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# Decolonizing Judeans “Jewish-Indigeneity” and the (Re)Articulation of Decolonial Language

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Article abstract

The confluence of decolonization and the Anglo-American study of religion has generally followed a mode of critical self-reflection which aims to illuminate, problematize, and undo the field's colonial contours. While crucial to decolonial processes within the academy, less appreciated or understood are the ways in which decolonial language has been invoked across a far broader social landscape, often indexing a range of political commitments and aspirations that depart considerably from more conventional decolonial frameworks. More often than not, such articulations are either rejected as fraudulent or cast off as mischaracterization of more noble decolonial projects. Using Jewish and Zionist communal discourses as a case study, this essay instead proposes to take seriously these articulations through a deeper inquiry into its undergirding religious, historical, and theological logics. In thinking through such orthogonal transformations of putatively decolonial claims, we may thereby arrive at a more capacious theoretical model that can organize divergent (and often contradictory) modes of decolonial interpretation by a range of social actors.

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# Decolonizing Judeans: “Jewish-Indigeneity” and the (Re)Articulation of Decolonial Language

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In mid-November 2023, a rally organized by the Jewish student groups Hillel Concordia and StartUp Nation convened outside Concordia University’s downtown campus to denounce the “rise of antisemitism” in both Montreal and across North American universities following the onset of the war in Gaza.<sup>1</sup> Reportedly attended by hundreds,<sup>2</sup> the demonstration nevertheless maintained a

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1. The protest was first organized following the firebombing of a Montreal synagogue and the discovery of two bullet holes at two Jewish schools in the same week, though was further catalyzed by what has since been colloquially deemed “the Table Wars,” a widely publicized escalation between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine students inside the Hall building at Concordia. See, for instance: CBC News, “Multiple Injuries in Montreal after Group Altercation at Concordia University over Israel-Hamas War,” *CBC*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/concordia-university-altercation-montreal-1.7023019>.

2. Amanda Polese-Lovgren, “Post-Secondary Students Led a Rally for Israel in Montreal—While Both Concordia and McGill Are Now Facing Lawsuits Alleging Failures to Combat Antisemitism,” *The Canadian Jewish News*, November 17, 2023, <https://thecjn.ca/news/montreal-rally-mcgill-concordia/>.

predominantly cool and collected air. Sporadic chants to “bring them [Israeli hostages] home” never reached more than a genteel, if not somewhat self-conscious, pitch, while speech after speech by eminent community members tended to reiterate the same talking points as those on stage beforehand. One can only hear the same things so many times, I thought, until it inevitably loses its affective charge.

It was not until Elisheva Ysabella Hazan ascended the podium that I detected a notable shift in the crowd’s energy. With an Israeli flag draped across her shoulders, the energetic Hazan, a former Concordia law student and founder of the *Decolonized Judean* social media platform, began:

The turnout here today is a testament to the strength and to the unity of *Am Yisrael* [the nation/people of Israel]. Seeing the massacres of Israelis at the hands of Hamas terrorists, many have asked us, “do you have family in Israel?” And to that we say, yes. Yes we do have family in Israel— millions of Israeli brothers and sisters. We are one. United here today, we have a clear message: Let *our* people go!<sup>3</sup>

Here the mythic plight of the biblical Israelites in ancient Egypt effectively collapses into the present, establishing a powerful (and culturally potent) temporal link wherein Jewish suffering and oppression is always already anticipated, and wherein such oppression can and *will* be ultimately thwarted by both Jewish pride and collective will.<sup>4</sup> The crowd began to ring with excitement

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3. Hazan’s comments were recorded by the author at the rally.

4. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, “Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory,” in *The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996). See also: Esther Benbassa, *Suffering as Identity: The*

as cheers reached a previously unmatched intensity. Grasping upon this renewed energy, Hazan loudly redoubled:

We are the descendants of Maccabees, and resilience is encrypted into our DNA. To those who try and terrify the nation of Israel, please know, *that anti-colonial tactics do not work on an Indigenous people*. No matter how many times you call us colonizers to the land that we are from, we are only reminded of who we are.

The rally had at last reached its acoustic zenith, with claps and clamours reverberating down the city street in all directions. Flurries of blue and white dominated the visual scene as demonstrators fiercely waved their Israeli flags. “An attack on the nation of Israel is an attack on us,” Hazan exclaimed, “We are one nation, one people, with one heart, and one homeland. We are not just pro-Israel, we *are* Israel. *Am Yisrael Chai!* [the nation/people of Israel lives!]”

From a discursive perspective, Hazan’s address represents a broader development over the last decade, wherein Jewish entitlements to the territories now claimed by the State of Israel are increasingly articulated by and through recourse to Indigenous, settler-colonial, and, as the name of Hazan’s platform suggests, *decolonial* language. Branded as a “Judean empowerment movement promoting justice and decolonizing Jewish identity,”<sup>5</sup> *Decolonized Judean* departs considerably from more common ascriptions of decolonial politics and thought, often aligning with mainstream Zionist organizations to support Israel’s military campaigns while simultaneously pointing toward a more therapeutic and urgent process of global Jewish cultural transformation. This essay, in many

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*Jewish Paradigm*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2010).

5. “Homepage,” *Decolonized Judean*, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://decolonizedjudean.com>.

ways, represents nothing more than an attempt to make sense of such decolonial articulations without losing sight of their immediate political context. As the strong affective response vividly exhibited at the Montreal rally indicates, such languages are not only playing an increasing role in shaping Jewish and non-Jewish public perceptions of Palestine, but are also influencing individual and communal Jewish identity formations within and, perhaps crucially, *beyond* modern Israel's geopolitical boundaries. It appears to me that while a plethora of critical engagements have (rightly) addressed the often-problematic appropriation of such grammars to buttress Zionist claims to political sovereignty and military exceptionalism, a more careful consideration of the logics undergirding such articulations can help us better understand the mobility and mobilizations of decolonial language as it unpredictably circulates across the social sphere. In other words, what is missing from these analyses is a fuller appreciation for the ways in which decolonial articulations can index a broader set of ideas which, though not external to settler-colonial dynamics, can nevertheless fall outside its interpretive purview.

Using Jewish and Zionist communal discourses as a primary case study, I propose taking seriously these uneven circulations and unanticipated articulations of decolonial language. Through an inquiry into the undergirding cultural, historical, and theological logics of these putatively decolonial claims, I aim to: (1) locate and index an often-obfuscated set of inter- and intracommunal processes and paradoxes in contemporary Judaism, while also (2) expanding the possibilities of decolonial investigations within Jewish studies and the study of religion more broadly by shifting our attention to the ways decoloniality is variably understood and mobilized by a range of social actors, particularly those whose political visions cling onto the progressive revolutionary imaginations characterising our present moment with rather radically different aims.

Indeed, as one article from *The Jerusalem Post* observed, decolonization has become “the latest flashpoint” concerning Palestine/Israel leading up to (and especially following) the October 7th attack by Hamas militants.<sup>6</sup> While here the author only considers the proliferation of predominantly anti-Zionist decolonial analyses on Palestine/Israel both within and without the academy, an array of Jewish as well as Indigenous social actors in North America and New Zealand have taken up its conceptual grammars, often in decidedly subversive ways. On one hand, many of these instantiations explicitly reject the settler-colonial model as overly simplistic, dangerous, and toxic.<sup>7</sup> Such arguments often reiterate an exceptionalist rhetoric wherein the Jewish presence in Israel is not analogous to settler-colonialisms manifest elsewhere, and that any such comparison risks lapsing into (at least latent) antisemitism. In a similar though not antithetical vein, others have incorporated aspects of settler-colonial frameworks as a means of repositioning extant Zionist principles, structures, and claims through a new conceptual grammar. Joseph

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6. Andrew Silow-Carroll, “How ‘Decolonization’ Became the Latest Flashpoint in the Discourse over Israel,” *The Jerusalem Post*, December 4, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-776397>.

7. American Jewish Committee. “Translate Hate Glossary: Settler-Colonialist,” nd, <https://www.ajc.org/translatehate/settler-colonialist>; Anti-Defamation League, “Backgrounder: Slogan: Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” January 16, 2024, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/slogan-decolonization-not-metaphor>; Noah Feldman, “The New Antisemitism,” *Time*, February 27, 2024, <https://time.com/6763293/antisemitism/>; Simon Sebag Montefiore, “The Decolonization Narrative Is Dangerous and False,” *The Atlantic*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/decolonization-narrative-dangerous-and-false/675799/>; Sheree Trotter, “Defrocking Decolonisation’s Priesthood,” *Indigenous Coalition for Israel*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.indigenouscoalition.org/articles-blog/defrocking-decolonisations-priesthood>.

[Arawak Taino] and Laralyn [Eastern Cherokee] Riverwind, for example, write in an April 2024 *Tablet Magazine* op-ed that “Israel is the prime example of hope for other displaced indigenous tribes worldwide [...] stand[ing] as the original land-back and decolonization model multiple times in history.”<sup>8</sup> Zionism, rather than representing an exemplary settler society, instead constitutes a decolonial movement *par excellence*, wherein the State of Israel and the Jewish people stand as paradigmatic examples of both indigeneity and Indigenous political futures.<sup>9</sup>

This notion of Jewish indigeneity has received increased attention over the last decade following the 2015 World Zionist Congress resolution which, by a one percent margin, declared the Jewish people as “a Semitic people, indigenous to the land of Israel

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8. Joseph Riverwind and Laralyn Riverwind, “The Indigenous Sovereignty Movement Called Zionism,” *Tablet Magazine*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/indigenous-sovereignty-movement-called-zionism>.

9. Ryan Bellerose, “Are Jews Indigenous to the Land of Israel?” *Tablet Magazine*, February 8, 2017, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/bellerose-aboriginal-people>; Micha Danzig, “Jews: Identity Matters. De-Colonize, Re-Indigenize, Don’t Call Yourself – or ‘Wonder Woman’ – White!” *The Times of Israel*, June 20, 2017, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/jews-identity-matters-de-colonize-re-indigenize-dont-call-yourself-or-wonder-woman-white/>; Karen Lehrman Bloch, “Jews Are An Indigenous People. Let’s Decolonize Our Identity,” *Jewish Journal*, March 23, 2020, <https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/columnist/312546/decolonizing-jewish/>; Barbara Kay, “Israel Is a True Indigenous Success Story,” *The National Post*, February 24, 2024, <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/barbara-kay-israel-a-true-indigenous-success-story>; National Post Staff, “Jews Are an Indigenous People to Israel, Says Maori Director of Indigenous Embassy Jerusalem,” *The National Post*, June 11, 2024, <https://nationalpost.com/news/jews-are-an-indigenous-people-to-israel-says-maori-director-of-indigenous-embassy-jerusalem>.

and seeking international recognition of its indigenous status,”<sup>10</sup> as well as the controversial 2018 “nation-state law” which declared Israeli self-definition and self-determination as the exclusive purview of the Jewish people.<sup>11</sup> Often borrowing liberally from the settler-colonial paradigm mapped out by Australian academics Lorenzo Veracini and Patrick Wolfe, such analyses have tended to examine such “indigenizing” movements as a manifestation of “a logic of elimination” which ultimately “strives for the dissolution of native societies.”<sup>12</sup> Following Wolfe, Veracini distinguishes settler-coloniality from its colonial and postcolonial forebears insofar as the former “is characterised by a persistent drive to ultimately supersede the conditions of its operation.” While “colonialism reproduces itself,” he argues, “settler colonialism [...] extinguishes itself.”<sup>13</sup> Veracini takes settler-indigenization as a crucial process and primary operational strategy of settler-societies to efface, and thereby overcome, their respective settler-ness: “As settlers are non-indigenous, they are forever indigenising [...]. The question then is how to be efficient self-indigenizers.”<sup>14</sup> This mode of interpretation

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10. World Zionist Congress, *Resolutions of the Zionist Congress XXXVI*, Resolution 6. 2015.

11. See also Rachel Z. Feldman and Ian McGonigle, “Introduction,” in *Settler-Indigeneity in the West Bank*, ed. Rachel Z. Feldman and Ian McGonigle (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023), 3–44.

12. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 387–388, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

13. Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing: Settler Colonial Studies,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2011): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648799>.

14. Lorenzo Veracini, “What Can Settler Colonial Studies Offer to an Interpretation of the Conflict in Israel–Palestine?” *Settler Colonial Studies* 5, no. 3 (2015): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2015.1036391>.



has since garnered considerable weight within progressive and pro-Palestine activism, and there is now an extensive literature on Palestine/Israel undergirded by this Israeli-settler and Palestinian-native paradigm. Such works, accordingly, have almost universally emphasized the incoherence of Zionist claims to indigeneity as a misreading and misappropriation of both settler-colonial and decolonial critical models, as a kind of cooptation aimed to undermine Palestinian claims to sovereignty and otherwise justify Israeli occupation.<sup>15</sup>

Though I do not wish to disagree with or discount such critical readings, here my concern rests in how such interpretative models may unintentionally reify a stable and theoretically rigid decolonial grammar (and by extension a one-dimensional “pure” and authentic indigenous identity) and, by extension, how such pre-ordained expectations might subsequently limit the ways we come to

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15. For instance, scholar Megan Scribe [Ininiw iskwew, Norway House Cree Nation], uses the case of Israel to name wider processes of “settler moves to indigeneity.” “In recent, years,” she notes, “settlers have also begun appropriating Indigeneity as an identity to inhabit on a full-time basis.” Connecting Zionist claims of indigeneity in Israel with the “Pretendian” phenomenon seen in North America, Scribe aims to illuminate a wider process of colonial “ethnic fraud” that seeks to not only supplant but in fact eliminate and replace Indigenous life: “In both cases,” Scribe concludes, “the language of Indigeneity and collective oppression is deployed to justify Israeli occupation and genocide of Palestinians.” See Megan Scribe, “Settler Moves to Indigeneity: From Canada to Israel,” *Yellowhead Institute*, November 14, 2023, <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2023/11/14/settler-moves-to-indigeneity-canada-israel/>; for more on the “Pretendian” phenomenon in Canada, see: Darryl Leroux, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019); and for more on the appropriation of human rights language by oppressive regimes, see Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon, *The Human Right to Dominate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

understand the mobilization, mobility, and transformative effects of decolonial language as it emerges and is practiced across a range of social scenarios and cultural contexts. In other words, though the settler-indigenization model is useful in highlighting *why* such articulations occur, it is less efficient in addressing *by whom* and *when* de/colonial language is deployed at particular moments, *what* kind of social movements, political allegiances, or intracommunal transformations it attempts to inaugurate, and *how* such instantiations are entangled within a much larger (though not unlimited) discursive arena.

David Koffman, for instance, has traced a growing interest in First Nations issues by Jewish-Canadians since the late 2000s, as both a well-meaning effort to participate in nationwide processes of settler-indigenous reconciliation, while at the same time attempting to build affiliative frameworks of shared historical oppression.<sup>16</sup> Thus, while engaging with this national discourse *as* settlers within the Canadian sphere, such homogenizing practices can double to support auxiliary claims of Jewish indigeneity. As such, Koffman concludes, “First Nations talk is simultaneously... often a proxy for Israel.”<sup>17</sup> Conversely, Rachel Z. Feldman and Ian McGonigle’s 2023 co-edited ethnographic volume addresses the varied mobilizations of indigeneity as “a modality of self-definition” across Haredi and Mizrahi settlements in the occupied West Bank, calling attention to the ways in which national expansionist regimes, racial politics, and messianic religious fervour combine through various “settler-indigenization” or “indigeneity-making” practices such as winemaking, farming, or the cultural and aesthetic mimicry of

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16. David S. Koffman, “Suffering and Sovereignty: Recent Canadian Jewish Interest in Indigenous Peoples and Issues,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* 25 (2017): 28–59, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40013>.

17. Koffman, “Suffering and Sovereignty,” 50.

(displaced) Palestinians.<sup>18</sup> While they are careful to not equate these settlers as themselves actually native, the authors nevertheless utilize critical indigenous models in order to reveal the historic and cultural production of settler-indigeneity. Taken together, these examples reveal a complex set of geographic locations and discursive circuits which, though perhaps undergirded by settler-colonial dynamics, in some senses exceed the explanatory framework of a dominant colonial narrative. Determining the in/validity of Jewish utilizations of decolonial language (or otherwise exposing its internal contradictions) becomes less important than thinking through the conditions of its very emergence; than of asking what such mobilizations accomplish across a range of social, political, and religious scales.

### **Theorizing Jewish Decolonial (Re)Articulations**

What I have in mind here is to place a more-or-less abstract and multivalent Jewish decolonial theory alongside a robust cultural theory of articulation. In this sense, I consider this project to be both located within the field of Jewish decolonial studies that is nevertheless distinct from existing works which have variably engaged with, excavated, or otherwise envisioned the historic,<sup>19</sup>

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18. Feldman and McGonigle, "Introduction," 8–12.

19. To offer only select examples of a larger field, I include: Naomi Davidson, "'Brothers from South of the Mediterranean': Decolonizing the Jewish 'family' during the Algerian War," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 76–96; Ethan Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud Mandel, eds., *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017); Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Jonathan Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews*, 1st ed (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005).

epistemic,<sup>20</sup> ontologic,<sup>21</sup> and more recently aesthetic dimensions of Jewishness through de/colonial interpretive frameworks.<sup>22</sup> Such works have, to put it briefly, sought to both resituate and complicate “the Jew” within and across a range of de/colonial dynamics – whether that be as imaginatively invoked in humanist epistemes of race and religion (as seen in predominantly Hispanophonic theories of decoloniality) following the “discovery” of the New World, or as implicated social agents across a variety of past and contemporary social processes (seen in the traditional Franco- and Anglo-American postcolonial and more recently settler-colonial studies). These fundamental contradictions and entanglements have, until only recently, befallen a relative reticence by Jewish Studies scholars to engage with the history and structure of colonialism in any comprehensive way. Nevertheless, these silences appear to be cracking as new works have put critical decolonial theories into

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20. Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137345837>; Walter Mignolo, “Decolonizing the Nation State,” in *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021) 154–180; Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, “The Conceptual Triad: Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality,” in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 135–152,

21. Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019); Benjamin Steinhart Case, “Decolonizing Jewishness: On Jewish Liberation in the 21st Century,” *Tikkun* 33, no. 1–2 (Winter/Spring 2018): 47–58; Ilan Pappé, “Shtetl Colonialism: First and Last Impressions of Indigeneity by Colonised Colonisers,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 2012): 39–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2012.10648825>.

22. Dario Miccoli, *A Sephardi Sea: Jewish Memories across the Modern Mediterranean* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022).

generative conversation with Jewish phenomenon at the intersections of race, religion, nation, and empire.

Though I draw upon these resources, I depart from their methodological grounding by locating this study at the site of articulation itself. That is, rather than apply a decolonial paradigm onto historical Jewish phenomenon (a crude reduction that is not entirely representative of the field), I take as my starting point the very moment which decolonial language is *explicitly* uttered – always by a particular set of actors, always working within and constrained by particular social arrangements and political economies, and always with particular aims. Here Stuart Hall’s notion of “articulation” serves as an important theoretical resource. Building upon a double-meaning of the word – that is, as both a (contextual) speech act as well as a technical act of (temporarily) linking discrete entities together – Hall characterises articulation as

the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time [...]. The so-called “unity” of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary “belongingness.” The “unity” which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.<sup>23</sup>

Crucial to this model, therefore, is the absence of any presumption concerning the nature or essence of a particular collectivity or group. That is, articulation does not presume any “real” relation between what is spoken and who is speaking, turning instead toward how

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23. Stuart Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” ed. L. Grossberg, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 56.

(seemingly) distinct cultural elements are brought together, through language, to produce a (seemingly) natural alliance at a moment of in time. Articulation, then, is “not just a connection, but process of creating connections.”<sup>24</sup> Thus writes James Clifford: “An articulated ensemble is more like a political coalition or, in its ability to conjoin disparate elements, a cyborg [...]. In articulation theory, the whole question of authenticity is secondary [...]. It is assumed that cultural form will always be made, unmade, and remade [...]. The relevant question is whether, and how, they convince and coerce insider and outsiders, often in power-charged, unequal situations, to accept the autonomy of a ‘we.’”<sup>25</sup> Articulation thus enables a group to be thought through and charted without falling into “the twin traps of reductionism and essentialism,”<sup>26</sup> shifting our attention away from presumed expectations of group behaviour and instead toward the shifting contextual terrain under which a given social formation or alliance is soldered.

This point is particularly relevant in thinking through our present moment. In February 2024, an Indigenous Embassy was inaugurated at the evangelical Friends of Zion Museum in Jerusalem, attended by a large contingent of First Nations and Aboriginal representatives from Polynesia, southern Africa, the United States, and Canada, as well as a large delegation of Israeli diplomats. While not representative of an official government body, co-founder and Director Sheree Trotter [Māori] has stated that the Embassy instead serves as an expression of solidarity *between* Indigenous nations:

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24. Jennifer Daryl Slack, “The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogue in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 114.

25. James Clifford, “Indigenous Articulations,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 478–479.

26. Slack, “Theory and Method,” 112.

“Antisemitism has seen a disturbing and unprecedented rise in the weeks since 7 October. *We* recognise the Jews as indigenous to Israel and stand with her in her struggle against forces that seek her annihilation.”<sup>27</sup> Such “tribal alliances” (particularly Native Christian groups) with the State of Israel, according to anthropologist Mark Clatterbuck, have only continued to expand over the last decade, often in *spite* of public condemnations by Indigenous scholars and activists who see such support as a betrayal of Indigenous identity.<sup>28</sup> “Against such accusations,” writes Clatterbuck, “many Native Christians are not merely defending their support for the Israeli state; they are also actively redefining the terms of debate over what constitutes Native authenticity [...]. simultaneously asserting their credentials to speak as *Indians* on behalf of Native interests, even while calling into question the legitimacy of their critics to do the same”<sup>29</sup> A study on Jewish decolonial articulations therefore not only gets at a specifically Jewish phenomenon, but places us at the centre of emergent political formations which brush against dominant readings of settler-colonial dynamics.

Of course, to write on such a topic at a time of (ongoing) brutal oppression and muscular destruction, often explicitly sustained in the name of Jewish supremacy and Jewish indigeneity, risks missing the forest for the trees. Nevertheless, in thinking through the tensions underlying one’s political allegiance and theoretical practice, I am compelled to consider the growing wave of creative rearticulations of Jewish life in the wake – and often in spite – of

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27. Indigenous Coalition for Israel, “Media Release,” January 25, 2024, <https://www.indigenousembassy.org/240126-media-release>.

28. Mark Clatterbuck, “Tribal Alliances: The State of Israel and Native American Christianity,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 49, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 384–404.

29. Clatterbuck, “Tribal Alliances,” 403.

political and religious Zionisms. Such reimaginings, as Atalia Omer has expressed in her magisterial *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (2019), emerge through a complex process of introspection and contention, and constitute a yet-unfinished kind of work. As such, I hope that by shedding some light onto the processes and logics underlying this open and always-unfinished discursive phenomenon, we may yet learn something about “the discursivity of the matrix of Jewishness,”<sup>30</sup> and thereby contribute to the production of more capacious and liberationist formations of Jewish identity and intra-communal solidarity which are both quickly emerging and urgently needed.

### **Decolonization as Re-Indigenization: “Decolonized Judean” and the Modern Jewish Condition**

We may now return to our initial case study with a new set of considerations. Though not representative of the entire field of Zionist articulations of Jewish decolonization, Decolonized Judean offers itself as a generative starting point for such an analysis insofar as Hazan’s putatively decolonial theory of Jewishness is both well-documented, publicly available through social media platforms, and increasingly resonant within mainstream Jewish communities. Indeed, since the onset of the Israel-Hamas War, Hazan has garnered considerable media attention, amassing a sizeable following on Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter) while appearing in a range of radio and television interviews, podcasts, and speaking at pro-Israel demonstrations in Canada, the United States, Israel, France, and the United Kingdom. Although, as we will see in more detail, the nature and scope of her decolonial vision is oftentimes rudimentary – owing

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30. Omer, *Days of Awe*, 6.



in many ways to the sloganeering of social media infographic activism – the openness and adaptability of her rhetoric in many ways enables the conditions of its popular appeal. Consider here some examples, taken from *Decolonized Judean*’s Instagram account:

1. “Jews returning to Israel is an act of decolonization.” (November 4, 2021)
2. “Decolonized Judean, Empowered Judean.” (October 5, 2021)
3. “Jews are From Judea” (October 27, 2021)
4. “Decolonize Your Tongue: Learn Hebrew. Decolonize Your Mind: Learn Torah.” (December 30, 2021)
5. “Decolonize Your Spirituality – Connect to Your Hebrew Roots & the Oneness of HaShem [God]” (July 12, 2022)<sup>31</sup>

At least upon first view, decolonization herein is at least putatively in line with extant and popular conceptualizations of political Zionism writ-large. It is less of a conceptual leap so much as a recasting of the most basic and early Zionist principles of Jewish sovereignty and cultural expression onto a (albeit, rather simplistic) decolonial interpretive grid. As Hazan neatly summates in another post: “Zionism = Decolonize [sic]” (11 November 2021). And yet, the simplicity of this formulation, positioned here as a kind of common-sense logic, masks some stronger and perhaps less confident interpretive claims concerning the relation between contemporary and mythic Jewish identities. On one hand, as these posts indicate, the Jewish return to its homeland has constituted a successful instantiation of a decolonial politics, articulated herein as

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31. Ysabella Elisheva Hazan (@decolonizedjudean), [www.instagram.com/decolonizedjudean](https://www.instagram.com/decolonizedjudean).

a revival of an ancient (and stable) “Judean” culture. Yet on the other hand, it is also apparent that this process of civilizational decolonization remains a yet unfinished one, requiring the now-empowered Jewish-cum-*Judean* people to move inward, decolonizing *themselves* through a kind of linguistic and theological transformative program. Though the (re-)establishment of the State of Israel constitutes a crucial piece of the decolonial puzzle, the real work to decolonize Jewish identity has only just begun.

Central to this formulation is what Hazan regularly describes in interviews (usually, it should be noted, to non-Jewish interviewers) as “the Jewish story.” It is here worth considering this narrative further. “The Jewish story,” as Hazan explains in one podcast,

is one of resilience. But from a more historical perspective, it would be that Jews are an ancient people who have a culture, a language, and a history [...] some people would call it a religion, [but] I don’t think that fits it just right, to a land, being Israel. The land that is named after us. We are *Am Yisrael*, the nation of Israel. And, due to a colonizing power, an imperial power, the Romans, we were forcibly displaced from our indigenous land. And for 2,000 years we have yearned to return and to come back. [...] After we were forcefully displaced, we were kicked out to all corners of the globe [...]. But we have always yearned to come back home.<sup>32</sup>

Decolonial articulations thus set up for Hazan an implicit geographic and temporal cartography emanating outward from the mythic First

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32. Walker, Robert, host, The Honest Report Podcast, “How the Lie of a Colonialist Israel Is So Dangerous to the Next Generation of Jews: A Fireside Chat with Ysabella Hazan, Founder of Decolonized Judean,” HonestReporting Canada, June 16, 2022, <https://honestreporting.ca/podcasts/how-the-lie-of-a-colonialist-israel-is-so-dangerous-to-the-next-generation-of-jews-a-fireside-chat-with-ysabella-hazan-founder-of-decolonized-judean/>.

Temple in Jerusalem, wherein an authentic, agricultural and unimpeded (indigenous) Judean culture thrived prior to the cataclysmic moment of (colonial) displacement and rupture. Under such a rubric, distance, minoritization, and social miscegenation in the diaspora constitute a colonized, fearful, and uniformly degenerate collective subjectivity from a once-pure, powerful, and homogenous society. Antiquity stands as a golden period of national vitality, standing in contradistinction to a now-stifled Jewish present. Zionism, by enabling Jews to “return” to their ancestral homeland, thereby constitutes a means rather than an end for the re-vivification of this once-lost Judean culture.

The decolonization of the Jew is thus akin to the re-indigenization of the Judean; the reversal of a condition brought about by not only the distance from the Land of Israel, but more problematically from time spent within external societies as a minority population. Thus reads the Decolonized Judean website: “Thousand [sic] of years in the diaspora has added many layers and elements of colonization to our identity and culture. Decolonizing Jewish identity means [...] [t]aking charge of our Jewish story and not forming or acquiescing elements of our peoplehood to our oppressors.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the relation to this nebulous non-Jewish other constitutes a central problematic for Hazan insofar as it both demands that Jews articulate their identity according to incongruent modernist taxonomies (such as religion, as we saw above) while at the same moment, by virtue of proximity, accrue further layers of foreign elements from the pure, authentic core of what we might here call Judean-ism, an immutable (though colonially impeded) set of cultural characteristics, a continuous kernel of an essential and primordial

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33. “Homepage,” *Decolonized Judean*.

national identity passed down through to the present day.<sup>34</sup> Marred by the excesses of this diasporic existence, the decolonized Judean must molt these “colonial” vestiges in order to move into a truly authentic Judean selfhood.

The avenues to do so are clear though imprecise, wavering between individual acts of decolonization to deeper societal reconstruction of a Judean life. “Read Torah, Speak Hebrew” as the above Instagram post mentioned; “Understand Jewish identity from a Jewish perspective” reads many, many others. And yet it also more than just this. Jews, she states elsewhere, have a responsibility to take back this narrative “from anyone other than us.”<sup>35</sup> Decolonization is a zero-sum game of indigeneity, the rejection of Palestinian claims to political sovereignty thus become an enactment of decolonial politics. But above all, it marks out a clear and historically line between a perfect mythic past to a complex, assimilatory, and anxious present moment, and again to a yet imminent and perfected future. The State of Israel is less an endpoint so much as it is a conduit for a larger – one may dare say transcendent – aim.

### **Conclusion: Detours of Decolonial Critique**

This essay touches on one instance of decoloniality which, though unique in its particularities, nevertheless indexes a range of ideas and questions undergirding what may be called Jewish decolonial discursivity. This discourse circumscribes more than just

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34. Nadia Abu El-Haj, *The Genealogical Science: The Search for Jewish Origins and the Politics of Epistemology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226201429.001.0001>.

35. Ysabella Elisheva Hazan (@decolonizedjudean), October 1, 2021, [www.instagram.com/decolonizedjudean](http://www.instagram.com/decolonizedjudean).

origins and political sovereignty, but also traffics in and engages with a deeper set of questions and anxieties relating to the modern Jewish condition. Thus, while the broader field of religious studies and its decolonization has not been an immediate concern, I hope to have offered some coordinates here for an alternative kind of engagement with decoloniality, and how such different modes may lead to new forms of knowledge. By tracing the more orthogonal movements and transformations of this intellectual genealogy, decolonial studies may not only arrive at a better understanding of divergent modes of interpretation as its terms become increasingly inscribed into everyday politics, but also generate more capacious theoretical models that can grasp the contradictory investments, desires, and foreclosures distilled across this range of putatively “decolonial” commitments.

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