditions of these terrains and the ambiguities of legal property regime made it possible for Jewish settlers to extend their claims on the space. Since 1967, 34% of the West Bank has been declared state land. While 99.76% of state land allocations were given to the Jewish settlements, only 0.24% were granted for Palestinian use and cultivation.[11]

Organic soil: Redeeming the lost roots

Har-Sinai Farm is an outpost located on the outskirts of Susya settlement in the south Hebron hills (a region also known in Arabic as Masafer Yatta). The region is part of a semi-arid area on the desert threshold, with an annual average precipitation of just above 200 mm of rain. Due to the scarcity of natural springs, inhabitants of the region need to collect rainwater in cistern hoardings. The soil in the area is rocky on the hilltops with shallow loess and lithosol in the lower parts. Traditionally, agriculture in the area is based on dryland farming of field crops (such as wheat and other grains) around the stream basins and grazing in the rest of the area. Scarcity makes soil and water an integral part of the political conflict in the area, not only in terms of material needs and land regulations, but also in the symbolic narratives of authenticity and connection to the place.

Har-Sinai farm was founded by Dalia and her late husband Yair, to "put down roots in the land [of Israel] and spiritual roots in heaven."[12] While the farm itself is built on declared "state land," most of its agricultural lands are located outside the declared area. As many other outposts, the farm was built without state authorization yet it receives de facto governmental support with infrastructures, military protection, and direct and indirect budgets (Tzfadia, 2017).

Over the years, Yair Har-Sinai became a revered figure among many Jewish settlers and his persona was associated with the image of an unruly and independent settler who walks freely in contested areas as if these are his own property. Murdered by Palestinians in 2001, Yair remains a mythical figure among the Jewish settlers and their supporters. Dalia, for her part, has continued to run the farm and advance its initial goals since Yair's death. The story of Har-Sinai farm, the legacy of Yair, and Dalia's activities articulate the concept of soil by portraying organic farming as a romantic mission of redemption. Raised in secular *Moshavim* (cooperative agricultural communities) in the central district of Israel, Dalia and Yair had strong connections to land and nature, but not necessarily to religious spirituality. This changed after a crucial meeting with Mario Levi (the CEO of the IBOAA) who was a religious charismatic figure. Dalia and Yair "discovered [their] Jewish roots," as Dalia put it. Subsequently, they moved to the Susya settlement, established in 1983 on the lands of the Palestinian village of Susya.[13] Meeting with Dalia on the farm, she rationalized her life project in terms of sustainability, tradition and modesty:

> I have no interest in expansion. Other [Jewish settler organic] farmers want to be bigger, to show presence. It is as if they say: 'we want to display power, ability and control beyond what we can actually produce, beyond our ability to cultivate the soil.' While [those] farmers were focused on growing crops, we wanted to learn the ancient methods of cultivating the soil, dryland farming,[14] the methods used by our ancestors. We looked for ancient species of grapes and olives.

However, the conversion to organic farming and the departure from industrial agricultural technologies (as Dalia put it) were mediated by the couple's complex relations with their Palestinian neighbors. What Dalia described as a "return to the Jewish roots" was in practice learnt through mimicking local Palestinian practices. Dalia reflects on their process of mimesis:

> Yair learned a lot from Arab shepherds. He realized that the way to cultivate the soil and to protect the land would be to raise goats. We were the first [Jewish shepherds] in Judea and Samaria. At first, the [Jewish] residents of the settlement were surprised and told us 'shepherding is only for the Arabs'. But Yair did not give in and we bought a small herd. He even learned to speak Arabic fluently. But later, they saw that [through herding] the soils have actually returned to us, so the Arabs were less enthusiastic [...]. Yair went out every day with the herd to graze around Susya, and slowly the Arabs withdrew.

Dalia's narrative revolves around the claim that "soils have actually returned to us," and discursively elides violence and territorialization, as if giving the soil itself the agency over the humans that cultivate it. Her narrative emphasizes that their main interest was not territorial expansion, nor material profit, but rather authenticity, self-sufficiency and a deep connection between Jewish identity and the soil. Nevertheless, what Dalia and Yair have actually done was territorial expansion. In Yair's memoir-cum-manifesto, practices of "pushing out the Arabs" are entangled with folkish-nationalistic meanings of farming:

> We have to train an army of Jewish warriors who will yield bread from the soil and occupy it with their feet. The Arabs are about to finish their shift in the Land of Israel. They must be displaced and abandon their grip on the sanctity of these lands [...] and return to their place. (Har-Sinai, 2007: 43)

Accordingly, practices of working the soil (*avodat ha-adama*) embody a paradox: recognizing Palestinian expertise and mimicking it, while maintaining radically antagonistic relations to the original owners of this knowledge (Braverman, 2019; Ram, 2014). This differentiation is based on the valorization of Jewish organic farming, and explicitly blaming the Palestinians for harming the environment. For example, Isaac, a settler farmer from Bat Ayin (a settlement near Bethlehem) who shares a similar worldview to Dalia and Yair told us in an interview:

> We are organic farmers. They [the Palestinian farmers] use pesticides because they need to sell huge amounts of produce, so they sell contaminated produce. It all starts with the philosophy of Esau [referring to the biblical figure of the farmer who is 'a man of the field,' characterized by his 'rough' qualities and greediness]. Esau always wanted more and more profit. But for us [the Jewish settler farmers], organic means 'this is our produce, our soils and our way to get settled.' My settlement is supposed to satisfy all my needs, not to maximize profits. We are settlers in the deep sense of the word.

Organic territory: Violence and expansion

The notion of territory embeds the processes of place-making in a political system of active bordering (Elden, 2010). Territory, as Mark Neocleous explains (Neocleous, 2003: 102), is etymologically derived "from *terra* (of earth, and thus a domain) [...] but it also has links

with *terrere*, meaning to frighten [. . .]. Territory is a land occupied and maintained through terror. The secret of territoriality is thus violence." In the context of Israel/Palestine, while the settler project of "working the soil" operates within the framework of religious-utopian nationalism and a folkish-romantic discourse of redemption, colonial territoriality hinges on a variegated repertoire of strategies—ranging from violent land grab to a discourse of mass production.

Arguably, one of the most prominent figures in that process would be Avri Ran of Givo't Olam. Similar to Dalia and Yair Har-Sinai, Avri was not "born" into radical religious nationalism. He grew up in a secular and socialist kibbutz, converted to a religious way of life, and moved to the settlement of Itamar—in the north part of the West Bank, between Ramallah and Nablus. Soon after, he decided to take over one of the high hills, east of the settlement of Itamar, and set up a new unauthorized outpost, "Givo't Olam," translated literally as the Eternal Hills.

Avri's project departs from Har-Sinai's vision of small-scale autarchic agriculture by launching a business model of organic farming which is fully integrated in the colonial and capitalist economy. In the territorial modality, as represented by Avri, soil loses its tangible and intangible qualities—as stressed in organic philosophy—and becomes subjugated to the logics of expansion, both spatial and economic. Avri's farming is aimed at bordering, ordering, and othering (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002) by creating bordered facts on the ground to mark the Jewish-settler territory and violently claim his right to conquer and exclude.

Givo't Olam is located in a relatively rainy region (with an annual average of around 600 mm), characterized by *terra rosa*: a well-drained reddish Mediterranean soil, that is typical to karstic regions. Historically, most of the lands in this fertile region have been cultivated by Palestinian villagers (Doumani, 1995). Since soil thickness ranges from a few centimeters on the rocky hilltops to a few meters in the stream basins, agriculture is traditionally limited to the lower slopes, while the hilltops serve mainly for grazing. After the occupation of this area by the state of Israel in 1967, many lots around the hilltops were declared "state lands," paving the way to their grab by Jewish settlers.

From its inception, Givo't Olam sought to become an organic farming power center. The total area currently occupied by Avri is spread over 900 dunams, most of which was privately owned Palestinian area until Avri dispossessed it. These lands were rapidly converted into a farm of 70,000 free-range, organically raised, chickens. The feed for these chickens (a mixture of organic clover and oats processed in a mill Avri built) is grown organically in the 450 dunams of land around the outpost. Nowadays, Avri is by far the major producer of organic eggs in Israel/Palestine. In addition to the organic egg business, he built a goat pen, raises thousands of goats, and produces a variety of organic dairy products. Currently, the vast area that Givo't Olam covers includes animal pens, olive groves, fields of organic vegetables, a flour mill, a vineyard, offices for marketing, and a synagogue.

Avri refers to himself as a "self-made man," insisting that he built his spacious organic farm with his bare hands, with no support from governmental or regional authorities. Despite this rhetoric, his organic enterprise was heavily subsidized by various state apparatuses. As part of a strategic plan carried out by Itamar settlers in the last two decades, Avri's actions endeavored to create territorial continuity between Itamar settlement and Gitit settlement in the Jordan Valley, nearly 20 kilometers away. To this end, Itamar settlers have taken over more than 13,000 dunams of Palestinian lands adjacent the towns Akraba and Beit Furik and Yanun village. The state has actively supported the project of expansion by providing infrastructure such as roads, electricity, military protection and overlooking the settlers' violent attacks on Palestinians and recurrent legal violations (Handel, 2009;

Kotef, 2020). Moreover, Avri receives governmental veterinary supervision and a government-guaranteed price for eggs determined by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Finally, he receives organic certification services from Agrior—one of the leading organic certification and inspection agencies authorized to operate in Israel according to the Law for the Regulation of Organic Produce in Israel (Grosglik, 2021).

When we visited Givo't Olam and interviewed Avri, we realized that for him, organic farming serves as an apparatus to distinguish between the Jewish legitimate dwellers of the place and the illegitimate invaders—the Palestinians, to whom he often refers as "an invasive species." The former, according to him, are traditionally gifted farmers, blessed by some sort of inherent efficacy. As he puts it:

> Our Sages [*Hazal]* speak about farmers who can take a lump of soil and know intuitively what should grow in it [. . .]. And back then – it was organic farming, obviously! It was organic farming that could carry the entire world! [. . .] We are the best farmers in the world, and the most efficient in the world, [. . .] because of the 'Jewish genius'.

For Avri, organic farming is not only an expression of inherited knowledge, but also of a superior power of will attributed to Jewish farmers. His reasoning is based on both practical-instrumental considerations and environmental racism. Spatial development, environmental care, the creation of healthy agricultural ecosystems and productive ways of farming—all serve to compartmentalize Jews and non-Jews:

> We live alongside the Arabs, so it's very easy to see the difference: I always want more. I'm Jewish! It's a matter of genes [. . .], I would never agree that my yields will amount only to a hundred kilo of wheat per acre. No way, that's not enough for me! The gentile farmer— not only the Arab farmer, any non-Jewish gentile farmer—will 'throw' the seeds on to the ground and, as far as he is concerned, 'whatever will be, will be.' He's ok with it. But not me! We, as Jews, think differently and cannot accept that.

Contrary to the philosophical foundations of the organic idea that emphasize a discourse of small-scale non-conventional farming and the cultivation of healthy soil, Avri emphasizes mass production of organic foods and operates according to quantity and quality-driven agricultural methods.

Over the years, hundreds of young settlers gathered around Avri, followed his path and engaged in the hard labor of organic farming on remote hills. Sociologist Shlomo Fischer notes that

> the outposts and the hilltop settlements [. . .] are spread horizontally over distances so that each farmhouse merges with the rocks, soil and olive trees in its immediate vicinity [. . .]. Thus, they interweave the themes of ecology and unmediated contact with nature, the earth, its elements and violence (Fischer, 2011: 302; see also Tzfadia, 2017).

Indeed, violence is part and parcel of the organic enterprise Avri spearheaded along these colonial frontiers. For the nearby Palestinian village of Yanun, Giv'ot Olam spelled disaster (Feige, 2009: 236–237). Avri himself was convicted in court of assault four times, including one case of aggravated assault. Describing Givo't Olam's land-grabbing, intimidation, harassment, and physical violence, political scientist Hagar Kotef specifies that Avri's dedication to organic farming is consistent with his worldview. For him, brutality, aggression,

and territorial expansion are synonymous with being in nature, practicing agriculture (Kotef, 2020).

Avri's combination of working the *terra* while applying *terror* (Elden, 2009; Neocleous, 2003) points to the extent of his territorialization life-project. We should thus understand his philosophy of environmental racism as inseparable from his permanent quest for agricultural quality and quantity (for the coproduction of colonialism and capitalism, see Ince, 2018). His attitude might seem at times instrumental and pragmatic, referring to productivity, marketing, and health. However, his practices are fed by an urge for ongoing territorial expansion. In contrast to Har-Sinai who pushed aside his neighbors—the Palestinian shepherds—while performing complex colonial mimicry and "going native" (Konopny-Decleve, 2018), Avri does not see the Palestinians as a point of reference, but rather merely territorial rivals. "I believe that this place is mine [...]. I don't hate Arabs. Absolutely not. I am indifferent to them. For me, they are merely dust" (Avri Ran, cited in Kotes-Bar, 2005).

Organic land: The colonial quality turn

The third spatial modality we identified among organic farmer settlers reconfigures agricultural space as land, namely as a resource for producing high value produce targeting mostly urban upper middle class consumers. Many of the Jewish settlers we met in the West Bank are concerned not as much with ideologies—whether it is an organic ideology, a national-political ideology, or religious ideology—but rather with market-driven strategies and profit-making in a global neoliberal market.[15] Clearly, all of the organic farmers we encountered operate within the economic field, yet the weight they attribute to each of the modalities creates different balances in their actions. Thus, while Dalia Har-Sinai emphasized self-sufficiency and Avri Ran oriented his actions towards territorial expansion, the following farmers seem to be more concerned with questions of quality and profit.

"Do you want to talk about organic agriculture or about 'the territories' (*ha-shtahim,* namely, 'the occupied territories')?"—Yoram, an organic poultry farmer from Shilo (north of Ramallah) provoked us during our tour of his farm. "Organic [agriculture] has nothing to do with [the politics of] the Territories. There is no ideology behind my decision to do that. This is simply what I do. Some produce donuts, and I produce organic eggs, as simple as that." Yoram, and many other settler farmers like him, reproduce a depoliticized discourse of "quality," a narrative that targets urban and secular clientele: "Our consumers have all kinds of requirements," says Yoram, "some of them are Leftists who prefer quality eggs from free range chickens, just like my chickens."

Other food producers operating in this area confirm Yoram's reading of the consumer trends. For example, in our visit to Achia organic olive oil farm in Shilo, David, the marketing manager of the farm, told us: "There is a growing demand for healthy, high-quality products in general. Consumption of olive oil is on the rise, including organic olive oil. We had a certain piece of land that we converted to organic."

In the case of Achia, the transition to organic olive oil production seems to be motivated by the desire to strengthen their brand and by the attempt to cultivate a "niche" product within their marketing plan. In addition to the secular liberal market in metropolitan centers in Israel, the framing of their operations in neutral terms of quality enables them to target the global market. David, for example, boasted that Achia's olive oil is also exported to China. We asked him whether Chinese customers are interested in the Biblical story, in which Shilo features as the city of the Tabernacle, the Ark and the Prophet Samuel. His reply was unequivocal:

> No, not at all! Quality, quality, quality! That's what interests them. Once, I exported oil to China without labeling it as 'Israeli olive oil.' They stopped the shipment at the port and sent it back. This Israeli brand signifies quality and without this label – the Chinese consumer will simply not buy it.

The growing emphasis on global standards of quality among organic farmers in the West Bank is compatible with broader processes that can be termed normalization by commodification (Handel et al., 2015). The booming scene of agritourism and the economy of singularities (Karpik, 2010) divert attention from the colonial circumstances within which food is produced, and highlight instead its culinary and economic value. This approach was well illustrated in Tekoa—a Jewish settlement built on lands belonging to the Palestinian village of Teqoa.

The settlement is located on the semi-arid outskirts of the Judean Desert. With thin and rocky loess soil and a scarcity of water sources, Palestinian agriculture in the region is based on barley, wheat, and olives as well as on goat and sheep grazing. Thus, it might come as a surprise to discover that despite these harsh conditions the settlement of Tekoa is a hub of conventional and organic farming, where one can find exotic herbs, mushrooms, and North-European berries. All this is accomplished by a nearly complete detachment from the actual soil and local climate in Tekoa, replacing both the socio-spatial philosophy of *soil* and *territory* for the technology of *land*.

The colonial quality turn is well represented by Matanyah Freund—an organic farmer in his 30s and the son of Gilad Freund, one of the first organic farmers in the West Bank. Matanyah produces both organic and conventional crops, including cultivars which are foreign to the region: raspberries, blackberries, and asparagus grown in climate controlled pots and greenhouses. Guiding us around his farm, he talked about efficient farming and about the high-tech features of his work. Describing his cutting-edge technological greenhouse that he operates by remote control from his smartphone, he asserted with great pride:

> It's the Rolls Royce of agriculture [. . .] We have greenhouses with full climate control. When humidity decreases the greenhouse will automatically launch a system that will increase the level of humidity. If the crops get too cold, it will turn on the heating. Everything is automatic here.

In contradistinction to the romantic farmers who seek to "work the soil" with simplicity and minimal intervention, the Freund farm endorses technology in the service of organic distinction: "Organic farmers should use all possible science and technological knowledge. They should be more advanced than the conventional farmer" (Gilad Freund, quoted in Heiman, 2010).

Differentiating himself from farmers like Avri Ran who seek to maximize territorial control, Freund openly prioritizes *efficiency* over *territorial expansion*. Recently, he reduced his farmland from 17.5 dunams to 3.5 dunams of high-technology greenhouses. Tellingly, Matanyah's spatial approach—which is associated with the search for the most efficient land use (rather than territory or soil) in terms of agricultural output—is congruent with his use of hydroponic soilless culture (*menutakey karka*).

Another land-related practice is related to Freund's use of Red California Wiggler earthworms. These earthworms, which have been nicknamed "a proletariat of diggers" due to their important contribution to land enrichment, are used for vermicomposting of both domestic and industrial waste (Meulemans, 2015). Earthworms are now used to produce soil (and, consequently, fertile land) in desert areas, urban rubbles and recently also in NASA's experiments of human settlement on Mars (Bertoni, 2020). Their ability to create fertile soils literally

everywhere suggests that Tekoa's actual physical and cultural–political geographies are of little significance to organic farmers operating according to the modality of land.

Agriculture always operates on the tension between nature and culture. While Dalia and Yair Har-Sinai sanctified the given conditions of nature, and thus used dryland farming and traditional practices of "working the soil" with minimal intervention, Matanyah, from the other side of the spectrum, produces his own soil material using exogenous non-human actants (Latour, 2005) and advanced technology. Thus, just like his hydroponic crops, his political discourse seems as "soilless" as his distance from the discourse of the sanctity of soil. Here, worms and high-tech highlight the dialectic relations between place-making and dis-place-ment. The political attachment to space is thus made not on a presumed natural basis of an imagined autochthony, but rather on an apolitical normalization that conceals the traces of violence and appropriation.

Matanyah and other organic farmers of the second generation of Jewish settlers in the West Bank whom we met express the logic of progress and technologically based organic farming (also known as "conventionalized organic" Guthman, 2014). At the same time, they easily dismiss the political implications of these practices in that specific territory. "I'm fed up with the Jewish-Palestinian conflict," Matanyah concludes. Similarly, Gil, a certified agronomist, and manager of Tekoa Farms, replied to our query about the divergence between the founders and the second-generation organic farmers, to which he belongs: "We care for this place. We always think 'what would it be in 100 years?' But politics is desperation, so we are just dealing with much more basic things required for production – land, water and air."

The neoliberal-pragmatic discourse endorsed by Matanyah, Gil, Yoram, and David from Achia farm reflects the main spatial perception of these farmers: the spatial modality of land. As such, they place notions such as quality and profitability at the center of their discourse and de-politicize their practices by removing them from geography in order to introduce their produce to the culinary fields in Israel and beyond. Importantly, the discourse of land—rather than soil and territory—marks the peak of the normalization process of the settlement project, which banalizes the agents of the occupation and renders them into entrepreneurial actors in an ostensibly free market.

Conclusions

Using the lens of organic farming in the West Bank, we trace the political spatialization of the contemporary colonial settler movement. As a category of practice, organic farming draws on three modalities of political-cultural spatialization: the intimate connection to the place (soil), political entitlement (territory), and property management (land). While we distinguish analytically between these modalities, they often intersect in practice. These spatial modalities form different repertoires which allow settlers to activate the appropriate discourse and logic of action in multiple contexts. Thus, Har-Sinai Farm and the martyrdom legacy of the late Yair Har-Sinai feature within a narrative of redemption; the narrative of Avri Ran positions the organic project between territorial expansion and practical-commercial rationality; and Matanyah Freund's economic enterprise invokes the pragmatic and instrumental logic of the land.

Amidst the challenging conditions of the semi-arid desert-frontier and realities of the colonial settlement project, a set of oppositional farming philosophies and practices are cultivated by Jewish settler organic farmers. Local agricultural practices—such as dryland farming—are "revived," on the one hand, and high-technology climate-controlled greenhouse and soilless agriculture are thriving, on the other hand. While traditionalized crops index the biblical-symbolic references of "grain, wine, oil and cattle" (Chronicles 2, 32: 28)

in Susya, other crops, such as North-European berries cultivated in Tekoa, are destined for global markets and secular organic food consumers.

In addition to the main crop cultivated by each one of these actors, the livestock in each modality can be seen as emblems of the different agricultural philosophies and eco-theological principles employed by them (cf. Gutkowski, 2020). In this regard, goats symbolize the connection to the soil and holding onto the land; free range chicken, whose cultivation requires an area seven times larger than a conventional chicken coop accommodate the logic of territorial expansion (Kotef, 2020); and earthworms, which operate as "soil engineers" in any given land, embody the placeless detachment from the specificities of local soil.

The three spatial modalities discussed above also reveal the variegated colonial formations linking the Jewish settlers and the Palestinian inhabitants. For Dalia Har-Sinai, the insistence on dryland farming and goat herding is concomitant with the principle of local authenticity and an ambivalent colonial imitation of the local Palestinian farmers. Avri Ran's project, however, instantiates colonial violent territorialization. The aggressive and confrontational position he takes vis-a-vis the Palestinians reflects his interpretation of territory as defensible space and his view of "the Arabs" as mere "dust." Finally, Matanyah Freund and Yoram, who are primarily interested in economic success and quality production, see no problem with employing Palestinian workers in their organic farms (and in a peculiar manner, describe their relationship with their Palestinian neighbors and workers as a form of "co-existence").

It should be noted that each of the actors described above is not a pure ideal-type of place-making in a colonial context, but rather an actor who integrates and stresses different aspects of the triad "soil-land-territory." Altogether, they display the complexity of diverse positionalities, which make up the Jewish settler organic (sub)field in the West Bank. Furthermore, by means of demonstrating economic resilience in a highly competitive global market, the combined agricultural and spatial activities of these settler organic farmers invigorate the colonial settlement project at large in Palestine. As such, organic food grown in these places can be seen as an ethno-quality commodity that generates complementary layers of value: it strengthens the alleged timeless connection between "blood and soil"; it produces economic profit via the branding of organic quality; and it raises the value of national ownership by promoting agricultural development and progress.

Sociologist Michael Feige argued that "the greatest challenge ever faced by the [Jewish] settlements [...] is the challenge of normalization" (Feige, 2002: 119). In the same vein, Veracini (2015) recognized the settler-colonizer's drive for self-indigenizing as a desire for unproblematic normality. The analysis of the discourses and practices of Jewish settler organic farmers reveals the multiple workings of self-indigeneity and place-making—the imagination of a harmonious relationship between humans and places, whether this relationship is understood as cultivating the soil, claiming territorial ownership, or benefiting from the fruit of the land. All of these approaches combined enable the settlers-turned-natives to imagine themselves as legitimate cultivators of their ancestral lands and thus inseparable from "the soil of which they are born" (Elden, 2013: 51). Thus, while soil comes to represent the imagined timeless connection between people and place, territory provides the political framework of sovereignty, and land seals ultimate normalization by concealing politics altogether.

The slippery term "organic"—that connotes both a return to pre-modern life-style (Caldwell, 2011) as well as a strict set of regulated codes (Guthman, 2014)—is revealed as an effective instrument of place-making. It is used as a socio-political apparatus (for self-indigenization, territorial expansion, and capital accumulation); it serves as a platform to convey different cultural meanings (religiosity, environmentalism, and economic efficacy); and, respectively, it serves as the basis of the constitution of different spatial modalities.

Altogether, the representation of a colonized region as a place of high-end products banalizes the occupation, normalizes its inherent violence, and strengths the settlers' claim for political privilege (Allegra et al., 2017; Handel et al., 2015; Tzfadia, 2017). The relational framing of the organic agricultural space exposes the connections between soil types, state land regulations, farming practices, eco-theological narratives, and economic interests and lays bare the relations between colonizers and colonized subjects in the West Bank. Echoing Wolfe's argument that agriculture is "a potent symbol of settler-colonial identity" (Wolfe, 2006: 396), the case of Jewish organic farming in the West Bank demonstrates how different agro-spatial constructions—such as soil, territory and land—work concertedly as a powerful regime of placement and displacement.

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Notes

1. This article draws on a qualitative methodology which includes semi-structured interviews and published sources from public media. While most of our interlocutors are public spokesmen of organic agriculture, we also acquired their informed consent. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Pseudonyms were used for all individuals mentioned in the article who are not public figures.
2. On the variety of the different Jewish settler groups in the West Bank, see Allegra et al. (2017).
3. We use the terms non-conventional and alternative agriculture to denote food production systems and networks that oppose intensive farming and share common values such as sustainable agriculture, fair trade, integrated agriculture, agroforestry, permanent agriculture, and particularly organic agriculture (Goodman et al., 2012; Magdelaine et al., 2019).
4. We are aware that different languages ascribe varied meanings to the notions of land, soil, and territory. We use them here as analytical categories rather than emic discursive locutions.
5. Organic farming is a relatively recent development in a long history of agriculture in the Zionist project. From its inception in the late 19th century, the narrative of redemption of the land has been coupled by the effort to physically seize Palestinian lands (Neumann, 2011; Novick, 2014).

The specific case of organic farming in the West Bank stems from these processes, with two additional frames of justification: the organic philosophy of soil and land (Balfour, 1943; Howard, 1947) and the theological–political project of the Jewish settlements.

6. While colonial agriculture has typically represented "natives as unsettled, nomadic, rootless" (Wolfe, 2006), in recent years, several studies have described the use of farming for reclaiming indigenous identity in settler colonial settings. Studies focus on agro-activism as a means of resilience used by the colonized subject, and the ways in which local identity frames the resistance against colonial attempts to erase indigenous identity (Grey and Patel, 2015; Kepkiewicz and Dale, 2019). For an analysis of Palestinian farming initiatives, see Meneley (2020) and Joronen (2019).
7. Recent scholarship has seen a surge of major publications on settler subjectivities and relations to land. See, for example, Rifkin (2013) and de Leeuw and Hunt (2018).
8. On the "blood and soil" ethos of Zionism, originating from German romanticism, see Bloom (2011).
9. Another example of framing Palestinian agriculture as "ancient" and "wild" can be seen in the case of cultivating wheat in Palestine. As Tesdell (2017:43) shows, working through settler material and discursive networks "served to remake Palestine as a biophysical region in need of improvement and colonization."
10. The Israeli land and property regime in the Occupied Territories is an ad-hoc amalgam of Ottoman, British and military regulations. According to Israel, since the Ottoman Code was in force at the time Israel occupied the West Bank, its authorities were required to respect it under international law. Israel admits, however, that the fact that "the Ottoman land laws constitute the broad foundation of the land laws in Judea and Samaria" creates "an anachronistic situation that is almost without precedent" (Btselem, 2012: 6).
11. See https://peacenow.org.il/en/state-land-allocation-west-bank-israelis.
12. See www.harsinai.co.il/index.php?module = BizMiniste&id = 421&pname = about [in Hebrew].
13. For a chronicle of the ongoing dispossession in Palestinian Susya, see https://www.btselem.org/south_hebron_hills/201507_facts_on_susiya
14. For more on dryland farming (ba'al in Arabic), see Tesdell (2015).
15. For more about neoliberal Zionism, see Getzoff (2020).

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