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Published in:
Partecipazione e Conflitto

DOI:
[10.1285/i20356609v14i3p1221](https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v14i3p1221)

Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Pace, M., & Yacobi, H. (2021). Settler Colonialism (Without Settlers) and Slow Violence in the Gaza Strip. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 14(3), 1221-1237. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v14i3p1221>

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Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 14(3) 2021: 1221-1237

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v14i3p1221

Published 15 November 2021

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SETTLER COLONIALISM (WITHOUT SETTLERS) AND SLOW VIOLENCE IN THE GAZA STRIP¹

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ABSTRACT: Israel's ongoing settler colonialism in occupied Palestinian territory impacts Palestinians' everyday life in all its aspects. In this article we demonstrate how Israel's interventions, in particular since its "withdrawal" from the Gaza Strip in 2005, can be conceptualized through a combined lens of settler colonialism and slow violence. We suggest that settler colonial violence and strategies of carceration, exploitation and elimination of the existing population - without the physical presence of settlers inside Gaza - is not only inherent in the production of a new reality and geography, but also at the core of the transformation of life of Gazans into non-life. While Israel has fewer and weaker moral obligations over Gaza's population, at the same time it creates the possibility of manipulating destructive power and violent practices. With a specific focus on Israel's interventions in the field of health, we examine how power, violence and health are entangled in conflict zones in general and in Gaza in particular, by documenting and critically analysing the effect of violence in general and infrastructure demolition in particular, on the everyday life of Gazans. We conclude that Israel's withdrawal marks not only a continuation but even a radicalization of settler colonialism in the Gaza Strip through (often) slow violence.

¹ This article forms part of a research project funded by the Wellcome Trust and entitled *Gaza: The spatio-politics of health, death and life*. The sole responsibility of this publication lies with us as authors. The Wellcome Trust is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein. We are grateful to Marcelo Svirskey, our anonymous reviewers and others who participated at presentations of our work for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. We are also thankful to Dr Ziad Abu Mustafa and Dr Manal Massalha who assisted in data gathering via reports and fieldwork in Gaza.

KEYWORDS: Gaza, Slow Violence, Settler Colonialism, (non)Life, Health

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1. Introduction

“We are in Gaza, like the person who is sentenced to be executed and he or she is in the executioner’s cage and every half hour or hour, they inform him or her, we are going to execute you after a while. This is torture, not life at all. I prefer to be executed but not be in this no-life situation” said Am Hussam, a 42-year-old Gazan, who suffers from breast cancer. Her condition has been deteriorating ever since she was denied exit from Gaza for treatment. The Gaza Strip does not have adequate resources to provide her with appropriate treatment, yet she cannot leave, as Israeli authorities rejected her permit three times in a row without explanation. But this is not an anecdote - available data indicates that 54 Palestinians, including 46 cancer patients, died in 2017 after their requests for permits were delayed or refused.²

The case of Am Hussam illustrates the ways in which health, death, life and space are entangled in the Gaza Strip. These entanglements are not only about the use of social and political power, aimed at dictating how a group of people may live and how they must die, as Mbembe (2003) suggests. Rather, these predicaments are also about the spatial dimension of the issue at hand: Reflecting the production of a highly controlled and militarized space, as well as about the very destruction of it, and therefore the eventual elimination of 1.9 million people. Thus, Israel’s settler colonial strategies become routinized and follow a script that repeats itself endlessly. Gaza is often portrayed as the largest open-air prison on earth. The role of carcerality in Israel’s colonial practices and the production of carceral space are a fundamental method of settler colonial governance: In particular, the manner in which these practices are used to reorganize and reconstitute the relationship between bodies and land through violence, the use of force and coercion. The notion of carceral space emphasizes Israel’s ongoing harm to Gaza’s land, waters and other living beings as a condition of possibility for carcerality within its settler colonial project. It further highlights how Israel’s settler colonial power devalues Gazan life of all living beings (Jurgutis, 2018). Moreover, Israel’s official narratives, justifying its unnecessary and excessive use of force expose the cognitive and material underpinnings of its state that continually imagines and consolidates itself as a community endangered by Gazans.³ This justification of violence, following Hagar Kotef (2020), enables the possibility for the settler colonizer to turn its gaze away from violence and the possibility to develop an attachment to violence itself.

Following the above line of argument in this article we draw upon the manner in which Gazans themselves speak about their everyday life in the Strip today and the resulting harm of a strategized settler colonial project which often necessitates Israel’s interactions with Gazans’ resistance. As Sai Englert aptly points out:

“settler colonies have a variety of different strategies at their disposal, which can include exploitation, elimination, or both. One strategy can morph into another through such processes as the development of new strategic necessities for the colonial powers, interactions with indigenous resistance, or changing economic relations with the metropolis.” (Englert, 2020: 1654).

Thus, we suggest nuancing the persistent settler colonialism and slow violence in Gaza today through three interlinked theoretical approaches: Firstly, there is the necessity to understand the current situation in Gaza

² For an updated discussion on the growing burden of cancer in the Gaza Strip see: Bowirrat et al (2019).

³ For more on quotidian events in settler colonial states see Razack (2020).

within the settler colonial project – that is, the manner in which Israel’s settler colonial enterprise prioritizes territorial and demographic control over basic rights, aimed at the exploitation and erasure of the local population, or at least the population’s systematic containment.⁴ However, the case of Gaza also challenges the settler colonial discussion which assumes the existence of a sovereign power (of a state) over a given territory. The case of Gaza, a space and subject of settler colonial power “without settlers”, illustrates a case in which settler colonial violence is mediated through the exercise of power from a “safe” distance, mainly through the use of warfare technologies. This notion of a safe distance can be traced back to the history of settler colonialism – as operationalised in the North American context, for instance, – which underscores how settler colonial power worked through international treaties, with settlers and indigenous peoples sitting in different territories under different jurisdictions.⁵ Similarly, Israel frames its jurisdiction over Gaza as somehow separate from the rest of its settler colonial space. This framing is not so different from other cases of settler colonial frontierism (Mamdani, 2015). In this way we can understand how Israel justifies its violence in Gaza by constructing Israeli society as being under a constant threat and imperilled by Gazans.

Secondly, there is an urgent need to critically understand the transformation of everyday life in Gaza into - what we will refer to (based on our interviews with and observations of Gazans as well as our short video) as - “everyday non-life”. By everyday non-life we mean the intentional frontierization of a given territory, the destruction of “the totality” of urban and rural experience, the “not yet arrived” death - as a central part of the lived experience that dictates the daily lives of Gazan people, resulting in the economy of life and death (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2016) which is, in turn, embedded in the Israeli regime of control. In this manner we show how Israel’s settler colonialism is continuously ignited through an attachment to violence which does not see Gazans as humans.

Thirdly, we suggest that the liminality of everyday non-life is the outcome of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) that increasingly takes place over time and space and is often not necessarily viewed as violence. In this way we attempt to make more visible the slow violence that Israel’s settler colonial enterprise has been engaged in, and continues to be engaged in, relentlessly, and with what effects on the daily lives of Gazans.⁶ We do this through supplementing our interviews with Gazans with a video - as a critical intervention in the way we “do” settler colonial studies - that demonstrates how, as scholars, we may better “get at” the everyday tactics that Gazans use to engage politically with Israel’s slow violence.

Taken together these three frameworks cohere around a single analytical argument on how Israel’s settler colonial violence, containment and control produce the possibility of non-life and the enabling terrain for slow violence to erode life of Gazans and turn it to non-life.

Empirically we draw upon our video as well as over 26 interviews conducted with Gazans (17 male and nine female) by our research assistant Dr Ziad Abu Mustafa, himself originally from Gaza, during the September - December 2019 period. Out of nine female interviewees two are students (aged 19 and 21), three are employed (aged 24, 32 and 50) and four are unemployed (aged 35, 36, 37 and 42). From the 17 male interviewees, (aged 25-63) 13 are employed, three are unemployed and one is retired. We also draw upon a number of reports collated by our second research assistant, Dr Manal Massalha, from international organizations including the World Health Organization as well as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Though this research project was conducted by a team familiar with the case of Gaza, it was highly important for us to appoint a Gazan to interview Gazans in order to safeguard a full and nuanced comprehension of the

⁴ For a wider discussion see: Wolfe (1999), Veracini (2010) and Lentin (2018).

⁵ For more on historic treaties as core elements in colonialism see King (2018), Simpson (2016) and Pasternak (2014).

⁶ Within the scope of this article we are not able to develop the discussion about Gazans’ resistance and agency vis-à-vis Israel’s slow violence. For more on this see: Hammami (2019) and Veronese et al (2017).

context at hand.⁷ We attempted and, to a large extent, succeeded in securing a balanced gender and age profile amongst our interviewees to ensure a valid representative sample of Gazans. We also sought to interview different generations of Gazans as well as Gazans living in different parts of the Strip. Through a critical ethnographic approach, Ziad Abu Mustafa spent a considerable amount of time reaching out, meeting and listening to his interviewees as well as transcribing all interviews and translating his recordings from Arabic to English.⁸ This entailed a lot of emotional labour⁹ from his part while, at the same time, presented a balanced power level for interviewees and interviewer alike. To our field researcher's interviews we add a video project which also forms an important part of our empirical material. We do this as a method of co-production between us as researchers and those we study, namely Gazans, as well as to address the challenge of "seeing" Gazans who are often silenced and / or made invisible.¹⁰

In this article we focus on Israel's settler colonial strategies, in particular since its "withdrawal" from the Gaza Strip in 2005, through a combined lens of settler colonialism and slow violence. We suggest that settler colonial violence and strategies of incarceration, exploitation and elimination of the existing population - without the physical presence of settlers inside Gaza - is not only inherent in the production of a new reality, but also at the core of the transformation of life of Gazans into non-life. The article is structured as follows: first, we scrutinize the academic debates on settler colonialism and add Robert Nixon's concept of slow violence as a supplementary analytical lens to expose Israel's warfare in the Strip. We then move on to uncover what non-life in Gaza looks like – seen through the narratives of our interviewees both in the field and as depicted in our short video. We conclude by arguing that Israel's "withdrawal" from the Gaza Strip marks a radicalization of settler colonialism that comes at the expense of the daily life and slow death of almost two million Gazans.

2. Settler colonialism, everyday non-life and slow violence

Scholarship on settler colonialism - as a crucial conceptual lens in understanding the manner in which Palestine and Palestinians have been subject to highly violent forms of erasure (in the pursuit of the creation of a Greater Israel) - is a vibrant one.¹¹ What these contributions have in common is an acceptance that settler colonialism aims to materialize imagined places in existing territories which are politically constructed as terra

⁷ Not to mention that it would be impossible for Haim Yacobi to enter Gaza while Michelle Pace's requests to enter would most likely have been turned down. In order to reach out to our interviewees Ziad had to make careful use of his existing network which he had built over the years and especially during his previous role as a/n (established and respected) journalist in Gaza. Ziad knows well the nature of Gazan society and how to navigate embedded structures and (unofficial) societal norms. He also knows the entire Strip very well. His interviews took him to different areas across the Strip from Nuseirat refugee camp to Gaza city, to Al Burj, to Beit Hanoun and Al-Shujiah. This gave him the possibility to have relatively easy access to interviewees (whom he approached via a telephone invitation for an interview and who would otherwise be inaccessible to non-Gazans), including: the Head of the Gazan Water Authority and the Head of the Gazan Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMWU); the Manager of Gaza's European Hospital, the Head of Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Hospital, the former manager of the Karam Abu Salem (Kerem Shalom) border crossing, the Head of the Health and Environment department at the Khan Younis Municipality, students, cancer patients, as well as protestors at the Gaza March of Return (peaceful) protests.

⁸ Ziad interviewed an additional four interviewees (three male of which two are unemployed and the third is employed; one female, employed) but due to the time it takes to translate and transcribe interview recordings the research team agreed to keep these as audio recordings. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

⁹ For more on the emotional labour involved in critical ethnography see: McQueeney and Lavelle (2017).

¹⁰ See also Pace et al (2021).

¹¹ See for example, Barakat (2018), Busbridge (2018), Dana and Jarbawi (2017), Fernandez (2017), Gordon and Ram (2016), Greenstein (2019), Locker-Biletzki (2019), Lloyd (2012), Pullan (2011), Salamanca et al (2012), Weizman (2017), Wolfe (2006) and Milner (2020), amongst others.

nullius. In so doing, settler colonialism, as a conscious and well thought through/planned enterprise, develops a complex set of narratives and practices that erase indigenous people's humanity. Colonized territories, however, are never empty. Yet, settler colonial politics, geographies and economies extensively produce not only new settlements but they also construct a dominant and powerful image of the colonized territory as bare (Milner, 2019). The elimination of the existing population and sites is thus inherent in the production of such a new cartography (Wolfe, 1999). Thus, the settler colonial imaginary of empty land becomes a social construct: an imagined space that supports and legitimizes the violent and invasive settler colonial agenda by constructing indigenous peoples as threatening others / erasing indigenous presence on existing land.

Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis (1995) explore what then becomes of settler colonial societies where (primarily European) migrants become the dominant political group over indigenous people. The key features which distinguish settler colonial societies (from say metropolitan societies) include the manner in which (European) settlers construct racialized myths and discourses about indigenous peoples in order to build their own nation-states. In this manner, settler colonial societies are based on a project of settling newcomers on contested frontiers in order to achieve political control as well as to access key resources. In other words, a key aspect of the violence inherent in settler colonialism relates to the making of a Self through attachments to land acquired by force, theft and acts of displacement (Kotef, 2020). The discursive construction of an "imperialist superiority complex" is based on the desire to create a new society through the cultivation of what is considered as, already mentioned above, terra nullius, a land under no formal ownership, awaiting to be seized and used by the modern, advanced nations of the world, displacing its native communities. Settler societies may be external or internal: The former relates to the organised movement of people across borders, often into other continents, as happened during the period of European colonialism. The latter refers to the planned ethnicization of internal frontiers, in which the state manipulates the local geography to further the interests of a dominant group (Yiftachel, 2006; Plonski, 2018; Falah, 2003). As Kotef (2020) poignantly points out, claiming a home through colonization entails the cultivation of belonging through elimination: in this manner the settler's identity proves to be alarmingly adamant and disturbingly durable.

Settler colonialism is thus a "situation" established on the displacement of an indigenous community, via a carefully planned demographic engineering process (Veracini, 2010: 5) that establishes and ensures the domination of foreign invaders. Unlike European colonizers, settler colonizers have a clear intention to stay (Veracini, 2010: 100). Settler colonialism is thus not (only) about exploitation (as in colonial societies), but also about replacement (Wolfe, 2006: 163). Sai Englert (2020) makes a clear distinction between franchise colonialism (which also replaces) and settler colonialism (which also exploits). In Mahmood Mamdani's work (2012), settlers are made by conquest and in this manner they establish a political order.

A number of researchers have identified Israel with the settler society model (Shafir, 1989; Yiftachel, 2006). Israel exemplifies such a society in the sense that a broad set of racial-classes have been built up over time: these include the "founders," the "immigrants," the "locals" and more recently, the "foreigners" (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995). These racial-classes are created through geographical processes of expansion and settlement, as well as through the associated flows of resources and development, which are, in turn, determined by, and hence reflect, power relations between groups. This establishes structural, economic and political stratification, in which ethnic origin and class affiliation largely overlap.

These insights are also reflected in the work of Palestinian scholars who, even prior to the work of Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini, have been writing (and continue to write) about Israel as a settler colonial state and settler colonialism as an analytical framework to understand how the Zionist movement and (later with the

creation of the state of) Israel have sought/seek to exploit and eliminate the indigenous Palestinians in their endeavour(s) to create a Jewish settler nation-state.¹²

These debates culminated in a conference on settler colonialism in Palestine organised by the Palestine Society and the London Middle East Institute at the School of Oriental and African Studies in March 2011 and was later published as a special issue of the journal *Settler Colonial Studies* (Salamanca et al. 2012). This event, and the ensuing publication, became seminal in enabling a close understanding of Israel's social, economic, political and spatial zero-sum contest against the indigenous Palestinian population of Palestine.

The settler colonial debate is important for our work here because it helps us understand the structural continuities inherent in Israel's aim to eliminate Palestinians from Palestine's landscape. As eloquently put by Salamanca et al in their editors' introduction and worth quoting at some length here:

“the settler colonial structure undergirding Israeli practices takes on a painful array of manifestations: aerial and maritime bombardment, massacre and invasion, home demolitions, land theft, identity card confiscation, racist laws and loyalty tests, the wall, the siege on Gaza, cultural appropriation, dependence on willing (or unwilling) native collaboration regarding security arrangements, all with the continued support and backing of imperial powers... the Nakba is not a singular event but is manifested today in the continuing subjection of Palestinians by Israelis. In order to move forward and create a transformative, liberatory research agenda, it is necessary to analyse Zionism's structural continuities and the ideology that informs Israeli policies and practices in Israel and toward Palestinians everywhere” (Salamanca et al., 2012: 2).

While the settler colonial discussion is central to this article, a number of issues need clarification. While the case of Gaza, at least from Israel's “withdrawal” of 2005 to date, does not fall neatly into the established categories of settler colonialism¹³ as delineated above: (On the one hand there are no Israeli settlers in the Strip anymore, on the other hand, Gaza is under ongoing Israeli control and violence), we argue here that it is best understood as part of territories under the control of the settler state. Moreover, violence is inherent to how the Gazan space is pacified and made vulnerable (both through slow and direct violence): Israel frames Gaza as a separate entity, which in turn enables its carcerality.

Israel's agenda of emptying the Strip takes shape in the form of gradual acts of violence. The intention here is not to stay but to control from a safe distance the lives of the indigenous inhabitants in such a way as to make their everyday life unbearable and allow the population no choice but to leave the land at their own initiative. Here we are inspired by Azoulay and Ophir who show that, “The Israeli regime, having shirked its duties... did not relinquish the sovereign's ultimate right: the authority to take life” (Azoulay and Ophir, 2012: 183). The “emptying” of the Strip is thus broken down into a number of continuous violent actions through which the existing population is constructed as “dangerous” (terrorists), which in turn legitimizes the settler colonist's warfare, especially through technologies that enable its remote control of the Strip.

It is these structural continuities that we explore further in this present article. And, in order to do this, we introduce the temporal dimension and suggest a supplementary analytical lens in the form of Robert Nixon's concept of slow violence. We find Nixon's notion of slow violence very useful in adding (what to our mind is) a much-needed dimension to the already existing scholarship on settler colonialism. In his work, Rob Nixon contests conventional wisdoms regarding what counts as violence and alerts us to that which “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” or what he refers to as “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011: 2). Drawing

¹² See amongst others: Zureik (2020), Khalidi (2020), Abu Lughod (2020), Jiryis (1977), Sayegh (2012), Nazzal (1978), Mashala (2018) and Said (1992).

¹³ With some exceptions: See Salamanca et al (2012).

upon Nixon's work we further seek to expose the slow violence that Israel's settler colonial enterprise has been engaged in, and continues to be engaged in relentlessly, and with what effects on the daily lives of Gazans.

Rob Nixon contemplates on how slowly unfolding environmental crises – acidifying oceans, deforestation, oil spills, climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, amongst many others – confront humanity with significant challenges that hinder efforts to mobilize for change. He draws our attention to how we are used to see violence in front of our eyes (via TV screens, our mobile phones, online via our laptops, etc) as something immediate, spectacular, explosive and instantaneous. Our visibility of violence is thus instant and concentrated. He further cautions us that such perceptions of violence do not rally us to respond well enough to a variety of social crises including domestic abuse or post-traumatic stress. Such conventional ways of seeing violence become newsworthy because they focus on an event, bounded by time and aimed at a specific body or bodies. What Nixon urges us to do instead is to focus on what is not visible – or what he terms as the invisibility of slow violence: that is, violence that is incremental, whose catastrophic consequences are deferred for years or decades or even centuries. By focusing on the temporal dispersion of slow violence, in particular the strategic challenges of environmental calamities, we find ourselves better equipped with possibilities for changing not only the way we perceive violence but importantly how we respond to a variety of social crises which are both collective and individual, public and private.

Nixon surveys slow violence or the “incremental and accretive” forms of violence that harm peoples and ecosystems around the world to elucidate political as well as literary forms of resistance to this type of violence that in turn give voice to - what sociologist Ramachandra Guha (2002) coined as - the environmentalism of the poor. In his analysis, Nixon draws upon the use of cluster bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan, oil drilling in the Niger Delta and the Middle East, deforestation in Kenya, dam building in India and the western United States, the climate crisis in the Maldives as well as the 1984 chemical explosion in Bhopal, to reveal how understanding these episodes through structural violence alone does not suffice precisely because this lens restricts us to short timescales, spectacular events and visible environmental impacts. His project is to introduce and explore at length temporality (along a long *durée* or long-term time-scale), scale and representation. Nixon's specific focus is what he considers the persistent silence in ecocriticism regarding US foreign policy and its severe environmental and social legacies.

Disturbingly, Nixon shows how the US and its allies dropped 24 million cluster munitions on Iraq alone in 1991 and that Afghanistan is the “most heavily mined nation” in the world (Nixon, 2011: 225). Disconcertingly he describes the enormous impact of slow violence when he writes that: “In the aftermath of war, political changes occur far faster than environmental recovery. There remains little incentive for an administration to spend taxpayer money cleaning up lethal detritus left behind in far-off countries from a predecessor's war” (Nixon, 2011: 228).

We find it fitting to combine Nixon's insights into the consequences of invisible violence with the nuanced and enriching ongoing discussions on settler colonialism to cast light on the reality lived by Gazans in the Strip. As our short video entitled “Gaza: Arts of Resilience and Hope in the Midst of Despair”¹⁴ depicts, Israel's settler colonialism not only deprives Gazans of space but also of possibilities of being: The testimonies from our interviewees show the severity of a life-destroying machine that settler colonialism is, not least the impact of the shortage of art supplies for creative work. Their narratives shed light on a critical angle of the brutality of the siege. Thus, and as we argued in the opening of this article, we provide updated evidence (see furthermore the below empirical section) on the transformation of everyday life into non-life as central to the

¹⁴ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRPnvdCbNGM> May 5, 2021: The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, University College London. A second, revised version is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DazrtM5ObE> October 12, 2021. For more on using film/video as method in social science research see Harman (2019).

politics of violence in Gaza. Following Lefebvre, we see everyday life “...as a totality... And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human – and every human being – a whole takes its shape and its form. In it are expressed and fulfilled those relations which bring into play the totality of the realm albeit in a certain manner which is always partial and incomplete: friendship, comradeship, love, the need to communicate, play, etc.” (Goonewardena, 2008: 124-125). And in the case of our artist interviewees whose narratives we record in the above video, art practices become humanizing experiences and allow for a pedagogy of hope in the midst of all Israel’s settler colonial violence.

Indeed, the quality of life, of housing, water, electricity, nutrition, education, health – to mention a few aspects of everyday life – turns our focus on infrastructure as both a physical and a political construct which generates life in spatial settings (Anand et al, 2018; Lemanski, 2019; Graham and McFarlane, 2014; Roy, 2006; Yacobi, 2012). In our video and artist interviewees, the representation of place as both a site of destruction but also as a space inscribed with love on the walls (thus emulating hope in the midst of crisis), is clearly depicted. Thus, our video supplements and adds insight to our interviews in a number of ways: primarily the possibility for our viewers and readers to see “the invisible” not only in terms of the artists and their narratives and how they become visible on screen, but, more importantly perhaps, are the hidden, unseen and unseeable aspects of everyday life in Gaza: As the moment (in our video at approx. 04:59) when composer and instructor Yasser Omar is talking and the electricity goes out. We, the viewers, see only a black screen in contrast to the colourful mural painting Yasser had in the background just a few seconds before. Yasser comments: “The electricity was cut off while we were filming.” ... “Mr. Hassan (local videographer) has turned on the mobile flash light ... Nonetheless, we must continue to persevere and remain standing and go on with our lives. This is part of our life without doubt. I don’t know whether the electricity will come back or not ... God willing it will return”.

Through this short instance of a black out on our screen, viewers get to pay attention to the power of colour of the visual. The politics of colour help us understand the socio-political work that the visual does – we see through this video the every-day lives of our Gazan artists as emphasised by Yasser: “This is part of our life without doubt”. Following Roland Barthes’ (1977) work on the death of the author, we also get to appreciate the potential of varying aesthetic effects the video has on different audiences: Thus, the visual complements our interviews by creating space for new ways of thinking about silence/ing and in/visibility – of our Gazan subjects: a combined communicative force of our textual and visual in that neither words nor vision have prime explanatory power but together they help us get closer to see the everyday lives of Gazans under Israel’s settler colonial violence.

Moreover, our short video shows how the notion of confinement, now in vogue due to the pandemic (at time of writing), takes a different dimension in the context of besieged Gaza: Yasser uses this allegory to express the long duration and experience of Gazans under siege as well as the subjugation of Palestinian political prisoners: “Lockdown for years - Living in a cell - desolation – of imprisonment of four decades.” Therefore, what this video and the narrated testimonies within enable is the capturing of alternative epistemologies in the study of infrastructures within violent settler colonial contexts: of body languages, objects, gestures, the serendipity of contextual conditions (energy disruption), music/sonic landscapes and the evocative power of music, colour, the expressed feelings and emotions, the texture of the talent of our artist interviewees as well as the visual symbols used.

There appears, then, to be a significant potential for engaging embodied, symbolic and affective approaches in the study of infrastructures as socio-technical systems. Rodgers and O’Neill’s (2012) work on “infrastructural violence” highlights the capacity of networked services to exclude selected populations by restricting access to vital resources, thus perpetuating inequality. In these studies, disconnection from the network is equated to Galtung’s “structural violence” (Galtung, 1969). More recently, there has been increasing

interest in the symbolic aspects of infrastructures, which are understood to function as symbols of modernity (Larkin, 2013) and sites at which the terms and boundaries of citizenship are negotiated (von Schnitzler, 2016; Anand, 2017).

Indeed, there is increasing recognition that (sewage, water, etc) pipes, (electricity) cables and roads are essential to the political form of territories, and that infrastructure shapes everyday life (Amin, 2014; Larkin, 2013). Electricity, water and sewerage affect everyday life and provide the basic political channels which establish the relationships between those who govern and those who are governed.

It is with the above conceptual framework in mind - that brings together settler colonial studies and slow violence - that we now turn to – and in greater depth – our empirical material in order to discern the ways in which the everyday life of Gazans has turned into non-life.

3. Non-life in Gaza

2021 marks 54 years since the occupation of the Palestinian Territory and 14 years of the Gaza blockade. Both the occupation and the blockade affect every aspect of everyday life for Palestinians – they dictate where they can live and study, whom they can marry, etc. The siege on Gaza has devastated its economy, caused widespread destruction and left most people largely cut off from the outside world.

According to the World Bank (2020), life expectancy at birth in the West Bank and Gaza is 74 years (2017 est.), almost ten years lower than that of persons in Israel (where life expectancy is 83). Oxfam International reports that over one million Palestinians in Gaza today do not have enough food to feed their families, despite receiving food assistance or other forms of support. This echoes Sara Roy's study (1995) pointing to how the Gaza Strip became a subject of de-development, and a severe humanitarian case which Israel withdrew its responsibility from. Poverty in the Strip has in fact spiked from 38.8 per cent in 2011 to 53 per cent in 2017, two-thirds of whom (656,000) live on less than \$3.6/day (that is, they live in deep poverty). Food insecurity went up from 59 per cent in 2017 to 68 per cent in 2018. The Humanitarian Needs Overview for 2019, a UN OCHA-led coordinated approach to needs assessment jointly identified by the humanitarian community, reported 82.5 per cent (1.6 million) of the total population in Gaza as being in need of humanitarian assistance, 79% of whom are refugees (UN OCHA, 2019).

With the blockade in place and with tougher restrictions for accessing Gaza via Kerem Shalom, the main commercial crossing, Gazans find themselves with very limited amounts of fuel and cooking gas reaching their hospitals, homes and businesses. In February 2018 the electric company in the Gaza Strip announced the shutting down of the only power plant in Gaza because of a lack of diesel fuel to run the plant. Currently, Gaza's approximately two million residents receive about four hours of electricity a day: Gaza's medical facilities have already been struggling to operate with limited electricity, depending mostly on generators to provide services for patients.

The fishing zone has been reduced from six to three nautical miles (preventing fishermen from accessing 85% of the fishing waters agreed under the Oslo Accords). Almost half of the working-age population are unemployed. Apart from the devastating effects of the blockade imposed on Gazans, and in the space of less than six years (Dec/2008-2014), Gaza experienced three devastating wars which not only inflicted human losses (3,808 dead) and left thousands injured and displaced but which also targeted key infrastructures, including Gaza's sole power plant, sewage treatment facilities, hospitals, schools, factories, agricultural farms and local industries. Now, less than four percent of fresh water is drinkable, and the surrounding sea is polluted by sewage. This situation was exacerbated by the May 2021 war during which three Israeli strikes killed 62 Palestinian civilians. (There were no evident military targets in the vicinity, Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Four of our interviewees are under the age of 25. They describe their struggle to survive on a day-to-day basis and more so to build a future and find a partner. With more than 14 years of Israel's siege, half of their lives has been experienced through recurring Israeli violent attacks on the Strip and deteriorating economic and social conditions. As a direct consequence of these conditions, they refer to an ever-decreasing marriage rate across Gaza as most youth and their families cannot afford dowries, weddings nor accommodation for young couples. This has wide-reaching consequences for Gazan society. As Am Hussam, (who we quoted at the beginning of this article, now divorced and former business woman from Gaza City, Tal ilhoua area) put it:

"I had a beauty salon and from that salon I was able to feed my children and pay the bills and my life was brilliant. However, the siege led people to not marry that much and if you have a son and you want him to marry, you will delay it as you don't have enough money. The lack of customers and clients led me to close my shop in the end".¹⁵

The above reveals the fragmentation of a society as a result of violence as well as the collective and individual outcomes; these sentiments are echoed in the narrative of 19-year-old Iiya Mohamed Soulima Al-Basouni from Beit-Hanoun, North of Gaza, who is a student at the University College of Applied Sciences:

"I am quite ill because of the lack of nutritious food: I suffer from anaemia, asthma, and constant headaches and kidney problems. One experience affects me on a daily basis. I'm a young lady and coming to university I see a lot of other young ladies well-dressed and every day they come in a new colour. On the other hand I have only two dresses and use them all year round and I got them as gifts as my dad cannot afford that. On 8th October, we have my cousin's wedding and they are asking me "what are you going to wear?" and I say, I did not buy anything and will not buy anything as I cannot. My uncles paid for my medicine and iron vitamins as I cannot afford that, though I'm quite sick until now. If there was no siege and violence my life would not be like this and I would not be sick".¹⁶

Iiya also narrated how she has attempted to commit suicide at different times of her life due to hard times and the lack of life she experiences everyday. But she was not alone in expressing this sentiment. Am Hussam also had this to share with Ziad, our interviewer, which is worth quoting at length as it illustrates the consequences of Israel's long *durée*, settler colonial, slow violence on the foundational aspects of Gazans' everyday life:

"They are trying to create hungry people and their equation is like this - if you are going to resist the occupier you will be besieged, tortured and humiliated - You have to agree and surrender and your land will be confiscated - as has happened in the West Bank ... Your dignity, honour and land are exchanged for your food, this is the main Israeli goal. They stole Gaza's water and they are still stealing it - They were digging wells alongside the borders and stole the water and also, they stole the settlement water in Gaza".¹⁷

Am Hussam continued:

¹⁵ Interview conducted by Ziad, October 5, 2019, Gaza City.

¹⁶ Interview conducted by Ziad October 2, 2019, Beit Hanoun, Gaza.

¹⁷ Interview conducted by Ziad October 16, 2019.

“I think from a dignity point of view, one should ask about one’s basic rights - which is the better option? To end one’s life by committing suicide or to set oneself on fire? I was one of the elites in society and my family was considered bourgeois in Gaza but during this crisis, I thought to end my life and that committing suicide was better than seeking a loan from a man who is looking at you and his eyes have a lot of meaning. In other words, “oh I can help you but you have to pay the price by your honour” but for me, death is better than this... “Gazans feel that humanity is lost and the feeling of happiness does not exist at all. We feel insecure and we have lost the beauty of life and we are just after necessities. I do not blame the people for that as they lost their soulfulness in life. Therefore, you find some people who commit suicide by setting themselves on fire.... I thought about suicide and I stopped because all my life I struggled and found this is against my Islamic religious values and I fully believe and trust in Allah that He will change my status as Allah is able to do everything”.

Without doubt, settler colonial violence ensures the sense of a loss of control on everyday life – both tangibly and symbolically. As noted in the interview quotes above, and as similarly echoed by the visual artist Ilham Al Astal in our video, the outcome of slow violence affects environmental resources - such as water and land - as well as the dignity and identity of Gazans. These material conditions are intertwined with the mental health of our interviewees. Specifically, Am Hussam refers to a growing number of talented Gazan youth who voice the despair of their generation via social media. In May 2018, The Guardian reported the suicide of 22-year-old student, Mohanned Younis who used to express his sense of hopelessness through reading, writing short stories or working out with his punch bag (Helm, 2018). It also conveyed how Mohanned’s death through suicide was symptomatic of an increasing trend amongst the youth of Gaza: as a direct consequence of the despair for their future and the siege’s imposed misery on all Gazan population. The effects of Israel’s settler colonialism on the mental health of Palestinians in general had already been documented in 2005 through Nadia Taysir Dabbagh’s succinct anthropological study called *Suicide in Palestine: Narratives of Despair* (Dabbagh, 2005). This work is important because it contextualizes suicide in a society with a large Muslim population and in which *intihar* (suicide, for reasons such as despair) is forbidden (in Islam). It is also an act that brings a lot of shame on relatives of those who commit such an act. In 2017, Itani et al reported an increase in suicidal thinking among Palestinian middle school students living in the oPt as well as in United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria (Itania et al., 2017).

Thus, Israel’s settler colonial slow violence, that is frequently invisible and which occurs steadily, often with consequences that are delayed and dispersed across time and space, shapes the daily lives of Gazans. As also noted by Interviewee 19 (who wishes to remain anonymous), herbicide or hydrocide are inherent to Israel’s control over life in Gaza. It is not just a strategic, military end, but rather a means of controlling Gazan life:

“The fierce occupation disrupted the beauty of Gaza - the occupation intervened in every detail of our life, upset the people, trees, animals - to the extent the occupation contaminated the air as their aim is to suffocate the citizens in Gaza, in order for us to accept the less for human life. They stole Gazan water and the water remaining became unsuitable for drinking”.¹⁸

It is therefore important to highlight how the destruction of infrastructure is central for understanding the mechanism of slow violence. “Infrastructural violence” (Rodgers and O’Neill, 2012) accentuates the centrality of networks to exclude/include by restricting/enabling access to essential resources and services:

¹⁸ Interview held by Ziad, September 23, 2019, Khan Yunis.

“Water is not fit for drinking at all from a health point of view. The problem is in Gaza, the people are digging wells for sewage and as their depth is nine meters, the sewage goes directly into the groundwater. However, for washing water... no alternative - we have to use it. We need a sewage net in Gaza as the sea is full of sewage and I cannot swim in the sea and we need a better life - like other people all over the world”.¹⁹

By disconnecting Gazans from key utility networks, Israel performs not only a form of “structural violence”,²⁰ but also slow violence through the everyday absence or malfunction of infrastructures that seek to ensure public hygiene and sanitation (such as water, sewage, and electricity). Thus, our evidence and especially our witness accounts from Gazans themselves reveal how they lack the necessary infrastructures upon which their everyday lives depend.²¹ This is echoed in how they talk about their everyday liminal lives between life and death:

“The hospital was attacked by Israelis on 24/07/2014. The number of injuries during that war was so huge and we referred many of them to Yafa Hospital in Der-Ilibalh and to Al Shifa as well. The surgical rooms were insufficient and we extended the emergency area into empty spaces in order to deal with the crisis... We cannot differentiate between life and death - both are equal. We cannot distinguish between anything - We evacuated the hospital at the time of the attack... I admit that there are people who escape from reality and find their solution in taking drugs and become addicts”.²²

Furthermore:

“My personal life was affected... and I was divorced... My husband had been a car merchant and lost his business due to the siege. He was arrested because of debts and many shopkeepers are still in prison. He was not able to feed his children and locked himself in his room and was just sleeping and on his mobile all the time...”²³

The above interviews validate our argument in that slow violence is not solely a macro-power mechanism of destruction. Rather, it is also an effective means of transforming private life into non-life. But Gaza is not only under a constant shortage of basic infrastructure - including the provision of health-related services. As one interviewee put it, during the last two years Gaza has witnessed a dramatic emigration:

“The only alternative is emigration, and I have to emigrate to feed my children. I tried to work in Israel and they prohibited me as they need exact numbers and they do not want to increase the numbers. I need to work in Israel to feed my children”.²⁴

¹⁹ Anonymous interviewee no. 15, interview conducted by Ziad, Gaza City, September 21-22, 2019.

²⁰ See Galtung (1969) for more on this notion.

²¹ See Gandy (2006) for more on how infrastructures are the very extensions of our bodily selves on which our survival depends. Lacking key infrastructures thereby means vulnerable human bodies and everyday environments.

²² Interviewee 24, Deir al-Balah, central Gaza, October 8, 2019.

²³ Am Hussam, Gaza City, Tal ilhoua area.

²⁴ Interviewee 15, Gaza City, September 21-22, 2019.

It is estimated that around 35,000 young, educated and middle-class Palestinians left the Gaza Strip (via Egypt) during 2018 due to the dire economic situation (Kubovich, 2019). And between 2018 and 2019 around 120 to 150 highly qualified and desperately needed Palestinian doctors emigrated, leading to the closure of medical departments in hospitals (Middle East Monitor, 2019). Slow violence, indeed, is about the settler colonial, conscious damaging of both private and public spheres, as a medical doctor in Gaza told us:

“We have a lack of doctors in Gaza... our doctors are studying abroad or they went to complete their speciality - they did not return to Gaza for the following reasons: the lack of salaries in Gaza, life’s difficult circumstances in Gaza, and the journey hurdles while travelling to Gaza...”²⁵

Moreover, almost half of the Gazan population is unemployed (Al-Awsat, 2020) and Gazans experience chronic power shortages of at least eight hours a day:

“The siege policy aimed to make Gaza unliveable - to force people to leave Gaza and escape. The continuation of the status quo in Gaza is completely unacceptable for living in for the following reasons, the educated become unemployed, the economy has collapsed and the policy of cutting salaries, a lot of employees are in the prison as they cannot fulfil their financial commitments, the water is contaminated, and employees cannot afford food for their children”.²⁶

“The electricity cuts lead to the spoiling of frozen food, cheese and a lot of food ... therefore, we in the municipality are getting rid of goods ”...²⁷

“I came back from university and cannot study because of the electricity cuts and there is no life as water is not there and no money and these are the pillars of life”.²⁸

The quotations from our interview material above go a long way to show what is really happening in Gaza today as a result of Israel’s settler colonial enterprise. They also help manifest – in praxis – our conceptual framework, which brings together settler colonialism, slow violence and non-life: in effect exposing how settler colonialism aims at the direct/indirect, gradual removal/cleansing of the indigenous population of Gaza.

3. Conclusion

Slow violence in the Gaza Strip and in the form of the ongoing blockade and restrictions on movement of goods and people remains intact since 2006. With the Palestinian divide unresolved, the chronic disruption of electricity and fuel supply, and recurring hostilities always looming and never far off, the conditions on the ground in Gaza have deteriorated to deplorable proportions.²⁹ In less than two decades Gaza experienced devastating wars which not only inflicted human losses and left thousands injured and displaced but which also targeted key infrastructures, including Gaza’s sole power plant, sewage treatment facilities, hospitals, schools, factories, agricultural farms and local industries. As we suggested throughout this article, this should be understood not as an anecdote, but rather as part of Israel’s settler colonial (political) logic. Some might contradict our argument that Gaza is no longer under a settler colonial regime, since Israel withdrew from the Strip via its disengagement plan, which the Israeli state claims put an end to its grip on the people of Gaza.

²⁵ Interviewee 19, Khan Yunis, September 23, 2019.

²⁶ Interviewee 21, October 16, 2019.

²⁷ Interviewee 22, Khan Younis, September 29, 2019.

²⁸ Interviewee 16, Beit Hanoun, North of Gaza, October 2, 2019.

²⁹ For additional data see: <https://www.ochaopt.org/data/crossings>

However, we contest such claims and argue that the withdrawal from Gaza marks not only a continuation but even an escalation in the violence perpetrated by Israel in Gaza; this slow violence operates constantly and its temporality is the core of its destructive effect (Erakat and Tareq, 2016).

Slow violence – as practiced by Israel – gains significant spatial and political value in transforming the Gaza Strip into a frontier where the logic of elimination is legitimised, placing Gazans in a permanent state of exception. Gaza as a frontier is the spatial and physical materialisation of everyday non-life characterised by deplorable ecocide (Abu-Jaber, 2019) health, social and housing conditions. Hamas, which controls Gaza, attempts to challenge these slow violent forms by, for instance, blocking medical doctors from leaving the Strip (Kubovich, 2019). However, there is a clear power imbalance between Israel's settler colonial mechanisms and Hamas.³⁰ In this article, we have aimed to expose (the) forms of Israel's slow violence that impact on Gazans' everyday life in all its aspects. We have done so through a combined lens of settler colonialism, Nixon's slow violence and the consequences of infrastructure demolition on Gazans' health and non-life. We argued that by targeting to eliminate the existing Gazan population through the creation of an unbearable life, Israel uses Gaza as a frontier for its destructive power and violent (albeit slow) practices. We hope that our research sheds light on the ways in which Israel's settler colonial power, slow violence, the destruction of key infrastructures and the consequences of all these on Gazans' health are entangled in such a manner as to confirm the UN's prophecy that Gaza has indeed become uninhabitable (United Nations, 2018). This, we conclude, is the result of a radicalization of settler colonialism in the Gaza Strip that comes at the expense of the daily life and slow death of almost two million Gazans.

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³⁰ For more on this see: Abu Hatoum (2021).

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