

Special edition: chasing truth and (re)conciliation: navigating contexts, tensions, limits and possibilities “Reclaiming truth recovery against the backdrop of ongoing Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine”

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Abstract

Purpose – This article argues that truth recovery practices that take place against the backdrop of ongoing settler colonial erasure, as is the case when considering Zionist colonial violence in Palestine, must focus on combating state-sponsored attempts at erasure, rather than solely providing a platform for the expression of settler guilt.

Design/methodology/approach – The article analyses existing literature on truth recovery practices that take place in Palestine, including the work of a variety of local NGOs engaged in such praxis, with a view to considering how this form of transitional justice has germinated incrementally in the space. Critical reflection on the work of a variety of grassroots NGOs is situated alongside other forms of transitional justice intervention.

Findings – The article argues that in the context of enduring settler colonialism, the truth regarding past Zionist atrocities in historic Palestine must avoid being curated in the present day in such a way as to allow for damage limitation rather than the platforming of conversations around meaningful repair. Truth recovery for recovery’s sake serves only to reinforce the settler colonial status quo rather than properly agitate for a full decolonisation, one that demands and facilitates indigenous Palestinian return.

Originality/value – The article challenges prevailing notions of the role of truth recovery practices in spaces of enduring settler colonial value. It makes clear that the role of truth recovery interventions in sites where colonial violence endures must be to actively and meaningfully support activities that reinforce native identity, history and presence on the land. Moreover, by reference to existing grassroots attempts at truth recovery in Palestine, the article provides an original and clear argument that states it is simply not enough to platform the revelation of uncomfortable truths or to provide opportunities for settler violence of the past to be “confessed” in public if it is disassociated from challenging the present-day structures of ongoing oppression.

Keywords Palestine, Israel, Transitional justice, Truth recovery, Settler colonialism

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In the absence of a period of transition, and in the context of ongoing Zionist settler colonial erasure in historic Palestine, centring the “truth” around the foundational violence that undergirds and maintains the Israeli state-building project assumes great significance [1]. Since its formation in 1948, successive Israeli governments have invested great time, energy and resources into marginalising narratives of Palestinian dispossession and exile so as to



delegitimise Palestinian “justice” linked demands and claims associated with the right of return, doing so through, *inter alia*, a combination of: (a) ignoring it completely, (b) providing counter narratives that centre on Palestinian flight rather than forced exile, and by (c) criminalising those involved in recounting narratives of the Nakba to a wider public audience (Pappé, 2006b; Lentin, 2013; Rashed *et al.*, 2014; Masalha, 1992). In considering the various ways that transitional justice (TJ) practices linked to truth recovery ought to challenge Zionist settler colonialism and its attempt at Indigenous Palestinian erasure, Park’s (2015) application of Judith Butler’s (2006) thesis on grievable life provides useful theoretical scaffolding. Park (2015, p. 274) maintains that truth recovery practices that take place against the backdrop of settler colonial violence, “must engage a “politics of grief” . . . addressed to both dimensions of decolonisation.” Rendering Indigenous life “grievable”, Park (2015) argues, strikes “at the heart of the settler colonial logic of elimination”. When it takes place in settler colonial contexts, the aim of TJ ought to be on ensuring that “the politics of grief resists a purely emotional or affective understanding of grief that lends itself to settlers simply “feeling bad” for colonial violence. Rather, grief must be understood as a political resource that calls for an agenda of decolonising structural justice”. By linking the logic of settler colonialism and Butler’s theory of ungrievable life, Park (2015) argues for truth recovery practices that elevate the status of indigenous life as being “grief worthy”, a process which is a prerequisite to any meaningful process of decolonisation and repair. In the context of Palestine, or so I argue, TJ must only be practiced if it is capable of challenging this logic of elimination. In highlighting a need to combat these attempted processes of settler colonial “memoricide” (Rashed *et al.*, 2014; Masalha, 1992), those individuals and groups engaged in TJ truth recovery in Palestine must ensure that they also provide the space required for a critical dialogue on how to realise a meaningful reversal of this attempted erasure that is truly decolonial.

Delegitimising the narrative underpinning the historical existence of an Indigenous Palestinian population is one of the “softer” (but no less nefarious) means of attempted erasure used by the settler state when seeking to retain its hegemonic stranglehold over Palestinian life. Narratives of the past are manipulated, controlled and distorted so as to discredit them, evidence of a Palestinian presence on the land pre-1948 is physically destroyed (or built over), public acts of commemoration of the Palestinian Nakba are prohibited, Palestinian centres of art, culture and heritage that point to Indigeneity are targeted, and a process of de-Arabisation (and by extension enacting processes of Judaisation) occur in Palestinian spaces (particularly in and around the Old City of Jerusalem). Counter memoricide practices broadly mirroring examples of truth recovery in other contexts have emerged, from a grassroots level, across historic Palestine, initiated by a combination of Palestinian and Israeli/Palestinian activist led NGOs. Through a mixture of public facing events, online databases, digitisation of destroyed villages, and the promotion of narratives that run counter to the dominant Zionist state-sponsored one, the trauma and legacy of the Nakba is kept alive. Such processes help to “reconstitute Indigenous people’s individual and collective, literal and figurative deaths as loss, and thus assert that Indigenous life/lives matter” (Park, 2015, p. 286).

Truth recovery and transitional justice in settler colonial contexts

As a mainstay of the “new science” (Roberts, 2020) of TJ, truth recovery has been lauded as one means of advancing the cause of “justice” for victims, embedding fragile peace processes, and assisting individuals and societies find catharsis, reconcile, and move beyond their violent past. Popularised following the purported successes of the high-profile South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the demand for the implementation of similar truth recovery methods in other post-conflict/transitional contexts remains unabated.

In recent times, there have been calls from former European colonies seeking “justice” for decades of colonial violence leading the United Nations (2021) to consider what role, if any, TJ could assume in aiding this process. [Rolston and Ni Aoláin \(2018, p. 339\)](#) have argued that one of the reasons why such a task has proven elusive thus far is that colonialism “represents a complex conundrum in the TJ context” given the “deep conceptual gap in defining where colonial legacies fit in the TJ toolkit”. Beyond this structural limitation, an emerging body of critical scholarship has challenged the very suitability of TJ being advanced in dealing with such legacies, spotlighting the inherent colonial underpinnings of the TJ “project”. In a recent analysis of what she terms the “epistemic violence” that underpins TJ, through analysis of truth recovery interventions in Burundi, [Jamar \(2022, p. 4\)](#) has spotlighted the confines of Western imposed TJ practices demonstrating the way they produce “normative knowledge that promotes epistemic supremacy of Western legal standards above and to the detriment of other ways of addressing and accounting for past violence”. Critiquing TJs coloniality and western centric underpinnings remains fundamental for my work on and in Palestine ([Browne, 2021, 2023](#)) and I remain guided by the views of many decolonial thinkers, including [Maldonado-Torres \(2016\)](#) who reminds us that, in a modern/colonial world the aim of liberal institutions (or in the present case as I suggest, liberal peacebuilding practices such as TJ) is “to advance modernity without realizing that doing so also entails the continuation of coloniality”. The growing corpus of scholarly work that calls into question TJs suitability in post-colonial contexts, I suggest, helps to sharpen our understanding of its limitations when pressed into service in areas of ongoing settler colonialism [2]. In addition, the legal arguments underpinning a “right to truth” in colonial/post-colonial contexts, whilst interesting and indeed worth platforming and interrogating in greater detail, remain beyond the tightly defined parameters of what follows.

In much the same way that violence in Palestine/Israel does not happen in a vacuum, truth recovery processes and those invested in this specific form of TJ operate against the backdrop of ongoing Zionist settler colonial activity in historic Palestine. The revelation or burying of truths from the past remains a space of contestation and conflict in the present day. Subsequently, important questions raised in a previous analysis provided by [Broadhead \(2020, p. 339\)](#) are worth reiterating when it comes to truth recovery in Palestine/Israel, specifically: “What is the role of the occupier in acknowledging past and present injustice? What role is there for settlers to act as allies to those dispossessed by colonial actions? Is it appropriate for settlers to participate in the telling of colonial history, and is it possible to do this without becoming the central character in the narrative?” Revelations around the violence that accompanied the formation of the Israeli state in 1948 at the expense of the forced displacement of an indigenous Palestinian population have long been “uncovered” [3] by Palestinian and Israeli activists, academics (including historians, geographers, and archivists) and more recently by NGOs in an effort to challenge “official” Israeli state sponsored narratives and to promote a counter version of events that would inevitably give rise to greater calls for “justice” (however conceived). However, this too has raised certain tensions, particularly when it pertains to the extent to which the revelation of historical truths are (a) carefully managed and controlled by beneficiaries of the colonial power, or (b) designed in such a way as to support the platforming of meaningful, constructive, and generative conversations on how to halt, reverse, and repair the damage done. The recent “uncovering” of hidden military archives and gathering of witness testimonies from surviving Israeli soldiers who oversaw forced expulsions and massacres of the Palestinian population has been lauded as one way of unmasking the “truth”. However, in so doing, what has become clear is that such revelations of crimes committed in the past, including the wholesale destruction of Palestinian villages and the murder of the Indigenous Palestinian population writ large, can be “revealed” in such a way as there is little at stake when it comes to ensuring criminal accountability or shifting the everyday reality on the ground. As Seth [Anziska \(2019\)](#)

has argued, there can now be “confession without consequence” and the “possibility of exoneration without accountability” all of which, he suggests, reveals much about the fundamental moral decay that lies at the heart of Israeli society.

As a result, there is a pressing need, I argue, for a stronger examination of the limitations associated with truth recovery practices that take place in the present context, one that is characterised as settler colonial in nature, so as to more fulsomely appreciate the damage that such practices can enact on the Indigenous population. Beginning first with a brief note on terminology, I next turn to situate the “contested” narratives that are subject to competing claims in the Israeli/Palestinian context and provide insight of the settler colonial environment into which such historical “truths” are being revealed. I highlight attempts made by several grassroots organisations to facilitate “truth recovery” including both Israeli and Palestinian groups, and in so doing I consider some of the limitations and tensions therein, borrowing from Edward Said’s (1984) “Permission to narrate” thesis and from more recent critiques offered by those who have queried the rationale and appropriateness of Palestinian suffering and “truths” being legitimised or amplified when curated through the words and work of the coloniser. Ultimately, recovery of the “truth” when it takes place in ongoing spaces of settler colonial erasure must centre on reclamation, not only of distorted historical narratives or of past traumas but also of a decolonial future that is both meaningful and implementable. The extent to which these processes amount to “truth recovery” or “truth management”, I argue, depends greatly on whether their aim is to stimulate meaningful debate around what ought to amount to actual, material and structural decolonisation in Palestine.

A brief note on terminology

Foundational myths and contested narratives lie at the heart of the so-called Arab Israeli “conflict” [4] (Houry, 2016) and it is against this backdrop that organisations involved in truth recovery must engage. Native claims to the land are routinely framed as “contested” or “disputed” and selective “truths” are ingrained in mainstream (including international) discourse, entrenched in a way that renders possibilities for resolution appear challenging, complex, or unattainable. Nevertheless, “one must begin with what most Palestinians consider to be incontrovertible truths” as Tareq Baconi (2022) reminds us, “Zionism is a settler-colonial movement intent on, at best, our erasure, and at worst, elimination. It is a racist ideology rooted in the belief of Jewish supremacy in Palestine”. The history of Palestine, as has been well established in a fulsome literature, is one of violent colonial intervention, with various periods of conquest and exploitation including: epochs of Ottoman rule, British imperialism, Zionist settler colonialism (with associated mass migration in the late-1800s that continues in the present day) and a process of ongoing neo-colonialism facilitated through internationally sponsored liberal “peacebuilding” practices (Turner and Shweiki, 2014; Tartir, 2015; Haddad, 2016). Despite this, the settler colonial framing in Palestine/Israel is routinely eschewed in favour of the term “conflict”, including by many of those who are most vocal in the internationally embedded and globally sponsored TJ industry. Avoiding the language of settler colonialism is simultaneously politically expedient and nefarious in that it allows for the germination of a dual protagonist narrative one which flattens power structures, distorts on the ground realities, and minimises the impact of the past and present violence of Zionist settler-colonialism.

The literature on Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine includes scholarly contributions from: Zurayk (1956), Sayegh (1965), Abdo (1995), Wolfe (2006), Shlaim (2012), Lloyd (2012), Veracini (2013), and more recently Hawari *et al.* (2019). The processes that embody settler-colonial logic are, as Wolfe (1999, 2006) and Collins (2011, p. 31) have noted, “Elimination, expansion, exceptionalism, and denial”. Indigenous land (in this case, Palestinian land) that is

confiscated is in need of being “settled” by the “settler” (Israeli) population, a process that is achieved through a variety of means including: physical relocation by way of forcible transfer of the native population, actual destruction or elimination (through physical violence, genocide), forced assimilation of the native into the settler society, active discrediting of native claims to the land, and the use of colonial violence that renders life on the land for indigenous populations untenable (Vanden Boer, 2020, p. 22). Added to this important framing, I propose, is (a) the settler state’s role in burying awkward “truths” about the past and (b) the role played by liberal peacebuilding organisations, including those with extensive international TJ expertise, in curating “truths” about the past in such a way as to ensure control over the extent to which attempted elimination of the native is fully revealed, partially, or hidden entirely. Obfuscation of the “truth” is thus, I suggest, an extension of the definition of settler colonial erasure.

Beyond revelation, documentation and putting forward calls for reparatory “justice”, truth recovery interventions that occur in areas of ongoing settler colonial erasure ought to be guided by a language that aids the process of decolonisation if it is to actively mitigate, and indeed reverse, this further layer of Palestinian erasure. However, routinely those who engage in such interventions shirk the language of settler colonialism, demonstrating a liberal bias that seeks to maintain rather than disrupt the status quo, all of which in turn provides a veneer of “justice” for a few whilst allowing for endless Zionist settler colonial expansion. The adoption of “a technocratic discourse that silences other voices and inherent political battles” as Jamar (2019, p. 59) eloquently surmises helps to divert “attention from contemporary use of violence and oppression towards political opponents”. Such TJ practices thus become pressed into active service for the benefit of the settler state at the expense of the colonised.

From past to present day settler colonial conquest

Failure to address disputed and entrenched national narratives remain at the heart of various failed “peacebuilding” attempts in Palestine/Israel (Khoury, 2016). Competing claims over the existence of an indigenous population, dating back to biblical times, are routinely offered as reasons for the justification of policies and practices in the present. “The Zionist narrative” pertaining to indigeneity and connection to the land, as Nadim Khoury (2016) notes, “is premised on the religious and ethnic link between the ancient Israelites and the modern Israelis. This continuous link was disrupted when the Jewish people were sent into exile”. Amara and Hawari (2019) suggest that “Whilst Zionist settler colonialism shares all the hallmarks of European invasion, attempted superiority, and domination it simultaneously advances a nativist claim that suggests that Zionist returnees are just that; returnees to Palestine based on biblical narratives”. The persistent and closely held “truth” for many Zionists, is that Palestine was an empty, barren space in 1882, with the native Palestinians who resided there largely invisible (Pappe, 2006a) a view that is in stark contrast to the counter Palestinian narrative that reveals deep seated attachment to the land as evidenced through the existence of an indigenous Palestinian population dating back as far as the time of the Canaanites and Philistines. Arguably the defining moment that rapidly increased Zionist settler colonialist expansion in Palestine and which gave rise to myriad issues when it comes to uncovering contested truths and subsequent justice issues in the present, is that of 15 May 1948, the day the British Mandate [5] in Palestine ended leading to the subsequent Israeli declaration of independence and the forcible displacement of over 750,000 Palestinians. Details accompanying such violence have been subject to contrasting Israeli state attempts at cover up and contrasting efforts by a range of grassroots movements focused on truth recovery. The division of historic Palestine culminated in the uneven partition [6] of the land from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea with two-thirds designated for the fledgling Israeli state. Thus, from the outset one of the central “justice” issues at the heart of the “conflict”, namely the right of return for Palestinian refugees, emerged and remains as pressing now as was then.

Whilst partition was resisted by the indigenous Palestinian population, with support from neighbouring Arab Allies and Palestinian resistance in exile, internationally supported Israeli military campaigns helped to entrench and expand Zionism's settler colonial project in historic Palestine, including the expansion of military occupation over the West Bank of the River Jordan, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, a reality which remains in the present day. A proposed resolution to the "conflict" was tabled following a relatively successful campaign of Palestinian civil disobedience, resulting in the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, also commonly referred to as the Oslo II Accord. Under the Oslo framework, the West Bank of the Jordan River was divided into Areas A, B and C, each with varying degrees of limited Palestinian autonomy. The purported aim of the 1993 Oslo Accords was to act as a set of guiding "peace" principles designed to pave the way for Palestinian autonomy, however, the reality is that they have operated as a sophisticated and violent method of settler colonial control ensuring Palestinian containment and appeasement rather than providing the requisite framework for final status negotiations around Palestinian self-determination that focuses on issues of "justice" however conceived. The emergence of the Palestinian National Authority (PA), the body designate to represent the voice of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, side-lined the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and within it those who provided a critical voice in opposition to the Oslo "Peace Process" with [Fatafta and Tartir \(2020\)](#) arguing that such a move "gutted the PLO politically". Internal PA divisions have resulted in a curious homeland in historical Palestine and a governing reality that endures in the present day; the West Bank controlled by Fateh and the much-maligned Gaza Strip, by Hamas. Embedded within the framework of the Oslo arrangement is the outsourcing of economic growth and development in Palestine to the international donor community, thus helping "to create a political economy that stabilises from the inside" and allows for the "preservation of a violent colonial peace" ([Turner, 2015](#), p. 140). Simultaneously, the rapid influx of foreign aid post-Oslo helped cement (literally and metaphorically) the "two state" fallacy as the only show in town, with the on-the-ground reality being consistently reinforced through an "American-brokered political process" ([Khalidi, 2013](#)). This in turn has reaffirmed time and again the legitimacy of Israeli statehood whilst simultaneously delegitimising the decolonial aspirations of the indigenous Palestinian population.

The "truth" that underscores the violence that accompanied the emergence of the Israeli state has been rendered invisible within the eyes of the international community largely because selective amnesia only permits for an understanding of the root causes of "conflict" that centre on this period of state building partition. "The adoption of the national partition paradigm" as Nadim Khoury eloquently surmises (2016, p. 3) "partitioned their narratives just as it sought to partition their territories". From the outset, the most significant peacebuilding effort failed to engage in any meaningful consideration of the contentious "truths" pertaining to Palestinian loss and Zionist attempts at permanent erasure of Palestinian lives and livelihoods that remain central to present day concerns. Nor did the framework for "peace" consider a reparatory framework that could lay the foundations for creating a climate that would allow for a serious consideration of decolonisation. In turning a blind eye to the settler colonial reality that underpins the legacy of historic displacement in Palestine, what is clear is the extent to which the international community played (and continues to play) a role in curating how the past in Palestine/Israel must be read and understood, in turn ensuring that destabilising historic "truths" are avoided through the promotion of a liberal peacebuilding framework that allows no space for such revelations to emerge. The Palestinian refugee crisis, for example, has been central to the way the "question" of Palestine has been considered by the international community since 1948; however, rather than acknowledging the truth behind what caused this forcible displacement in the first place, i.e. internationally enabled Zionist settler-colonialism, the international community has chosen to frame the reality as a humanitarian crisis ([Imseis, 2020](#), p. 6),

allowing their own responsibility in this process of ethnic cleansing to be side-lined. All of which provides yet further succour to the argument that international organs, including the UN, have aided and abetted in the obfuscation of the truth about the past in Palestine–Israel, engaging in a “conflict management” approach that avoids having to face up to the realities that arise from the failure to provide redress for the forcible transfer of an indigenous people. What this demonstrates for many is the West’s ubiquitous role in sponsoring Zionist settler colonialism in historic Palestine whilst declaring platitudes of “peace”. In much a similar vein, those who campaign for revelations of the truth behind Palestinian flight and dispossession, yet who fall short of calling for restitution and repair through a decolonial lens, I argue, fall into a similar category.

Controlling narratives

The “truth” underpinning the events that resulted in Palestinian flight in 1948, including fulsome revelations regarding levels, and nature of violence that accompanied the formation of the Israeli state, have also been subject to competing scholastic views and opinions. Leading Palestinian intellectuals have illustrated how events that transpired in 1948 were part of a systemic and coordinated attempt to eradicate an Arab presence in historical Palestine (Khalidi, 2005; Mashala, 2012). Alongside Palestinian scholarship, “In the late 1980’s”, as Ilan Pappé (2020, p. 22) notes, “a group of Israeli scholars known as the New Historians published several monographs challenging the Israeli/Zionist narrative of the 1948 war that led to the dispossession and expulsion of three-quarters of a million Palestinians and the destruction of more than five hundred villages and localities in what had been Mandate Palestine”. Acknowledging that the work that underpinned and informed these “new histories” had long been advanced by Palestinian scholars [7], Pappé (2020, p. 22) argues that what was different was the fact that the claims that had been made were:

Substantiated by declassified archival material. The research made possible by such material, which constitutes the main contribution of the New Historians’ historiographical effort, categorically refuted a foundational Israeli propaganda claim that during what Israel calls its “War of Independence,” the Palestinians left their homes voluntarily to make way for the invading Arab armies coming to their rescue, thus becoming refugees by their own hands.

Israeli counter-rhetoric presents Palestinian displacement at the time as being the result of Pan-Arab aggression and a lack of confidence in their own leadership. In keeping with the Zionist line of argument Karsh (2010, p. 3) suggests that Palestinian flight, not expulsion from the land, is what really transpired, resulting in the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem. He further suggests that “If ultimately the Palestinians evacuated their country, it was not out of cowardice, but because they had lost all confidence in the existing system of defence . . . they had perceived its weakness, and realized the disequilibrium between their resources and organisation, and those of the Jews”. The Zionist position, one that has been mainstreamed as the “truth” by successive Israeli governments, aims to discredit the notion that Israeli statehood involved the systemic ethnic cleansing of an indigenous Palestinian population and thus fits a more traditional understanding of colonial violence. Writing in *The Electronic Intifada* Pappé (2018) notes, “A deconstruction of Israel’s approved history is the best way to challenge a word laundrette that turns ethnic cleansing into self-defence, land robbery into redemption and apartheid practices into “security” concerns”. Thus, a politics of denial has been the position of successive Israeli governments who have attempted to bury the past literally, physically and metaphorically by either permanently shuttering access to military archives, building over destroyed villages [8] or criminalising groups involved in promoting counter narratives to that of the state. Referring specifically to the erasure of the Nakba in the Israeli archives, Anziska (2019, p. 67) notes that “. . . in an Orwellian act of self-censorship that

began in the early 2000s, the Defence Ministry's secretive security department, Malmab, spearheaded efforts to reclassify documents and methodically remove files from various archives across Israel to hide evidence of Israeli responsibility for the Nakba". Such acts of truth management make perfect sense in spaces of ongoing colonial violence in that it allows for the smooth continuation of the present-day process of ongoing Zionist settler colonial erasure in Palestine, undeterred by any duty to address a past that has the potential to be inherently destructive to the aims of the colonial project. This burying of the past operates alongside the Zionist need to foment a new version of the "truth", as explained by Palestinian academic Walid Khalidi (2005, p. 43), who argues:

It was only in 1949, when the Zionists realized that the problem of the Arab refugees was touching the conscience of the civilized world, that they decided to counter the damaging influence it was having on their cause. The story of the Arab evacuation order would hit two birds with one stone. It would absolve the Zionists from the responsibility for the refugees, and it would pin this responsibility on the Arabs themselves.

Against this backdrop of competing historiographies, and in seeking to consider ways of breaking through the ongoing "conflict" impasse, scholarly work that takes as its focus the potential role of TJ interventions in Palestine/Israel, has emerged. Early contributions include work from Cohen (1995) and Dudai (2007), and more recently Nets-Zehngut (2012), Osiel (2015), Khoury (2016), Bracka (2021) and Browne (2017, 2021, 2023). Others have spotlighted specific "justice" issues that may benefit from an application of TJ including Peled and Rouhana's (2004) work on TJ and implementation of the right of return for Palestinian refugees, Swart's (2019) consideration on TJ praxis as a means of generating reconciliation between an internally fractious and divided PA, and more recently Bahdi and Kassis's (2020) analysis on a potential TJ framework to aid Palestinian judicial reform. Alongside these scholarly critiques, several NGOs emerged in the heady days of post-Oslo "peacebuilding" who subsequently became engaged in work that, broadly speaking, focuses on "truth recovery" and which involves documentation of historic injustices committed against the Palestinian people (Broadhead, 2020). Arguably the leading Palestinian organisation involved in attempting to avoid the "re-invention" of Palestine (Pappe, 2006a) is the BADIL Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights [9]. Recognising the pressing need to ensure that the plight of refugees was not lost amidst the Palestinian state building project, BADIL's focus ever since has been on promoting the right of return as being an essential component for providing some form of "justice" for Palestine, and to advocate for Palestinian refugee issues on the international stage, including through submissions made to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Although not solely focused on truth recovery, the myriad projects that BADIL is engaged in are designed in such a way to ensure that the memory of the Palestinian Nakba remains alive in the present day. Other organisations such as Grassroots Al Quds [10] with its innovative online platform, invites users to explore Palestinian villages and areas not often spotlighted on mainstream tourist maps of Jerusalem (and beyond) and in so doing, draw attention to the long-term existence and presence of Palestinians on the land, one that ultimately challenges the hegemonic narrative promoted by Zionist settler colonialists. In Israel, amongst the most well-established groups engaged in truth recovery praxis is the Tel Aviv based NGO Zochrot whose mission statement is to "promote acknowledgement and accountability for the ongoing injustices of the Palestinian Nakba and to push for the realization of the right of return of the refugees – a precondition for establishing a future Palestinian-Jewish relationship based on justice and equality" [11].

Launched in 2002, the organisations' primary goal has been to educate the Israeli public about the "truth" surrounding events of 1948, to mainstream the narrative around the Palestinian Nakba, and to spotlight the need to focus on a "justice" that prioritises return or a

form of restitution for Palestinian refugees as a precursor to achieving a sustainable peace. In order to achieve these aims, the organisation developed an oral history platform aimed at collecting testimonies of victims and survivors of the 1948 Nakba, primarily those who became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within the new Israeli State, a process that aligns with many of TJs traditional stated aims around truth recovery in other conflict/transitional contexts. Combining cartography that “reveals” destroyed Palestinian villages and towns of 1948 alongside digital technology including an “iNakba” app that allows users to visualise original Palestinian villages on their smartphones, the aim has been to mitigate the attempted erasure of a Palestinian presence on the land and the subsequent silencing of “truth” of the violence behind this specific period of forced displacement. The organisation has also been involved in the facilitation of tours for Israelis and members of the international community to areas where remnants of destroyed Palestinian villages remain. More recently they adopted a more traditional attempt at truth recovery, spearheading the creation of a Truth Commission on the Responsibility of Israeli Society for the Events of 1948–1960 in the Negev, the first of its kind in the region. Owing to its relative success in platforming these uncomfortable truths, the work of Zochrot has repeatedly been attacked, challenged and criminalised [12].

Analysing how TJ approaches that involve a truth recovery component occur in spaces of ongoing settler colonialism, I contend, ought to require particular attention to be given to the way these narratives of the past are curated and disseminated by a range of actors, including academics, NGOs and members of the international community, in particular those who have been vocal in promoting a liberal peacebuilding framework. This is particularly important when we consider that “TJ is a core component, as opposed to a merely marginal element, of the liberal peacebuilding enterprise” (McAuliffe, 2017, p. 92). In the case of Zochrot, beyond simply stating that “justice” will come as a result of the formal acknowledgement of Palestinian harm suffered, the organisation endorses the view that “peace” will only come “after the country has been decolonized”. Thus, there is acceptance (albeit not explicitly stated) that this form of TJ practice must involve “de-normalising and rejecting the production of settler knowledge; and at the same time constructing alternative knowledge that can support and sustain a decolonised future (Hawari *et al.*, 2019, p. 162). The organisation has been subject to academic critique with a wide range of divergent opinions offered, including from those who query the appropriateness of an Israeli led organisation leading on truth recovery work in the context of ongoing Zionist settler colonial erasure in historic Palestine (Lentin, 2013; Orr and Golan, 2014; Broadhead, 2020). However, the extent to which Zochrot is successful in achieving the goal of platforming conversations about the past in such a way as to support meaningful strategies around decolonisation, for the purposes of the present analysis, is not really the point. Much like the criticism offered by Lentin (2013), who has suggested that there are questions to be raised concerning appropriation, particularly when it relates to the oppression of the Palestinians being used as a tool for expressing Israeli dissent, the real issue here centres on discerning what role, if any, settlers (broadly defined) ought to assume when curating and platforming TJ led practices for truth recovery amidst a time of ongoing settler colonial erasure. Considering further the appropriateness of this type of truth recovery work being led by Israeli organisations such as Zochrot, the words of Edward Said (1984, p. 34) ring particularly true in that, “Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them”. Perhaps none more so is this evident than in the recent “furore” surrounding the uncovering of a mass grave at al-Tantura and the subsequent reporting in the Israeli liberal broadsheet, Haaretz, an issue to which I now turn.

Permission to narrate – curating the “truth” around Palestinian loss

On the 22nd of January 2022, Israel’s leading “liberal” newspaper Haaretz published an article on the massacre at al-Tantura, a relatively small Palestinian village located on the Mediterranean

coast, not far from the city of Haifa. The Palestinian village had all but been destroyed in 1948, with subsequent claims made by Palestinian witnesses who spoke of massacres committed by the 33rd Battalion of the Zionist Alexandroni Brigade. The article in Haaretz documented the location of mass graves existing in plain sight alongside Israeli leisure facilities and noted “new” evidence that had been gathered from former Israeli soldiers who had testified as to what exactly had occurred at the time, including the orders they had been given. Haaretz’s revelation was not revelatory at all. In fact, what had been revealed had been long acknowledged as the “truth” by many of those whose work has involved documentation of the settler colonial violence that underpinned the formation of the Israeli state building project in 1948. Writing for the Institute of Palestine Studies, [Abushama \(2022\)](#) argues that when it comes to understanding the challenges around truth recovery interventions that take place in spaces of ongoing settler colonialism and associated attempts made by the Israeli state to bury the past, “The debates . . . tell us more about Israeli historiography than they do about the massacred Palestinians. They are reflective of the wider settler colonial power relations that determine who remembers, how they remember, and according to whose archives”. [Abusalama’s](#) intervention is important not least because it perfectly speaks to the words of [Said \(1984\)](#) noted above and demonstrates how revelation of historical “truths” in the context of ongoing settler-colonialism remains a process that is carefully managed and curated, not only by the state itself, but in this instance, emanations of the state, Israel’s leading broadsheet. “Truths” about Israeli state digressions (read war crimes) are therefore revealed to the broader Israeli public, including by those outlets that have a purported liberal slant, in such a way as to be careful, sensitive, and regulated, this being the “major project of Liberal Zionism” ([Pappe, 2021](#)); ensuring that historical revelations – i.e. palatable “truths” – are stage managed so as to mitigate against criticism that is too overt or damning. [Pappe \(2021\)](#) continues:

Liberal Zionism has always been obsessed with finding the balance between the high moral ground and the wish to portray Israel as a civilized State that errs here and there (which usually means killing Palestinians throughout history). The message is clear: none of these mistakes, even if they are war crimes or crimes against humanity, to which the Liberal Zionist admits, should cast doubt on Zionism, or the very idea about the legitimacy of Israel to remain a racist and ethnic Jewish State at the heart of the Arab world.

What this demonstrates, I suggest, is that when it comes to implementation of TJ practices involved in truth recovery, specifically when they are trialled in areas where settler colonial erasure of an indigenous population remains a guiding principle of the colonial power, the central concern must be on issues relating to: who gets to speak; who has permission to narrate; who is afforded a platform; and how “truths” about the past are revealed. This is as important, if not more so, than the very act of truth recovery itself so as to ensure that such revelations about the past are not decontextualised, disconnected or fragmented from the ongoing erasure logic that is the reality for those who remain subject to Zionist colonial domination. “Even the worst atrocity” as [Pappe \(2021\)](#) suggests, “can be tolerated and explained . . . and, thus, the discreet dots of Israeli criminality are not connected together to provide the full and truthful picture of the real intent of the settler-colonial project of Zionism that will not end until it is stopped - which is to eliminate the Palestinians and Palestine”. Truth recovery practices in Palestine/Israel must “narrate new counter-hegemonic narratives and devise fresh liberationist and decolonising strategies” ([Masalha, 2012](#), p. 256) if they are to meaningfully disrupt and agitate the liberal status quo. The need for this radicalisation ([Park, 2020](#)) of TJ in the case of Palestine/Israel is as pressing now as it ever has been.

Conclusion

Truth recovery processes with a stated aim of platforming hidden narratives of the past in an effort to disrupt and ultimately end ongoing Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine are undoubtedly an important means of supporting the call for Palestinian liberation. However,

if such truth recovery practices are not accompanied by a generative and meaningful conversation around an end to, and reversal of, Zionist colonial exploitation of Palestine they become an exercise in truth recovery for recovery's sake, serving no useful purpose and run the risk of being liberal interventionist irrelevance (Browne, 2021). Revelation of atrocity must be met with a steadfast commitment to a decolonial praxis that reverses and repairs the damage done. To do so, it will be necessary to disrupt the "orthodox transitional justice paradigm" (Park, 2020, p. 265) around truth recovery, particularly when we consider the extent to which TJ remains a "fundamentally liberal", and western centric product. Sitting with uncomfortable truths about the past, in any settler colonial context, requires and ultimately benefits from, the active involvement of the "settler" community. However, their involvement must be predicated on a commitment to action, and in the present context, these decolonial conversations must be led by Palestinians, those who bear the brunt of ongoing processes of colonial exploitation. Such conversations must also include the many disparate voices of the Palestinian populace, including those who live in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, within 1948 Israel and across the wider diaspora, as exclusion of any constituent element of the Palestinian people would render conversations around decolonisation, one that centres conversation around "justice", as partial and limited, amounting to an extension of the liberal peace building paradigm, one that has been so utterly destructive in the current context.

As Roberts (2020) has advanced, if detached from the advancement of meaningful action around undoing years of structural inequality, truth recovery processes serve the function of being a liberalising force more focused on assuaging settler guilt than platforming the demands of decolonisation for a long-suffering people. Any TJ approach that engages with truth recovery in the context of ongoing settler colonialism and adopts language and praxis that fails to platform meaningful discussion around decolonisation is less about "justice" and more focused on smoothing over, or forcing through, a difficult period of "transition", which in the present context amounts to a "transition" that allows for continued Palestinian erasure. "Decolonisation", as Park (2020, p. 273) has noted, must not be allowed to become a social justice metaphor, a useful turn of phrase for those who wish to champion the benefits of TJ without having to disrupt the settler colonial apple cart.

Notes

1. This article builds on existing work published by the author on the issue of truth recovery, most notably, Browne (2023), *Transitional (in)Justice and Enforcing the Peace on Palestine* (Palgrave MacMillan).
2. Jamar (2022) lists a growing body of literature which is worth resharing here, including: Sitze (2013), Madlingozi (2019), Robinson and Martin (2016), Talaga (2018), MacDonald (2019), Browne (2021), Nyeyezi Bisoka (2020), and Jamar and Bisoka (2022). To this list I would add the pioneering work of Balint *et al.* (2014), Park (2020).
3. I use parenthesis here as Palestine has a rich oral history tradition which has documented and safeguarded these violent stories of loss. See in particular the work of Ahmad H. Saadi and Lila Abu Lughod (2007), Nakba, 1948, and the Claims of Memory.
4. A term used advisably, for reasons outlined below.
5. Prior to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Palestine was considered an important constituent element of an area often referred to as the Levant (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine). The collapse of the Islamic Ottoman Empire and subsequent carving up of land by the victorious UK and French allies led to the demarcation of historical Palestine with the area subsequently placed under the auspices of a "British mandate", a decision confirmed by the League of Nations on 24 July 1922. During this period of British colonisation, the demographics of the region changed utterly with a policy of Jewish emigration actively encouraged. The ramifications of British colonial interference was such that Zionist proposals for realising a formation of the Israeli state.

6. As adopted under United Nations General Assembly resolution 181, which states: “Independent Arab and Jewish States and the Special International Regime for the City of Jerusalem, set forth in Part III of this Plan, shall come into existence in Palestine two months after the evacuation of the armed forces of the mandatory Power has been completed but in any case not later than 1 October 1948”.
7. Pappé lists specifically the work of Mustafa Abbasi, “The Battle for Safad in the War of 1948: A Revised Study,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36, no. 1 (February 2004): pp. 21–47; Saleh Abd Jawad, “Colonial Anthropology: The Haganah Village Intelligence Archives,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* no. 68 (Winter, 2016): pp. 21–35; Nur Masalha, *The Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of “Transfer” in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).
8. For a more in-depth analysis of the urban planning policies pertaining to the destroyed Palestinian villages inside what later became the state of Israel, see: Kadman, N. (2015) *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) (BADIL)
9. <https://www.badil.org/>
10. <https://www.grassrootsalquds.net/>
11. Other organisations not included for the purposes of this discussion include Breaking the Silence and MACHSOM Watch. Whilst interesting, this form of truth recovery, I suggest, is more focussed on platforming calls for an end to the occupation rather than promoting a systemic decolonisation of historic Palestine, and as such is sufficiently different from the stated aims of Zochrot. More in depth analysis of these organisations is available here: Helman, S. (2015) “Challenging the Israeli Occupation Through Testimony and Confession: the Case of Anti-Denial SMOs MACHSOM Watch and Breaking the Silence”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28, pp. 377–394.
12. See footnote n. 3 in the relation to the “Budget Foundations Law” and attempts to criminalise Israeli led NGOs who engage in activities that promote the Nakba.

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