**HOMInG interview**

**with Hagar Kotef (SOAS)**
**conducted by Gabriel Echeverría**

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## What does 'home' mean to you in view of your work and disciplinary approach?

I am not sure I have a disciplinary approach, so I am not quite sure on how to approach this question. If it is ok with you, I will answer your question as if settler colonialism was a discipline, even though it is not a discipline properly speaking. Probably, it is a field, or better yet: a category of analysis we must prompt further. I think that as both a field ("comparative settler colonial studies") and a category of analysis, it still requires work, but for reasons we may discuss later, in my recent book I do think more or less within its boundaries. All this is to say that I am not sure I am going to address your question adequately. Nevertheless, if you bear with me, I guess this is where I want to go in linking the concept of home to this "disciplinary approach": I think about and with settler colonialism because I think of home and homemaking in Palestine/Israel. In other words, I think about settling down, and specifically settling down in a geo-political context that at least to some extent is a project of occupying and taking control over someone else's land - so "settler" colonialism in its most direct meaning. And it also works the other way around: it is because I want to understand settler colonialism that I think through this concept of home. So, in this context, "home" does for me two, almost inseparable things: First, it is about the space and the terrain and a mode of placement (of being placed) in space, so if you want to think about discipline, we can think about geography; and second, it gives the dimension of subject formation, it is a place where the self takes form and becomes who they are. So this linkage of territory and selfhood which for me is part of what defines settler colonialism or what we must understand when we think about settler colonialism can be conceived most closely through the concept of home.

**As you research the relation between home and settler colonialism, do you find especially difficult challenges form a methodological point of view?**

Once again, I find it difficult to answer your question because I work in/on theory rather than systematically engaging with empirical work. And yet, this is not a fully honest answer because after all, I conducted significant empirical work [for this book](). I did some ethnographic work, I went to see settlers in the West Bank, I went to see Palestinians in the West Bank, I did some archival work on the histories of home in Israel… so there is empirical work there. I guess, then, that the main challenge – some of it is general to all of us working on these questions, and some of it is very specific for my particular project – is that home is a very personal thing. And thus one is immediately pushed to ask about the most intimate facets of people's lives. I think this is one challenge: how does one engage in fieldwork, in interviews, concerning such intimate questions? Of course, it is a challenge of many researchers who work on any question touching on the intimate—home being just one. For me this posed an additional challenge because my work is very close to home, as it were; it is very much about who I am, my own identity and positionality, it is very much about my very close social circles and therefore, touching the intimate was, well, more intimate.

Let me be more concrete: in the book there is a chapter about Israeli Jews who live in depopulated Palestinian homes. It is a chapter that asks about the affectual techniques that allow those people to make a home in the depopulated Palestinian home, about the strategies of attachment and detachment that allow them to live in the ruins of other peoples' homes. I wrote it through looking at movies, documentaries, artforms. And people asked me (keep asking me): "why didn't you do ethnographic work for that chapter as well?" Often this question came from those who know me and thus know that I know many people who live in such homes. I had the perfect "access" if we want to use this term. But I could not. I think precisely because it is so intimate and so close to me I had to distance it from myself somehow, and the analysis of cultural objects was a way to do so. And finally, there is something about how one engages in a highly theoretical level with the most close, mundane and personal elements of life, and perhaps even one's own life, which was yet another challenge.


**It is challenging but it is interesting how the mundane elements, the small empirical details that emerge from the field can trigger theory development.**

I think the key here is not the "empirical" but the "details", and specifically the material details. A review of my book was recently published in *Political Theory* which touched precisely on this point. Part of what the reviewer identified is how objects become in the book the vehicles through which the theory is conducted: the doors, the sofas, the beds, the furniture, the picture frames, and how all these are what both does and undoes, allows and undermines a sense of home. Home is in these small things. There is a children's TV show I am suddenly reminded of. Its protagonists, as often happens in TV shows, are animals, and at one episode the home of one of them is somehow destroyed. So two of the animals – I think it may have been a snail and a turtle (and this in itself is interesting – as they are both animals that carry their own homes or perhaps animals inseparable from their homes)—take a cardboard box, cut a door and a window in it and say to the other animal (let's say it was a goose): "this is your new home". The goose obviously resists: "this is not my home; it is but a cardboard box". At which point the turtle and

snail start singing a song that goes something like that: "home is but a box in which one lives; a box and nothing more; and yet it's a box I will never abandon" (it rimes in Hebrew…) What renders a box a home is precisely all these details, all these artefacts, but also all these ties and links that allow one to feel at home somewhere. Sometimes it would be a plant, sometimes it would be a piece of furniture, often it will be a defined group of people, but overall it is an assemblage of unrelated things one cannot pre-determine in advance that becomes a category of identity. I find this interesting.

**This brings us to the concept of homemaking, which is one of the crucial aspects of our research, as we investigate the relation between migration and home. Migrants are faced with the problem of leaving home and creating a new home. This is precisely an example of trying to transform a box into a home, with any elements available. In fact, settler colonialism is a form of migration. Do you see any specificity of homemaking for settler colonizers?**

I have two different yet related points on this. The first is that settler colonialism is a very particular form of migration, not just because of what we know form Wolfe, Veracini and others about the difference between migrants, who arrive to a different country in order to inhabit its laws, and settler colonial migrants who seek to own and shape the law in their own image. In this sense settler colonialism is a migratory movement that comes to take over. I will return to this, but I want to point to another difference: settler colonialism is also a migratory movement that is very much invested in stability and rootedness and in erasing its migratory elements. The Israeli case is interesting in this regard because it is a migrant movement that is explicitly claiming that it returns home. Importantly, this is not completely exceptional because we see similar patterns in other colonial contexts, but here it is much more structured, with a deeper history behind this claim. Either way, this notion of returning home is not something we should either accept as fully exceptional or take on its face value. The point is that in all these different contexts, even if in different ways, at stake is to say that our identity is somehow tied to this place, whereas often, in migrant societies at stake is precisely saving the links to the elsewhere and the traces of movement. That is, in many migrant societies at stake is to say: "we are here but we also belong there; part of our heritage is situated there even if this is now our home; the boundaries of these nations or countries are something we transgress or transcend; we want to find transnational ways of being and homemaking" etc. However, with settler colonialism something else happens, almost the opposite: an effort to erase the migrant element of the society, to say—precisely—this has always been our home. So this one element that is different.

The second element is that settler colonialism is a form of making a home on a territory that ultimately belongs to others. So it is about making a home whose very making is a form of destruction. And this goes back to the difference that Veracini and other have identified, namely that one seeks to own the place. If one seeks to own the place and the place has already been inhabited by someone else, which is almost always the case, then owning is necessarily a form of dispossession. And so there is a particular challenge, I guess, in homemaking in the case of settler colonialism—and this is what the book focuses on, this is the main thing I wanted to understand—how does one develop a sense of home, a sense of belonging, of being in place, when one's very practice of home and homemaking is destruction of others' homes? And of course (and this is the mirror image of the same point), when we think of home in settler

colonialism we must think constantly about these two homes, the one that is being built and the one that is being destroyed. And how the home that is destroyed can be reclaimed as part of struggles for decolonization, or even as part of living amidst structures of colonization.


**The question then would be: how are they able to make a home out of ruins? In fact, are they able at all?**

I don't think this is a question because we see that this is the case. Settler colonialism would have not been sustainable if people would not feel that they belong there. Because often, at least in the first years or even decades of settlements, settlement is quite rough, often dangerous and certainly not comfortable or easy. Often, the material benefits of this project reveal themselves only decades later, and often they are the benefits of a very small groups among the settlers. Yet, clearly people have made a home in the settler colony. The question then is not "if" but "how?" I guess what I am trying to do in the book is to take an issue with one dominant form of answer for this question, and when I say take an issue I do not mean to say that this dominant understanding is invalid. Rather, it is to say that I think it is not the only valid explanation, and sometimes also not the central one. And this is the idea that people somehow do not know, they forget, they ignore, they refuse to see. So the claim is that there is some obliviousness that allows them to make a home on destruction- they simply don't know, don't recognize the history of destruction. And I think it is a really problematic explanation when one looks at the context of settler colonialism, because the traces of destruction are all over – and here the case of Israel is a very unique case because it is all very intimate, very close... you cannot go around without noticing. If you take half an hour drive in any direction, you will see some traces of this destruction: You will see the traces of Palestinian villages that have been destroyed, you will see the Palestine houses that are now inhabited by other people, you will see Palestinians living very close to the places from which they had been deported... so it cannot be about not being able to see. And it is not only about the traces one sees all the time; it is an ongoing project. That is, it is not just the traces of the conquest that happened long time ago, but the structure and the destruction and violence that take place all the time. And so, what I try to do in the book is to show the different techniques and mechanisms that allow people to get attached to a place despite this destruction and sometimes even through this destruction, by the means of this destruction. How does destruction become something to which one is attached? And this attachment to destruction that I try to track has a very wide scope. Sometimes it is an attachment to direct destruction, when people actually take pleasure in seeing war, for example, or in directly inflicting violence. But sometimes it is much subtler, when people enjoy hiking around the prickly cactus, the fig trees and the olive groves that are "all that remains" (as Walid Khalidi put it) from the Palestinian villages that once stood there. These are such beautiful landscapes, so essentially "Israeli" for many of us, but at the same time these are landscapes of destruction. And when we romanticise these groves or these terraces that are half destroyed (as many Israelis indeed do), what we romanticize (at the very least in some mediated way) is destruction. I think it is important to come to terms with this.


**I tend to think about settler colonialism as a process in which the settlers know somehow that the place where they are arriving is not their home and they need to build it. But in the**

**Israeli case, it seems that people claim they moved to a place that was already their home. So, how it is possible to have these two different cases together in the same category?**

I think this is where we see how problematic the category is. And it is not only Israel. Depending on the different questions you ask, other cases could not fit into the settler colonialism category, for instance Algeria, which has been the subject of much debate within the "comparative settler colonialism" milieu. Each case is very different from the others, and I think what you say is completely right in this regard, about the possibility of drawing on a history of home that is already there, that has always been there, like this idea of the Jewish diaspora that has been waiting for return... the idea of a promised land for 2000 years, etc. So the story becomes a story of a "return" and not colonisation. But as I said before, we should remember that the story is seldom that of "colonisation" or "conquest". And whilst narratives of justification differ, Israel is not exceptional in having one. Moreover, we can question this narrative from at least two directions. One: has there really been - and we have historical works that have challenged this - a consolidated Jewish nation that has always seen Palestine as a home, or is this a later construction of Zionism? And from the other place, we can see in other cases of settler colonialism apparatuses that often draw on biblical promises that allow settlers to say: "this is where we have always belonged, or this land was meant for us, so that even if we have arrived just now, this is where we always have meant to be."

But I think the more important thing would be to ask the question of settler colonialism from a different perspective. Not from the particular histories of the settlers, and whether they or their ancestors have been there before or have not been there before, and who has arrived first or who was there first, or what counts as "there" or as "who" (that is, does the bible establish a temporal link of the Jewish people to Palestine/Israel, or did the 2000 years of exile unravel the identity of the "original" people, for example). Because it seems to me that if we go there we get to arguments that have no end and eventually no point. So, I think we should reverse the question and ask the question of settler colonialism form two tightly related perspectives.

First, the perspective of the natives: has there been an invasion (if we think from Wolfe terms) from their perspective? But perhaps the term "invasion" is not a sufficient one. Because for example, we have the case of Palestinian Jews or native Jews who have been in Palestine all along. In a recent article I wrote with Yuval Every, "When does a Native become a Settler?", we show how as the history of Zionist settlement evolved, this group, too, has been interpellated into the colonizers' side on the social/national map. In their case there is no invasion (they have been there "all along" - although this once again raises the question of who or from when we count), but something else that creates a settler-native divide, albeit one that is already more complex, less straightforward than what we have in Wolfe's scheme. Rather than an invasion we have here a structure that at some point in history, maybe through a very long process, has led to the taking over the land of some by others, to the dispossessing of one group by another. And this is the essence of the settler colonial structure. So just asking it from the perspective of the native rather than from the one of the settler and their history is one way.

Second, the other approach, which is kind of the same, is to look at practices, specifically practices of taking place. The question is ultimately how one takes place. In "When does a native become a settler?" Every and I look precisely at these practices. Or more accurately: when we focus on the Jews who have been in Palestine at least since the Ottoman Empire, we do so also to show how they tried to facilitate a migratory movement of Jews to Palestine that is not a settler colonial movement, and how they tried to envision modes of being in the place which are not

settler colonial. This allows us to see modes of taking place that were not colonial in nature, even if they were also of migratory movements of Jews into a land already populated by a majority of Palestinians. And when we look at that, the question of whether Jews inhabited that land 2000 year ago or not is still important, still significant, but it takes a very different role in the puzzle composing the question of justice, for example.

**Let us move back to home in a different perspective – hom*ing*. We are approaching homing as a special kind of relationship with space that involves domestic environments as well as larger neighbourhoods and cities. How do you see the connections between these dimensions of home? What kind of relationships do you identify between these spaces of attachment?**

In my book I move quite seamlessly between these different levels and meanings of home. This is intentional, because I ask about political identity in its most intimate sense but also in its widest, for example national sense, and I further ask about the links between them. So, it is important to move back and forth between all those layers. But I also think there are reasons not to do that and to ask ourselves constantly about the differences, and about the merits of the movement in between. So, for instance, is it a metaphorical relation? Is "national home" a metaphor or is it rather a spatial extension, so that we have the small home and the large home? Is it a scale relation in which we borrow from one context to the other? And I think it is all of these in different moments in time and in different contexts or for different people. If thinking about home is thinking about identity, about the most intimate ways by which we perceive ourselves and form attachments to others and to spaces, then I guess we should also recognize that different people form different forms of attachment. Thus, for some the nation would be a real home, in the most intimate way and for others not. And so, I am not sure we need or can determine between these different options. In some contexts and for some groups and for some individuals we find that the city is the most significant category of identity and for others the city means nothing, etc. Since at stake in these questions are both collective and individual psyches, then we must allow some movement between these different models, and not set differences or demarcations in stone.

**You have mentioned your latest book, *The Colonizing Self Or, Home and Homelessness in Israel/Palestine* (2020). I found it very interesting that two very different political uses of the concept of home emerge in the conflict, the one of the colonizers but also the one of the colonized. This second group uses the concept of home as a form of resistance. I would like to ask you about this conflict of uses. Besides the different usages that are made by the two sides of the conflict, were you able to find something common across them? Something that maybe brings us to the "core" of the concept of home?**

It is tricky because I always find myself starting from the wrong place, assuming that there are things we already agreed on, but I often realize later that we still need to agree on these most basic things. Let's start then with what we said already, that the home of the colonizer is a form of destruction and so, if we think about justice, political freedom and political equality, the first thing that needs to be undone in different ways is the home of the colonizer. And when we agree

on this we see very clearly that the practices of homemaking of the colonized are a form of resistance; they are precisely part of this struggle. To put it differently: if the home of the colonizer is a form of violence, the home of the colonized is a practice of resistance. This is the point from which we start. But this is of course an oversimplification. Therefore, I found it important to insist on the concept of home also in the case of the colonizer. Because despite all this violence this is a home as well. And now, the statement that we need to "undo" the home of the coloniser becomes much less clear. What would that mean? And how can this become a project of justice? I begin the book with a quote from Edward Said, who says "I want Israeli Jews to recognize their home is a form of destruction" – I am not quoting him from memory so it is probably inaccurate in terms of the words themselves – "I want them to recognize that their home is based on dispossession, on expropriation, but this recognition does not mean that I want them to leave. I recognize that this is their home as well. I have seen too many tragedies that come from this demand set on people to leave their home". So, what I am trying to do is to keep these two opposite movements: How do you criticize a home for being such a form of violence and dispossession, but also, how do you recognize that it is a home, that it has a value also for that person. The political horizon such insistence marks is that of a particular mode of decolonization that is based on sharing the land. Unlike, say, an Algerian concept of decolonization where the settlers need to move "back home" (as if they had such a home; because most of them, in most settler-colonial contexts, don't).

**So, interestingly, home becomes a justification, a legitimization of appropriation. This creates a problem that keeps reproducing itself, unless we are able to find a way to understand home in a different way, as a more fluid and open possibility. Appropriation instead, means to set a boundary, whereby 'this is mine and not yours', and there is no alternative to this...**

Which is so correct. And this where we see settler colonialism and capitalism as really held together within the structure of appropriation. And it seems to me that the concept of home is key to understanding this.

**Home, then, is the most powerful legitimation of appropriation. My last question is connected to some ideas I am working on. In the bulk of research on home, the accent falls on the personal, individual perspectives on home – what it means for individuals to leave home, to rebuild home, what in the end is home, what it offers to each of us; so, the function home has for individuals. However, I am trying to think about home from another perspective, not the perspectives of individuals but, let's say, a societal perspective on home. Is it possible, in your view, to trace something like a societal function of home? Is it possible to see home a social structure that helps society to reproduce itself, in its functioning?**

I have a simple answer and a more complicated one. The simple is: obviously yes, and the place to go for it is Foucault, while thinking about the relations between the home and the household and how these function within a larger disciplinary and later biopolitical systems. The more complicated answer is that I am not sure there is a difference. If we started this conversation by talking about disciplines, one of my most significant teachers is Judith Butler, and if we follow

her framework of understanding subjectivity, then the individual is already societal. We are who we are because of the social structures that shape and sustain us. And the home is one such social structure: home and the family and forms of kinship. But at the same time, the home can be seen as a knot that is itself being shaped by wider social relations, so I think we must think the individual and the societal as mutually productive in so many ways… as forms of networks. And this is another way to say "yes" in response to your question, because in a way I do not accept the division.

**Yes, I agree. In my view this is an issue of focus... you cannot, I would even say you should not separate things, but, since the accent is most of the time put on the individual perspective of home, I am interested in emphasizing what home tells us about society – about the functioning of it, about issues like property but also more general, like capitalism, or –**

Settler colonialism!

**Yes.**

And also the question you raised before about the different dimensions – the home as individual home, the home as the city, the neighbourhood, the nation – and the ability to move between them... it goes back also to this. I like the idea of accent as a way of thinking about these movements, but perhaps we can think of them also as kind of… if we have a really big picture that we cannot grasp as a whole and keep looking at segments, or if we observe something through an aperture through which we see parts of the whole. Sometimes we look at this part, and sometimes we look at that, but eventually all is part of a much wider picture we must ultimately understand as a whole.

**Thank you.**