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Alex Lubin

“We are all Israelis”: The Politics of Colonial Comparisons

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, Americans sought to understand how threats from afar would alter everyday life within the boundaries of the nation. As they mourned and made sense of the tragedy, some turned to a comparison in order to give the moment its full weight. Chicago Rabbi Gary Gerson, who played a public role on television and in newspapers, attempted to help people cope with fear and death: “Humanity came apart in lower Manhattan today, and each of us is wounded. We mourn the loss of our innocence. . . . Terror has struck us, but it will not destroy us. Now we are all Israelis.”¹

The refrain “We are all Israelis” was a ubiquitous feature of media coverage of the collapse of the World Trade Center and continues to animate contemporary rationales for U.S. foreign policy. Recently, in the wake of Israel’s war with Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman declared U.S. solidarity with Israel by proclaiming, “Today, we are all Israelis.”²

United States–Israel relations play a formative role in American attitudes about the United

States' so-called war on terror. The West views Israel as a bastion of Enlightenment principles in an otherwise premodern region, while the United States views itself as a new Israel and a beacon of light for the world's exodus away from "Islamic fascism." Indeed, animating contemporary Western assertions of threat, security, and the need for preemption are not only the diplomatic, geopolitical, and military ties binding the United States to Israel, but also the affective politics and poetics contained in comparing the two entities. "We are all Israelis" invokes biblical and historic narratives of providential destiny and biopolitical self-importance. The United States-Israel linkage is, among many things, a moral assertion about which populations deserve territory and which are incapable of self-rule, which populations belong and which are beyond the pale, which populations can govern and which are inherently subject. In this way, the comparison is shorthand for imperial rule, a map of captured territory, and a guide for future acquisition. Untangling the web of comparisons is a critical exercise of decolonization, but so, too, is creating other, less obvious comparisons.

Comparisons, as Benedict Anderson reminds us in *The Spectre of Comparisons*, have been the rubric of area studies since their cold war formation. For Anderson, comparisons are spectral "hauntings" in the ways they interrupt and mediate perception; the specter of comparisons "shadow[s] automatically" the present so that perception itself becomes constituted by something not present, the object of comparison.³ Anderson came to understand the specter of comparisons by reading José Rizal's nationalist novel *Noli Me Tangere*, in which the protagonist, having returned to Manila from a colonial education in Europe, cannot help but view Manila's municipal botanical gardens through a European lens: "He can no longer matter-of-factly experience them, but sees them simultaneously close up and from afar."⁴ For Anderson, the specter of comparisons becomes a sort of double-consciousness or an inverted telescope through which one can see oneself only through the gaze of a dominant culture; the colonial power thus haunts the post- and anticolonists' gaze. Anderson's project was to show how the field of Southeast Asian studies was constituted by comparisons, often to a European norm. In this way, Anderson implicitly outlines the problematic of a postcolonial politics that, like Rizal's perception of Manila's gardens, cannot help but "progress" through comparison to colonial norms.⁵

Anderson's recognition of the haunting aspect of comparison resonates with Edward Said's understanding of Orientalism as always citational and

comparative. The Orientalist draws his authority not from experience but from an archive constructed by other Orientalists; the *Orient* remains a projection of the Orientalist and the scholarship that provides his or her authority.⁶ Past Orientalists thus constitute and haunt the discursive field of Orientalism so that perception of the Orient is always mediated by someone else's construct.

Yet, even as comparisons might be the mode of imperial designs, we might also consider how the specter of comparisons could be profitably marshaled to invoke a new and critically engaged haunting. In addition to serving as rationales for colonial rule, comparisons may also work to disrupt the logic of colonialism by exposing its technologies of governmentality. In this way, critical comparative colonial studies can animate norms of rule by transforming Anderson's inverted telescope into a hall of mirrors that reflects disparate forms of violence perpetrated by settler colonial states and, in so doing, shatters its projection of uniqueness. A critical comparative framework disrupts the telos of colonial rule by illuminating its ubiquity and norms. The slogan "We are all Israelis" is a heuristic of imperial rule, but it is possible to disrupt its logic by reading it as an invitation to compare settler colonial technologies in the United States and Israel. In so doing, I view the slogan as an attempt to universalize ("we are all") the norms of colonialism; yet, I also see it as a critical framework for viewing the technologies of settler colonialism as they animate ongoing military projects and as they haunt the (post)colonial present.

The intention of this essay is to elucidate the practice and politics of comparisons in the settler colonial project, as well as to suggest how we might engage a critical comparative settler colonial studies that disrupts the colonial logic of comparisons. The first part of the essay reads the practice of comparative politics in the construction of American Orientalism. This section takes up the ubiquitous presence of the American Indian in American Orientalist literature, especially during various imperialist moments prior to World War II when the United States became a superpower with the ability to shape geopolitical realities in the Middle East. The second section enacts a comparative settler colonial studies that reflects colonial rule back on itself in order to shatter its logic. I compare the U.S.-Mexico border and the Israeli "security fence," as well as the question of Palestinian and Louisianan refugees, in order to imagine a comparative settler colonial studies that delegitimizes the norms of colonial rule.

America's Oriental 1848

Eighteen forty-eight was a watershed year in the expansion of U.S. territory and its development of colonial rule. Having annexed half of Mexico in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and doubling the geographic size of the nation, the United States realized what its leaders figured as its manifest destiny. The acquisition of northern Mexico raised new questions about who was an American as hundreds of thousands of Mexican nationals entered the body politic of the U.S. nation-state. Although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo extended citizenship to Mexico's colonized subjects, in reality, the United States was uneasy with the status of Mexicans within its borders and precluded full equality. Mexican land claims were ignored while Spanish land grants were tendered legally void. Moreover, the territories acquired in the Mexican-American War would remain *territories*—not quite part of the U.S. nation-state, while subject to its rule—until the early part of the twentieth century.

The racialization of colonial rule allowed the United States to grant legal citizenship to Mexicans while simultaneously practicing exclusion. Racialization is always relational and comparative, establishing a clear order of right and wrong, strong and weak, civilized and savage. In the case of the Mexican-American War, racialization helped rationalize land dispossession as benign and indispensable to national progress. That a racial order was created in the wake of the Mexican-American War is well known; what has received less attention, however, is how racialization under settler colonialism relies on a particular imperial imaginary that justifies inequality and colonial violence through particular comparative gestures. In order to justify a form of rule that accorded second-class citizenship to Mexicans without challenging the United States' outward claims to liberty, it relied on comparisons to previous colonial conquests, to memories that seemed to confirm the benevolent role of empire. In particular, the expansion into Mexico was rendered benign by imagining the territory that became the U.S. Southwest as America's Orient while discursively turning the Levant into the U.S. West.⁷

During the same year that the United States signed its treaty with Mexico, William Lynch, a naval commander who had helped defeat Mexican forces in Vera Cruz, published his account of his expedition of the Dead Sea and the Jordan. In this work, Lynch draws a comparative frame around the Orient and the U.S. West, a region Lynch had just claimed for the United States

in the Mexican war. Lynch's comparison led him to discursively transform the Orient into the U.S. West in order to explore the possibilities of frontier colonialism in the Levant. In doing so, Lynch helped facilitate a particular understanding of the United States' role in the world as an empire of liberty, not violence.⁸ His expedition of the Dead Sea and the Jordan thus became a complex signifier of U.S. Orientalism, one that not only is animated by the differences seen by comparing East and West but that is also highly attuned to the vicissitudes of race within United States and the U.S. West in particular.

As Lynch's expedition traveled through the Ottoman Empire en route to Jordan, its encounters with indigenous populations became opportunities for the members of the expedition to draw overdetermined comparisons that ultimately shaped everything they saw. For example, when the expedition met the Turkish sultan, Abdülmecid I, Lynch "could not refrain from drawing comparisons and moralizing on fate."⁹ As Lynch considered the sultan's "despotism," he "looked upon the monarch . . . [and] thought of Montezuma" (77). This comparison was both an observation as well as a statement of ethical consideration; by comparing Abdülmecid I to Montezuma, Lynch temporalizes the Ottoman Empire as one that, like Montezuma's, will inevitably fall under the weight of modernization and enlightened colonizers.

The Indian comparison became foundational to Lynch's entire experience of the Levant, and his account of the expedition is much more about describing racial differences than it is in charting Jordan and the Dead Sea. In one lengthy comparison, Lynch remarks on the ways in which Indian and Arab hearing acuity registers different levels of civilization. Indeed, by describing the bodily comportment of the people he encountered, Lynch creates what Ann Stoler calls "carnal knowledge" about the region, a form of imperial power predicated on the will to know colonized subjects' bodies:¹⁰

Wishing to send to Jaffa some things, which were cumbersome to carry about . . . I roused one of the Arab mule-drivers, and bade him to go up to the village, about a mile distant, and procure another mule. He sprang instantly to his feet, and, from where he stood, called out in a stentorian voice to some one in the village. To my surprise, he was answered almost immediately, and very soon afterwards the mule was brought. It is astonishing how far, and how distinctly, the Arabs can

hear and recognize each other's voices in this hilly country. . . . They seem to have distinctive cries, corresponding to the whoops of our Indians. (428)

Lynch's "Indians" serve to familiarize his American readers with what otherwise might seem very foreign. But the selection of the Arab-as-Indian comparison is one that carries a specific ethical response; it is a statement about Arabs as subject races, incapable of enlightened thought. Indeed, the comparison was a heuristic of colonial rule in that it positioned Lynch, prior to any experience with the Arab world, as already superior. Moreover, if Arabs were like Indians, Lynch could confidently reenact the drama of North American conquest in a region about which he knew very little.

However, Lynch's comparison ultimately helped him place the American Indian above the Arab in terms of stages of civilization, suggesting that the familiar, internal colony was less dangerous than the foreign, potential colony. The North American Indian was, for Lynch, a savage that could be converted through Christianity, while the Arab was driven by the unassimilable trait of greed:

We have often thought that we detected a resemblance, in many respects, between the Arabs and our North American Indians; but we were like those who, at a superficial glance, pronounce a portrait to be an exact similitude of the original, which, on a close inspection, exhibits such traits of difference, that they are astonished at their first impression. The distinctive trait of the American savage is his vindictiveness towards an enemy. The ruling passion of an Arab is greediness of gold, which he will clutch from the unarmed stranger, or filch from an unsuspecting friend. The Indian, seeking only a trophy, as a record of his achievement is content with the scalp of the foe he has slain in war. The Arab lurks in the crevices of the rock and, from his covert, fires upon the peaceful traveler, that he may rifle his body of money and clothes. . . . The Arab, therefore to the best of my judgment, is as far inferior to the North American Indian as an insatiate love of gold is more ignoble than a spirit of revenge. (431-32)

During a historic moment when the United States had concluded a war with Mexico and was contending with Mexican bodies in the United States, Lynch's expedition helped narrate an American Orientalism that cataloged national bodies into a well-ordered hierarchy. For Lynch, some bodies

could be made American through religious and moral conversion, while others could not. The question for American readers of Lynch's narrative was whether Mexican bodies were more like Indians than Arabs.

William Gilpin, Colorado's first territorial governor, understood conquest of the American West in terms of colonial projects in the Orient. Gilpin saw the West as an American Orient, waiting to be conquered. He identified the "'Plateau of Syria' and the Mississippi basin as twin cradles of human civilization, centers of world progress where a favored race of people had in the past, and would soon again, conclude a 'divine mission.'"¹¹ Furthermore, for American landscape painters of the mid-nineteenth century, many of whom were trained by European Orientalists, the American West was Oriental space. Numerous Southwestern landscape paintings after the Mexican-American War dressed Mexicans and Indians in clothing and scenery that turned them into Bedouins. It is not difficult to imagine why American settlers in Jerusalem in the 1880s could speak of "our" Jerusalem; through comparison, the Orient had been made familiar, a place where America's civilizing mission could spread liberty to subject races.¹²

Gilded Age Orientalism

Throughout the Gilded Age, American tourists, pilgrims, and policy makers made the Holy Land trip in order to better understand the United States' role in the world. The Holy Land was redemptive in that it signified an American place in the world in biblical terms, as a divine empire, expanding through liberty and not violence. Yet, what Hilton Obenzinger calls the Gilded Age's "Holy Land mania" took place amid the background of the United States becoming an imperial power through territorial acquisition in the Caribbean and the Philippines.¹³ Imperialist and anti-imperialist arguments centered on the relative merits of bringing "subject races" into the body of the United States. As it had in 1848, U.S. expansion was rendered meaningful through comparison to internal colonial settings in the United States. While these comparisons were meant to render the foreign familiar, they also invoked the messy realities of settler colonialism, including the incorporation of assumed inferior racial bodies into the body of the U.S. nation-state.

Nowhere was the Holy Land mania more apparent than in Mark Twain's 1869 satire of Holy Land pilgrimages, *The Innocents Abroad*. Twain satirized American disappointment with the Holy Land because of its inability to

compare favorably to expectations. Yet he also expressed his own disappointment with the Holy Land; in numerous comparisons to the U.S. West, Twain found Palestine's geography and inhabitants lacking. For example, in a section titled "Smallness of Palestine," Twain draws on comparative geographies as a means to diminish the significance of Palestine:¹⁴ "Palestine is only from forty to sixty miles wide. The State of Missouri could be split into three Palestines, and there would then be enough material left for part of another—possibly a whole one. From Baltimore to San Francisco is several thousand miles, but it will be only a seven days' journey in the cars when I am two or three years older" (479). In a later section, "Contrasted Scenery," Twain writes: "The celebrated Sea of Galilee is not so large a sea as Lake Tahoe . . . by a good deal—it is just about two-thirds as large. And when we come to speak of beauty, this sea is no more to be compared to Tahoe than a meridian of longitude is to a rainbow" (507). Lake Tahoe is both a frame of reference as well as an object of comparison that helps Twain narrate the insufficiency of the Holy Land. The comparative mismeasurement of the two regions enables Twain to view the indigenous Arabs in terms already familiar to him. He writes that the Arabs are "as swarthy as an Indian" (516). Moreover, if the Galilee is smaller than Tahoe, for Twain, Palestine's Arab villages could be compared to "the ancient mining camps of California" (517). Twain's comparative frame is thus a particular premodern vision of the U.S. West prior to American settler colonialism.

Even as Twain was himself engaged in the politics of comparison in order to diminish the Holy Land, he satirized American pilgrims' inevitable disappointment with the Holy Land. Twain's humor comes from his recognition that pilgrims think they already know the Holy Land because of the sheer amount of Orientalist writing about it. In this way, Twain recognizes the haunting specter of comparisons in the ways that Orientalist writing has already predetermined the experiences of the Western traveler in the Levant. Moreover, Twain showed how Orientalism's citational nature concealed reality. When pilgrims talk about the region, according to Twain, "they borrowed the idea—and the words—and the construction—and the punctuation—from Grimes. The pilgrims will tell of Palestine, when they get home, not as it appeared to *them*, but as it appeared to [popular Orientalists] Thompson and Robinson and Grimes—with the tints varied to suit each pilgrim's creed" (512).

Twain's Holy Land was necessarily tied to his construction of the U.S. West as a place improved through colonialism. But it was not only the

domestic colonial drama of westward expansion that haunted the Gilded Age's Orientalist fantasy; the Levant could also be haunted by the specter of Occidental slavery. For African Americans, the politics of comparison was employed to challenge American fantasies of progress and modernity. Yet even as a weapon of antiracism, the specter of comparisons traded on the Levant's incompleteness.¹⁵

Just prior to the U.S. entrance into World War II, in 1939, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., the African American pastor of Harlem's famed Abyssinian Baptist Church, embarked on a pilgrimage to Palestine that was fraught with the same comparative disappointment found in Twain's *Innocents*.¹⁶ As one of the leading civil rights activists in the United States and the son of a former slave, Powell's comparative frame was different from Twain's. Powell was attracted to Jerusalem's biblical importance as the homeland of freed slaves, and he therefore attached to the biblical story of Exodus. Powell traveled to Palestine in the hopes that America's former slaves could find freedom in ways similar to the Holy Land's ancient slaves:

As I stood there [in the Holy Land], I could not help but recall that both Moses and I represented an enslaved, persecuted and despised race. Moses was born a slave; he tramped and traveled and sacrificed for forty years to reach Canaan, but died without attaining the overmastering ambition of his life. I was born in a one-room log cabin in Virginia, twenty-six days after the chains of slavery were broken from the black man's wrist and the white man's conscience. (91-92)

What Powell found in Palestine, however, was disappointing. The biblical sites were dirty and the indigenous population "uncivilized." The inscription to the travelogue turned to a comparison in order to describe Palestine's deficiencies:

Before he had spent a week in the Holy Land, he had met people characterized by all the bad qualities possessed by the worst in New York and in the mountains of Kentucky. That little strip of land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean produced more holy characters and more holy literature than any one of the five continents, but the men and their literature have had more influence for good upon the citizens for Chicago than upon the natives. (vii)

The travelogue's comparative frame places Arab savagery and white supremacy together. Powell therefore rewrote Gilded Age Orientalist

travel writing while simultaneously affirming the premodernity of the Arab. Neither an advocate of the Orient nor of Western modernity, Powell sought to assert a third option, outside of the framework of East and West, by espousing Zionism.

It was in Palestine's new Zionist settlements that Powell realized a civil rights vision for the United States. He embraced Zionism as representative of a new modernism within a primitive landscape. As he describes his interaction with "the Zion movement" in Tel Aviv, for example, he represents Jewish settlements in terms of modernity—the neighborhoods' technology, cleanliness, and civility: "The Zion movement, one of the most significant in the world today, is made up of Jews in all parts of the world, some of whom are moving back to Palestine to live the remainder of their lives. These settlers, who have met with such bitter antagonism, are more prosperous in the Jaffa section than in any other part of Palestine" (24).

To a black American writer struggling with racism in the United States, Zionism seemed an intervention into Western notions of progress and modernity; in fact, what Powell sought was a new form of modernity, one distinct from the Orient but also distinct from the West. If Arab neighborhoods were like the worst elements of Kentucky, the Zionist settlements seemed like a promised land. The comparison of poor white Kentucky to the Arab Levant illustrates the limitations of Powell's antiracist politics, which were rooted in, yet critical of, the West.

The Haunted Fronts of World War II

World War II brought the United States to the North African and Middle Eastern front in new ways. With American soldiers stationed in North Africa, the foreign geography of the Orient became much more familiar. War reporters, often embedded with troops, played an important role in their ability to define the U.S. mission in the war and to represent the global theaters of U.S. military operations. Ernie Pyle, a resident of the Southwest, became a leading war correspondent, relating to Americans the victories and agonies of war as well as describing the geographies in which soldiers found themselves. In 1944, Pyle began writing about "G.I. Joe," an infantry everyman who represented American bravery and fortitude. The embedded war correspondent was supposed to relate the "real" war to American audiences in ways that had never been tried before. Yet most of the war correspondents, Ernie Pyle included, knew nothing about the

non-European contexts where American troops were deployed. Thus, in places like the Maghreb, American journalists, like Gilded Age travelers before them, turned to comparisons with the familiar in order to render the foreign. By World War II, however, the United States was emerging as a global superpower with an unparalleled ability to control the global economy. Within this context, there was much at stake in what kinds of comparisons were made. In war reporting and in American cinema, containing the legacy of racial violence and colonialism, while narrating the United States as benevolent and antiracist, was of paramount importance.¹⁷

Littered throughout Pyle's war correspondence was a comparative politics that rendered foreign geographies familiar. In particular, Pyle sought to show the greatness of the U.S. mission by narrating the Sahara as the U.S. Southwest and the war as a reenactment of Manifest Destiny. As Brian Edwards argues, Pyle described the "strange" context of the Sahara by turning to the familiar; he therefore compared Maghrebis to Indians. According to Pyle, "The Arabs seemed a strange people, hard to know. They were poor, and they looked as tight-lipped and unfriendly as the Indians in some of the South American countries, yet they were friendly and happy when we got close to them."¹⁸ Pyle compared the Sahara Desert to the border country of El Paso:

What we saw of the Sahara didn't look exactly the way it does in the movies, but that's maybe because we didn't go far enough. . . . We saw nothing more spectacular than the country in the more remote parts of our own Southwest. . . . Parts of it were so exactly like the valley around Palm Springs, even down to the delicate smoke-tree bush, that it made me homesick. And one bare, tortured mountain could have been the one behind El Paso. . . . [An oasis] had big adobe buildings like the Indian pueblos, and narrow streets and irrigation ditches, and hundreds of children running around. It was a big community, and getting to an oasis was like getting to Reno after Death Valley.¹⁹

Like Twain's pilgrims who cannot help but "know" the Holy Land through Orientalist writing about it, Pyle cannot help but "know" the Maghreb through Hollywood movies. Compared to the cinematic version, the "real" Sahara seems incomplete.

Produced two years prior to Pyle's *G.I. Joe*, Hollywood's *Casablanca* (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942) represented the North African front during World War II. As Edwards astutely argues, "Inserting a new memory of *Casablanca*

that never was, Warner Brothers' *Casablanca* participated in the interpretation of the North African campaign as a frontier tale."²⁰ The film turned the Moroccan desert into the background for an American romance in which American individualism and fortitude triumph over European uncertainty and Fascism. The film is centered at Rick's Café Américain, a place that brings together American ex-pats, French colonial officials, European refugees, and German Nazis. Within the context of the café, a series of dramas unfolds that figures the Americans as uniquely suited to the anti-Fascist project of World War II. Rick's (Humphrey Bogart's) steady certitude is contrasted by the French colonial official, Captain Renault (Claude Rains), who vacillates between obeying and resisting Nazi officials.

While the Sahara became a fitting setting for an American to draw his proverbial line in the sand, the film is haunted by a series of absent presences that structure the film's plot. Indeed, the film contains the contradictions of U.S. participation in the war. At a time when African Americans faced Jim Crow discrimination, when Japanese Americans were interned, and when guidelines for motion pictures effectively censored American films, the United States claimed to be fighting a war against racism and Fascism. *Casablanca*, in order to be credible as a war film, needed to engage these contradictions, and it did so by placing the African American piano player, Sam (Dooley Wilson), at the center of Rick's café. Rick depends on Sam's companionship and attempts to protect Sam from unscrupulous competitors who seek Sam's piano skills for their cafés. When a local competitor attempts to include Sam as a pawn in a deal with Rick, Rick protects Sam's agency (while usurping it) by stating, "I don't buy or sell human beings." In this way, Rick's supremacy as an American in the Sahara is derived from his stance against the Nazis as well as his paternalism over Sam.

Casablanca, like Pyle's war correspondence, traded on the Sahara as a scene of American supremacy. Yet, in both accounts, the frontier drama of the North African campaign is haunted by the specter of comparisons. Pyle cannot help but see El Paso and Native Americans in the Sahara, and *Casablanca* cannot help but invoke the legacy of slavery as it attempted to narrate American progress against Fascism and racism. In both sorts of texts, comparisons become the means of granting legitimacy to accounts of otherwise foreign settings; yet the comparisons' rootedness in scenes of colonial violence illustrates their haunted quality.

Of course, the seminal moment of the World War II era for our purposes was the 1948 creation of the State of Israel. Although the Harry S. Truman administration had been ambivalent about lending support to Israel for fear

that doing so would disrupt the U.S. interest in Arab oil regimes, ultimately it backed the new Jewish state because, among other things, it saw Israel as an ally in the increasing struggle with the Soviet Union.²¹ What interests us most, however, are the ways in which various groups of Americans understood the Jewish state in terms of comparisons. Melani McAlister notes the ways in which American biblical epics lent support to the idea that Israel was a Western oasis. In the 1959 film *Solomon and Sheeba* (dir. King Vidor), for example, Solomon protects the Hebrews from the Moabite king who wants to drive them "into the sea" by appealing to his nation's ability to "make the desert bloom."²² In a similar vein, Douglas Little notes how the November 1948 issue of *National Geographic* represents Israelis in biblical terms as Davids fighting Arab Goliaths. The magazine also presents Arabs as primitives, with one caption reading, "Like Monkeys in Tree-tops. . . . Their pay is a pittance and their food poor, yet they are cheerful." This depiction of Arabs is contrasted with a story about Zionist irrigation projects that illustrated the agricultural improvements brought by Western modernization.²³

By 1960, the United States solidly supported Israel as an ally against the Soviet Union and Arab nationalists who threatened U.S. economic interests in the region. But the bond was affective, as well as diplomatic, as was emblemized by the 1960 release of the film *Exodus* (dir. Otto Preminger), which narrated the founding of the State of Israel. While different groups of Americans held various reasons for their attachment to Israel, as McAlister notes, *Exodus* was legible to Americans in part because the film reproduced the generic conventions of the Hollywood Western: "The link between American tropes of national righteousness and the story of Israel's founding is reinforced by the movie's . . . homage to . . . the Western. . . . This link was not lost on observers, one of whom commented sardonically on the arrival of 'the first Jewish Western.'"²⁴ Israel's creation—and the ascendancy of the cold war—transformed the nature of American Orientalism. The Holy Land was not just Westernized as the drama of the American West, McAlister writes, but also "Israelized" through films such as *Exodus*.

Comparative Walls: "Now we are all Israelis"

The comparative imaginaries that have linked the U.S. West to the Orient reemerge in the George W. Bush administration's desire to "smoke" Osama Bin Laden "out of his cave."²⁵ The invocation of the Western drama of settler

colonialism has always animated American thinking about and activity in the Middle East, and Bush is merely tapping into a well of affective politics that links the United States to the Middle East as well as provides support for increased surveillance and the suspension of rights domestically. Yet, in the contemporary era of neoliberal globalization, the United States' comparative rendering of the Middle East through its own settler colonial past has been multiplied and transformed into a "global war on terror." That is, the United States' unparalleled superpower status enables it to universalize and globalize its comparative politics into a global "clash of civilizations."²⁶

Comparisons animate the contemporary conflict against "terrorism" as U.S. war officials battle daily to shape the story of the Iraq war by comparing the contemporary battle against "Islamofascism" to the antiracist and anti-Fascist memory of World War II. In 2007, President Bush inadvertently cautioned legislators to continue absurdly high rates of war funding so as not to repeat the mistakes of Vietnam, when, according to Bush, the U.S. superpower was undermined domestically by an emasculated Left unable to endure the rigors of war. The comparative turn, hinging on the seeming nobility of World War II and the darkness of Vietnam, illustrates an uneasy empire's attempt to maintain contradictions in the face of messy facts on the ground. Yet these comparisons are always fraught and invite unintended readings.

Comparing Israeli and U.S. settler colonialisms seeks to shatter the patina of exceptionalism, as well as the "state of exception," to use Giorgio Agamben's term, that currently justifies the military, social, and cultural occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Indeed, staking a claim for similarity—not exactness—allows us to see particular sites of state and imperial rule not in isolation but as constitutive of larger global systems and circuits of power.²⁷ Although most settler colonies come to an end through a successful anticolonial rebellion or through the absorption of the settler colony into the mother country, the legacy of colonial rule in places like the U.S. Southwest continues to haunt the postcolonial society. Comparing occupied Palestine to the postcolonial U.S. Southwest reveals each location in a new light: we are able to recognize colonial rule in Palestine as well as the colonial present in the U.S. Southwest.

Moreover, in each settler colonial location, rule depends on transnational and comparative understandings of how to administer colonized subjects. U.S. and Israeli officials have rationalized particular forms of rule by draw-

ing on—indeed, comparing—each others' administration of colonialism. Hence, in 2002, Israel amended its citizenship law to prevent "family unification" among married Israeli and non-Israeli Palestinians when it passed the Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law. The amendment denied Israeli citizenship through marriage only for Palestinians. In defending and upholding the amendment in 2006, Israeli judge Michael Chechin argued that the amendment merely reproduced a form of security practiced by Western governments: "The Palestinian Authority is an enemy government, a government that wants to destroy the state and is not prepared to recognize Israel. . . . Why should we take chances during wartime? Did England and America take chances with Germans seeking their destruction during the Second World War? No one is preventing them from building a family but they should live in Jenin instead of in [the Israeli Arab city of] Umm al-Fahm."²⁸ Those opposed to the amendment drew a different kind of comparison, claiming that the antifamily law mirrors U.S. anti-miscegenation laws in order to preclude increasing numbers of Palestinian citizens in Israel. The Israeli amendment to its citizenship law relies on a comparative imaginary that links U.S. and Israeli forms of colonial rule.

"We are all Israelis" no longer implies only an imagined community linking the United States, or the West, to the State of Israel; it describes the United States' attempts to shore up and militarize its border with Mexico. The security firm working to police and militarize the U.S.-Mexico border fence is Elbit Systems, a Haifa-based security firm building the Israeli security wall, that became a subcontractor in Boeing's bid to provide security along the U.S.-Mexico border. Elbit's American subsidiary, Kollsman, specializes in "Sensor Systems & Electro Optics [and] serves a domestic customer base providing Fire Control Systems, Tactical Laser Systems, . . . and Thermal Imaging Systems for aircraft, ships, ground vehicles and soldiers."²⁹

Here, a multinational corporation facilitates a particular comparison; policing the occupied West Bank and the U.S.-Mexico border are shared projects. In each territory, the same corporation provides the labor involved in policing the border. Furthermore, the rationale for constructing each border wall is haunted by the legacies of settler colonialism. Israeli and U.S. security contend with the messy facts of colonialism in ways that invite comparison between the annexation of Mexico and the occupation of the West Bank. Although the occupation of northern Mexico terminated with the incorporation of Mexican space into the U.S. nation-state more than 150

years ago, the legacies of that settler colonial moment endure in the anxiety about immigrants from Mexico in the United States. Rather than confront the past or recognize how neoliberal policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement further politicize the border, the United States instead turns to policing and militarizing the U.S.-Mexico border as part of the Secure Border Initiative (SBI), a multiyear plan to secure America's borders and reduce illegal immigration. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff has announced an overall vision for the SBI, which includes the following: "More agents to patrol our borders, secure our ports of entry and enforce immigration laws. Expanded detention and removal capabilities to eliminate 'catch and release' once and for all. . . . Increased investment in infrastructure improvements at the border—providing additional physical security to sharply reduce illegal border crossings; and greatly increased interior enforcement of our immigration laws—including more robust worksite enforcement."³⁰ The creation of the state of exception, Agamben argues, enables the suspension of citizens' rights and the creation of new forms of state control and surveillance. "Homeland security" and the SBI thus become a rationale for creating the sovereign authority of the executive branch to "produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible."³¹ Further, as the border renders peace and war indistinguishable, it also suggests an inability to conceal the historical brutalities of colonialism and its attendant created multiculturalism.³²

Israel's justification for building its so-called security fence is similarly informed by a willful forgetting of the facts of colonialism. Although the Israeli security fence operates like a militarized international border, the Israeli state continues to call it a "security wall" and not a border. In this way, the wall can be justified in the context of a global war on terror while also performing the dispossessive act of carving up Palestinian territory in order to minimize the geography of a future Palestinian state. The 730-kilometer wall is, among other things, a tool of land dispossession and forced expulsion of Palestinians. Its design takes it deep into the West Bank and does not observe the 1967 border. In doing so, the wall confiscates nearly 47 percent of the West Bank. The territory between the wall and the Green Line has been designated a "seam zone," and Palestinians living in these areas will need to carry special permits in order to remain in their homes and use their land. The wall consists of thirty-four checkpoints with three main terminals that regulate passage between Israel and the West

Bank.³³ Although the wall has been declared illegal by the International Court of Justice, Israel defends it as a necessary component of the country's security.

The U.S.-Mexico border and the Israeli security fence each respond to the anxieties produced by colonial violence. Although the walls are not the same—the Israeli security fence does not observe internationally recognized borders and is in violation of international law—they enter a comparative frame by virtue of the shared technologies used in their production, as well as the similarity of their conditions of existence. Moreover, as the technologies of colonialism enter into a shared circuit of power, so too do the victims of colonial violence warrant a comparative analysis.

Exiles of the World, Unite

In response to the catastrophic destruction of poor people's housing and communities during Hurricane Katrina, an unlikely donation came to the displaced residents of New Orleans. Palestinian refugees from the Amari refugee camp near Ramallah raised \$10,000 for Katrina's exiles. Jihad Tomeleh, one of the organizers of the fund-raising drive, notes, "Palestinian refugees who have lived more than fifty years displaced from our homes are very sensitive to the Katrina victims."³⁴ At the ceremony to donate the funds, Rafik Hussein, an aide to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, referred to what happened in New Orleans as a *naqba*, the Arabic word for "catastrophe" that is used to describe the devastating outcome of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.³⁵

About the donation President Abbas said, "On behalf of the Palestinian people and, in particular, the refugee communities of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, I wish to express our deepest sympathy with the survivors of Hurricane Katrina. With our humble donation, we feel it is important to show our concern since Palestinians know all too well the pain and hardship caused by being a refugee. We pray that they will soon be able to return to their homes."³⁶ For its part, the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem sought to read the donation not as a sign of international solidarity among refugees but instead as a donation from one poor group to another. Jake Wallis, the U.S. consul general in Jerusalem, said the donation was especially significant "because we know it came from poor people."³⁷

Here a group of refugees saw the necessity of comparison and solidarity, sharing the inadequacy of the U.S. government's feeble attempts to aid the

mostly African American victims of Katrina. While the Palestinian refugee and the displaced person from Katrina do not suffer the same conditions, they share the experiences of being forced to leave their homes, having to live in a foreign home as outsiders, and having little or no support from their political representatives. The Palestinians' recognition of their similarities to Katrina victims forces a comparison on us; it makes us consider how Palestinian refugees fall victim to state violence and racism, about how much New Orleans constitutes a socialized "third world" refugee site.

The archives of Arab-as-Indian comparisons in American Orientalist cultural production speak to an attempt to create an American Orient out of North America so that biblical narratives of providential destiny can be re-created. Yet, as Anderson reminds us, comparisons are always haunted. Like palimpsests, comparisons never fully erase the violence at their core. Moreover, comparisons can also reorient meaning. By looking at the U.S.-Mexico border through the lens of Israeli settler colonialism and by looking at the question of Katrina refugees through the lens of Palestinian refugees, we are able to see the palpable legacies of colonialism in the present United States as well as the colonial logic of Israeli occupation.

Notes

- 1 Gary Gerson quoted in Nancy Gibbs, "If You Want to Humble an Empire," *Time*, September 14, 2001.
- 2 Jim VandeHei, "Congress Is Giving Israel Vote of Confidence: Both Parties Back Ally, Court Jewish Support," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2006.
- 3 Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 5 *Ibid.* Also see Pheng Cheah, ed., *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson* (New York: Routledge, 2003), in which H. D. Harootunian discusses the implications of Anderson's telescope analogy on postcolonial politics. H. D. Harootunian, "Ghostly Comparisons: Anderson's Telescope," in *Grounds of Comparison*, 171–90.
- 6 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- 7 For studies of the racialization of Mexicans in the wake of the Mexican-American War, see Laura Gomez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Martha Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); and Thomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
- 8 Of course, "empire of liberty" refers to Thomas Jefferson's famous construction of the American mission as follows: "We shall divert through our own Country a branch of commerce which the European States have thought worthy of the most important struggles

- and sacrifices, and in the event of peace on terms which have been contemplated by some powers we shall form to the American union a barrier against the dangerous extension of the British Province of Canada and add to the Empire of liberty an extensive and fertile Country thereby converting dangerous Enemies into valuable friends." Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, December 25, 1780, in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 4 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 237–38. See also Michael Rogin, "Recolonizing America," *American Literary History* 2.1 (1990): 144–49.
- 9 William F. Lynch, *Narrative of the United States' Expedition to the River Jordan and the Dead Sea* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1849), 77; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.
 - 10 Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
 - 11 Quoted in Milette Shamir, "'Our Jerusalem': Americans in the Holy Land and Protestant Narratives of National Entitlement," *American Quarterly* 55.1 (March 2003): 29–60.
 - 12 See Brian Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007); John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Lester Vogel, *To See a Promised Land: Americans and the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century* (College Park: Penn State University Press, 1993).
 - 13 Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
 - 14 Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Modern Library, 2003); hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. Also see Obenzinger, *American Palestine*.
 - 15 This is a topic I consider more fully in "Locating Palestine in Pre-1948 African American Internationalism," *Souls* 9.2 (April 2007): 95–108. It is also the subject of my forthcoming book, *Promised Land: The Orient in the African American Global Imaginary* (University of North Carolina Press).
 - 16 Adam Clayton Powell Sr., *Palestine and Saints in Caesar's Household* (New York: R. R. Smith, 1939), vii; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.
 - 17 Ernie Pyle, *G.I. Joe* (New York: Overseas Editions, 1944). Also titled *Here Is Your War: Story of G.I. Joe*.
 - 18 Quoted in Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
 - 19 Pyle, *G.I. Joe*, 90.
 - 20 Edwards, *Morocco Bound*, 68.
 - 21 For a concise account of the Truman administration's policies toward Israel, see Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
 - 22 Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 66.
 - 23 The *National Geographic* stories are discussed in Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 25.
 - 24 McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 161.

- 25 Margarette Driscoll, Michael Prescott, and Tony Allen-Mills, "Smoking Him Out," *Sunday Times* (London), October 14, 2001.
- 26 McAlister's important study is now joined by a series of excellent monographs on American attitudes about the Middle East, including Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century Egyptomania* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Edwards, *Morocco Bound*.
- 27 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). The state of exception describes the state's usurpation of civil and human rights in the name of protecting national security. It transforms democratic societies into totalitarian states.
- 28 Donald Macintyre, "'Racist' Marriage Law Upheld by Israel," *Independent*, May 15, 2006.
- 29 Kollman, "Products," <http://kollman.com/products/Sensor-Systems-Electro-Optics/index.asp> (accessed March 20, 2008).
- 30 Department of Homeland Security, "Fact Sheet: Secure Border Initiative," November 2, 2005, www.dhs.gov/xnews/releases/press_release_0794.shtm (accessed March 20, 2008).
- 31 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 22. I mean to invoke Agamben's sense of the violation of rights that follows presumed national emergencies. Yet, I don't want to push this argument too far; Timothy Brennan and Keya Ganguly make a convincing argument that part of the Bush administration's *Machtspolitik* is its *engagement* with law and not its suspension of law. Moreover, they see the Bush administration creating an "exceptional state" rather than a "state of exception." See Timothy Brennan and Keya Ganguly, "Crude Wars," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 105.1 (Winter 2006): 19–35.
- 32 This is a situation not unlike that described by Paul Gilroy as postcolonial melancholy. Gilroy argues that British anxiety over multiculturalism and the culture wars within England signify a sort of melancholy about former colonial possessions. In similar ways, the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border raises the specter of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The rhetoric surrounding the border is saturated by regret and longing for the days of American colonial power over northern Mexico. See Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
- 33 These statistics come from the Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign, fact sheet, www.stopthewall.org/factsheets/883.shtml (accessed March 20, 2008). In making his own comparative gesture, Pink Floyd leadman, Roger Waters, protested the Israeli wall by comparing it to the Berlin Wall. He refused to perform in Israel and instead tagged the wall with graffiti, writing, "We don't need no thought control."
- 34 Associated Press, "Palestinian Refugees Donate \$10,000 to Katrina Refugees," *Jerusalem Post*, September 13, 2005.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Palestinian National Authority Ramallah, "Palestinian Refugees Donate to Survivors of Hurricane Katrina," *Occupied West Bank Press Advisory*, September 13, 2005.
- 37 Associated Press, "Palestinian Refugees Donate."

Abstract for Alex Lubin, "'We are all Israelis': The Politics of Colonial Comparisons"
(SAQ 107:4)

Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson and Edward Said, this essay analyzes the ubiquity of comparisons in American Orientalist culture. As the United States gained territory through settler colonial expansion, it often rendered its acquisition meaningful through comparisons to Levantine culture. Hence, in his 1848 account of the U.S. naval expedition of the Red Sea and Jordan, William Lynch compared Arabs to Indians and the Holy Land to the U.S. Southwest. During the Gilded Age, Mark Twain compared Palestinian villages to western U.S. mining camps. In the 1940s, World War II war correspondents compared the Moroccan Sahara to El Paso and New Mexican pueblos.

Yet, comparisons are also the rubric of critical colonial studies that unmask forms of exceptionalism and colonial rule. The comparative maneuvers that constitute American Orientalism unwittingly invite comparisons of colonial power. I therefore read critically against American Orientalism by focusing on a comparative analysis of the U.S.-Mexico and Israeli "security walls," as well as Palestinian and Louisianan refugees. This enables one to reveal the haunting specter, to cite Anderson, of comparative work.

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