

Justice is indivisible: Palestine as a feminist issue

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Introduction

Allow me to return to Wafa Idris and where, at this historical juncture, do radical women of color, with our focus on intersections of race, class, gender, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, and imperialism, locate her? Will we explore the impact of colonization on Wafa's family? Palestinian families? Palestinian communities? . . . Will we take interest in Palestinian feminists' analysis of women's resistance? Where do we locate her in the context of feminist heroine metaphors that highlight women's transformations from passivity to agency? And how might feminist theorizations of the body grapple with a woman who deploys the body as weapon against an unstoppable military machine?

—Nadine Naber (2006)

We are still faced with the challenge of understanding the complex ways race, class, gender, sexuality, nation and ability are intertwined—but also how we move beyond these categories to understand the interrelationships of ideas and processes that seem to be separate and unrelated. Insisting on the connections between struggles and racism in the United States and struggles against the Israeli repression of Palestinians, in this sense, is a feminist process.

—Angela Davis (2016)

When the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) voted by a landslide majority to endorse BDS at its annual convention in November 2015, Palestinian scholar-activist Rabab

Abdulhadi spoke of a “browning of the organization,” a demographic change within the largest Global North mainstream academic association dedicated to scholarship on gender (qtd. in Redden, 2015, para. 7). That demographic change, Abdulhadi suggests, is behind the vote that not only acknowledges the oppression of the Palestinian people, but also approves of and endorses a strategy they have proposed to end this oppression. BDS is the Palestinian call for global solidarity in the form of boycott of, divestment from, and sanctions on Israel until it abides by international law, and ends its violations of the human rights of the Palestinian people. The call for BDS was issued in July 2005, and ten years later, what was once a soft whisper limited to the margins of various progressive groups had become a chorus of voices clamoring for an end to Israel’s egregious treatment of the Indigenous people whose land it is occupying. This discursive change, due in large part to the debates occasioned by BDS resolutions, represents a shattering of the Zionist mythology of Israeli “democracy” and frailty—its supposed vulnerability to a hostile and aggressive regional environment. And with the growing awareness amongst various communities that Israel is not an embattled democracy, but a violently racist settler-colonial state, comes a widespread desire to hold it accountable for its crimes. Indeed, arguably the most significant success of the BDS campaign so far has been the open discussion of Israeli violations of international law and of the human rights of the Palestinian people, a discussion which necessarily precedes every boycott and divestment vote by a city council, a co-op, a church, or a professional association. These discussions, debates, and open forums have torn asunder the Zionist narrative, which could only be maintained through silencing, the censorship of counter-histories.

The NWSA vote came on the heels of similar votes (preceded by lengthy discussions), by the Asian American Studies Association (AASA), the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA), and the American Studies Association (ASA), to name a few of the national professional academic associations. Other such groups have since also passed resolutions in favor of BDS, and many, such as the Modern Language Association, are in some stage of organizing for a resolution.

Yet while the NWSA membership has indeed changed since the group was established in 1977, one cannot assume that “brown feminism” is a monolith, nor that it has always been on board with anti-colonial struggles, at least not as far as Palestine is involved. Nadine Naber’s plea for consistency, cited in the epigraph to this essay, is proof that the plight of Palestinians has often been dismissed even in radical feminist circles. Yes, there are some long-standing alliances between Palestinian and other communities-of-color radicals. The San Francisco-based Women of Color Resource Center, for example, has historically been consistent in its denunciation of colonialism and racism and, under the able leadership of executive director Linda Burnham, identified Zionism as a form of racism as early as 2000. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence issued its “Palestine Points of Unity” shortly after it was formed, albeit after much internal debate, proving that alliances are forged, earned, not spontaneous.

However, there are few Palestinian feminists who have not experienced some degree of suspicion, misunderstanding, or outright hostility, within communities of color, even feminist

communities of color. And the further we reach into (albeit-recent) history, the more that is the case. For, while it was obvious to some of the more radical Global North activists that our struggle was no different than the struggles of any colonized people, our yearning for liberation was all too often misread by many as anti-Semitism, rather than as an organic impulse to cherish freedom, dignity, self-determination.¹ As Angela Davis (2016) puts it: “The important issues in the Palestinian struggle for freedom and self-determination are minimized and rendered invisible by those who try to equate Palestinian resistance to Israeli apartheid with terrorism” (p. 34). This is less frequent today, but certainly not a thing of the past, nor a perspective that prevails only among white feminists. In fact, these “important issues” are rendered invisible to most who do not intentionally seek out the truth, and even prominent feminists of color have not always understood the question of Palestine as a decolonial question.²

The historic exclusion of Palestine from an otherwise progressive agenda has given rise to a well-known acronym, the PEP syndrome: Progressive Except for Palestine. And sadly, PEP is not today, nor ever was, an exclusively white disease. Thus while Palestinians and their allies welcome the NWSA vote as a significant and long-overdue recognition that justice for Palestine is a feminist issue, many disagree that it is a result of “the browning of the organization,” rather than an overdue weakening of PEP amongst black, Indigenous, Latin@, as well as white communities. And it would be naïve, if not outright foolish, to assume some unfettered organic alliance amongst brown people around the issue of Palestine, or indeed around any issue of racism. This is because the nature of racism is such that it separates us, pits us against each other. Sadly, many Palestinians, as well as millions of other Arabs, have also absorbed the negative stereotypes about communities of color that are pervasive in the dominant discourse, and often can be and are racist against First Peoples, Blacks and Latin@s. Additionally, “Oppression Olympics,” or the competition to prove one’s community or social group as the most oppressed, has proven detrimental to what, from the start, should have been a joint struggle against an overarching structural system of oppression.

My essay, then, will start with an overview of the challenges diaspora Palestinian activists, and our allies, have faced as we engaged with other feminists and “progressives” in the Global North—groups and individuals who we thought would have appreciated the intersections with our circumstances, but who nevertheless failed to recognize the plight of the Palestinians as a gross injustice and a violation of a people’s human rights. It then traces the advances we have made, amongst Global North and women-of-color feminisms, as activists and organizers finally grasp that the struggle for Palestinian self-determination is a struggle for Indigenous rights, and that feminist praxis entails engaging in solidarity with decolonial struggle. Finally, it ends with a call for Palestinians to continue the alliances we have forged or reinforced in recent years, so that

¹ I use “Global North feminists” here to refer to feminists geographically located in the Global North, who have absorbed the Zionist narrative—a Global North narrative—whatever their ethnicity. Sadly, there are many women-of-color feminists who fall within that category.

² I have documented some of our challenges within women-of-color circles in “The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out”, in Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, eds, *Arab and Arab-American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (Syracuse University Press, 2011).

we can in turn contribute to the struggles of other criminalized communities, once (not if) we achieve our goal of self-determination and Indigenous sovereignty.

Liberal feminism and/as Zionism

On November 25, 2015, the National Women's Studies Association became the first gender-focused mainstream academic association to vote, by a significant majority, to endorse BDS. Global North feminism had come a long way from the days when a rude, clueless, and patronizing Betty Friedan attempted to silence the prominent Egyptian feminist Nawal al-Saadawi at the United Nations International Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya. "Please do not bring up Palestine in your speech," Friedan had told al-Saadawi as the latter was walking up to the stage, to give her lecture. "This is a women's conference, not a political conference," Friedan then continued (qtd. in al-Saadawi, 2006, p. ii).

That attempt at censorship had happened thirty year earlier, in 1985. Of course, had Friedan known anything much at all about al-Saadawi, besides the fact that she was a fiery Arab feminist, she would have known her request would go unheeded. Al-Saadawi cannot be silenced, and she gave exactly the talk she had planned on giving. As she later wrote:

Of course in my speech, I did not heed what she had said to me since I believe that women's issues cannot be dealt with in isolation from politics. The emancipation of women in the Arab region is closely linked to the regimes under which we live, regimes which are supported by the USA in most cases, and the struggle between Israel and Palestine has an important impact on the political situation. Besides, how can we speak of liberation for Palestinian women without speaking of their right to have a land on which to live? How can we speak about Arab women's rights in Palestine and Israel without opposing the racial discrimination exercised against them by the Israeli regime? (al-Saadawi, 2006, p. ii)

But this interaction between Friedan and al-Saadawi revealed more than the ignorance of one particular Western feminist about one of the pre-eminent Arab feminists of the time. It was, and in many ways remains, a telling illustration of the highly problematic Global North approach to Global South feminism. It is an approach that seeks, often actively, to decontextualize the circumstances of Global South communities, and analyze them at the micro-level only, as if they functioned in a space of their own, immune to the macro-environment of global politics in the form of colonialism, occupation, militarism, multinational labor, international trade, "development plans," or other such manifestations of foreign intervention. It is also an approach that continues to privilege Global North women over women from the Global South. For, as al-Saadawi pointed out, Friedan and other Western feminists at this same conference felt free to "bring up" politics in their own talks and analysis, as they discussed solidarity with Black South Africans, and ways to end South African apartheid. In other words, white women could discuss

political matters, including the politics of other countries, but women from Global South countries were not allowed to analyze global phenomena and had to limit themselves instead to a denunciation of patriarchy within their communities. Global North women would then extend a helping hand in solidarity, to “save” their less-fortunate “sisters.”

Such “global sisterhood,” to borrow from the title of an anthology edited by one of Friedan’s peers, Robin Morgan, does not allow for being on an equal footing, and it certainly would not accommodate agency by the Global South women. The Sisterhood is Global Institute, founded by Morgan and Simone de Beauvoir in 1984, has not endorsed the Palestinian call for BDS and has not replied to my requests for any comment about the NWSA vote.³ This despite the fact that the majority of Palestinian women’s and feminist groups, including the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) and Palestinian Federation of Women’s Action Committees (PFWAC), are amongst the initiators and signatories of the 2005 call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, a call for solidarity with the Palestinian people modeled upon the call for solidarity with Black South Africans that US feminists had embraced in the 1980s. This non-violent campaign calls for broad boycotts and divestment initiatives against Israel until it meets its obligations under international law by

1. ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Separation or Apartheid Wall;
2. recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
3. respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

There is actually nothing “radical” in these goals, as they are based in the context of human rights and merely demand of Israel that it stop violating international law. Thus the refusal to address Palestinian women’s issues as feminist issues, and the dismissal of Palestinian women’s repeated calls for solidarity against a brutal occupier, are indications that Global North feminism is still ill-equipped to deal with a women’s agenda that denounces colonialism, rather than whatever version of home-grown patriarchy happens to impact us. Yet feminism, according to Palestinian scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2014), “entails understanding the nature and significance of solidarity with the dispossessed, something that global feminism, international law, and Israeli feminism have so far failed to do” as far as Palestinian women are concerned (section 4, para. 2).

More importantly for our present discussion, the Global North feminist approach has long singled out Israel for immunity from any criticism, as it continues to seek to censor any discussion of that country’s oppressive policies. Global North feminists, like so many Global North liberals, do not want to “bring up politics,” especially where Israel is involved. Yet they

³ I have contacted The Sisterhood Is Global Institute by message on their Facebook page, as well as directly through the “contact us” button on their official website. My last attempt was in May 2016.

have no such inhibitions when it comes to criticizing other overtly political aspects of sexism and gender inequity. It is certainly ironic that the activists who argued that “the personal is political,” a mantra of the 1960s white feminism (or “second-wave feminism,” as it is generally known in the dominant discourse), would deny that the political has a personal impact—especially on Global South women who fall at the intersection of various overarching oppressive structures. Nevertheless, this “hegemonic feminism” is the one that characterized mainstream discourse until recently, despite the simultaneous (not latecomer) existence of a more radical, more comprehensive analysis by women of color. If Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” speech remains insufficient proof that women of color have always been alienated from hegemonic feminism and have questioned it from the very start, rather than at a later stage, then Becky Thompson’s (2002) “Multiracial Feminism, Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism” is an excellent corrective to the idea that women-of-color feminism came *after* white feminism. Nevertheless, even within women-of-color feminism, some have simply never considered the plight of the Palestinians as a critical decolonial feminist issue, while others yet held on to the mainstream belief that Palestinians, not Israelis, are at fault in occupied Palestine.

The phenomenon of shielding Israel from criticism has plagued the West for decades. As a result, it has blinded a majority of Global North activists to the fact that the greater oppressor of Palestinian women is not Islamic fundamentalism, but Zionism, which has rendered the entire Palestinian people a dispossessed, disenfranchised people whose very human rights Israel violates daily. Thus we continue to see antiwar activists denouncing the U.S. occupation of Iraq, but not Israel’s occupation of Palestine, as if unaware of the parallels between the two. For example, in 2012, I was at a progressive African American event in Seattle, gathering signatures for a petition to have the city of Seattle divest from companies that benefit from Israel’s illegal occupation, and a white, self-identified Jewish American woman attempted to talk me out of my endeavor, patronizingly telling me I was “naïve” to seek to connect oppressions, and surely would not do so if I understood what was going on in Israel. When I explained that, as a seasoned Palestinian activist with first-hand knowledge of the situation, I would not describe myself as “naïve,” she switched to calling me anti-Semitic, and sought to have me ousted from the event.

Western feminists have been and remain quick to denounce the oppression of Arab women as a result of Islamic fundamentalism, but not as a result of Israeli occupation, and they seem oblivious to the fact that occupation and militarism have gendered manifestations that aggravate women’s circumstances in Palestine, as they would anywhere else. This is all the more surprising when these feminist scholars are eager to analyze the feminization of poverty in other war-ravaged countries, the disenfranchisement of women as military institutions hold sway over a society, the violence of sex work and sexual slavery in war zones, and the overall increase in sexual violence in communities that have experienced armed conflict. When it comes to Israel, however, many Western feminists’ critical analysis collapses into a reductionist binary that views Israel as “Western,” “modern,” “civilized,” and Palestinians as “backwards,” and thus fails to grasp the gendered aspects of Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people. The myopic lens

looks only at the micro-environment, namely Arab society, and completely overlooks the macro-environment, namely Israel's occupation, its harsh discriminatory measures, and its violation of the Palestinian people's human rights.

When the circumstances of Palestinian women are considered at all, it is generally a denunciation of "life under Hamas rule." Yet Palestinian women have been explaining for decades that they are at least as much, if not more oppressed by Israel and Zionism than they are by their fellow Palestinian men. As Camille Odeh told Nadine Naber (in press), the United Palestinian Women's Association was holding workshops on Palestine as part of radical anti-colonial organizing as early as the 1980s. Many Arab diaspora feminists have written essays explaining that solidarity with Palestinian women entailed denouncing and organizing to end Zionism as a settler-colonial project. In my own essay, "The Burden of Representation," I explain that Palestinian women's freedom of movement, their right to an education, their right to vote, to work, to live where they want, where they were born, their right to sufficient food, clean water, and medical treatment in their own homeland are denied them not by their fellow Palestinians, but by the illegal occupying power, Israel (Elia, 2011). This most basic reality seems too challenging for disingenuous liberals who prefer to focus on dress codes and the outwardly trappings of "emancipation," and persist in silencing criticism of Israel with retorts about "Islamic" patriarchy or fundamentalism. Haneen Maikey (2016), director of the queer Palestinian group Al-Qaws (Arabic for "rainbow") recently captured the frustration of many Palestinian feminists when she commented, in a Facebook post,

In today's meeting [with representatives of international organizations] one popular question was raised again by a staff who lives and works in Jerusalem for few years now: "how alQaws operates in Jerusalem, a very conservative place?" In an attempt to stay polite I replied with "why conservative would be the main framework of talking about Jerusalem or gay people in Palestine? Why not occupied; economically marginalized; a place that it's crucial social and political characterization is being changed and shaped by new settlements, and systematic house demolishing; or by the fact your right to live in your hometown is threatened on a daily base; a society that it's young generation is being executed on its streets; why not colonized, statelessness, poor, and, yes, also "conservative"?"

The attempts to frame sexuality issues in the norms and tradition lens, is not only racist and convenient, but is also far from capturing the endless forms of violence practiced on LGBTs in Palestine.

On the theoretical level, it is generally accepted that hypermilitarism, occupation, and settler-colonialism are inevitably accompanied by gender violence. The very language we use to refer to acts of land appropriation is reflective of this violent coupling. An expression such as "penetration into virgin land," which was quite common in the days of European conquest of the African continent, or "the rape of Gaza," which we hear again and again with every Israeli assault on the besieged region, are historical and daily reminders of this mentality. The men

whose land is conquered are considered “emasculated,” their failure to protect the land apparently reveals them as “effeminate.” This is all highly sexualized language of domination and violence. Of course, we are also sadly familiar with the expression “rape, pillage, burn,” which accompanies conquest, and we know that women are “the spoils of war.” Wherever we look, gender violence is an integral part of conquest, and of settler-colonialism. Israel, a brutal military occupying power constantly expanding its illegal settlements, is no exception. Specifically, when such a power views a population—its dispossessed, disenfranchised, and occupied Indigenous population—as a “demographic threat,” that view is fundamentally both racist and gendered.

And racist population control relies specifically on violence against women. So it is not surprising that Mordechai Kedar, an Israeli military intelligence officer turned academic, would matter-of-factly suggest that “raping wives and mothers of Palestinian combatants” would deter attacks by Hamas militants (Mezzofiore, 2014, para. 1). Similarly, Israeli lawmaker Ayelet Shaked did not attempt to present the murder of Palestinian children and their mothers as unfortunate, disproportionate collateral damage; she openly called for it by asserting that Palestinian women must be killed too, because they give birth to “little snakes” (qtd. in Abunimah, 2015, translated post section, para. 5). Yet Palestinian mothers, like mothers everywhere, have one overwhelming concern: sheltering their children from harm. In Palestine, that harm comes from the Israeli military and the Israeli settlers. Many mothers comment on the fact that it is impossible to avoid being politicized at an early stage, as children cannot be sheltered from the Israeli violence all around them. Others actually want their children to understand the gravity of the situation, so as to better confront it. Yet others, like Fatmeh Breijeh, for example, encourage resistance for liberation. Breijeh, of Al Ma’sara, near Bethlehem, explains:

I have decided to continue to resist until the last breath and to continue to urge people to resist and to teach my children to resist and to lay the foundation for this through their milk. Our roots are fixed here. We, this land, this land, we are from this land. Look at the earth, at the soil; you will find it’s our color. Every blade of grass, we know. They don’t know anything. They only know to carry weapons and to steal—to steal the water, to steal the blessings of our land—everywhere. (qtd. in Naijar, 2014, p. 637)

The resistance Breijeh has decided to teach her children is, above all, a resistance that consists of an Indigenous woman’s defiant persistence, a rooted resistance that stems from knowing every blade go grass, rather than the behavior of Israeli soldiers and settlers who “only know to carry weapons and to steal” (qtd. in Naijar, 2014, p. 637).

“Sisterhood is...” selective?

The differing views in the Global North about Palestine have tended to fall, broadly speaking, along race and its attendant socio-economic lines. However, many disenfranchised, progressive women of color in the Global North had also absorbed the hegemonic discourse, with the Zionist narrative underlying it, and also failed for a long time to view the Question of Palestine in a colonial context. As Simona Sharoni and Rabab Abdulhadi (2015) write in their essay published shortly before the historic 2015 NWSA vote, and a full 30 years after the Saadawi-Friedan encounter,

For years, feminists in the Global North have failed to understand why Palestinian women insist on linking their struggles for gender equality to national liberation. As a result, Palestinian women have been at the receiving end of well-intentioned but misguided initiatives, which have disregarded their agency, needs and resilience, and have focused on a narrow understanding of “women’s issues” and critiques of patriarchy and nationalism. . . . Missing from the feminist response to the crisis in Palestine has been recognition of its root causes, namely Israel’s illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, its violation of Palestinian rights and its apartheid-like policies toward the Palestinian people.” (p. 654)

Indeed, for many decades, hegemonic feminism in the Global North was dominated by middle-class women of European descent, grappling with the unmitigated trauma of the Holocaust. These include Betty Friedan, author of one of the more influential feminist manifestos of the twentieth century, *The Feminine Mystique*, who had tried to censor Nawal al-Saadawi at the International Conference on Women; Robin Morgan, author of the book *Sisterhood is Powerful*, and co-founder of The Sisterhood Is Global Institute; Gloria Steinem, founder of *Ms. Magazine*; Shulamit Firestone, radical feminist author of *The Dialectic of Sex*; and other such towering women who were either raised Jewish in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, or educated to denounce anti-Semitism, and few other forms of racism, as the ultimate evil. To these white women, the European discourse, and European suffering, is in a class apart, and above, any other suffering. Thus in hegemonic discourse, there still is no acknowledgment, to this day, that European imperialism led to the violent deaths of tens of millions of Africans on the continent itself, in addition to the millions who were enslaved in Europe and the Americas.

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison tried to inscribe the magnitude of this horrific episode in the U.S. national consciousness when she dedicated her best-selling novel, *Beloved*, to the “sixty million and more” enslaved Africans who perished in the slave trade, but the reminder was pushed aside in the all-American focus on the individual, rather than the collective. And despite widely documented atrocities committed by King Leopold II in the Congo, the Belgian monarch is never named as a murderous historical leader in line with non-Westerners such as Pol Pot, Idi Amin, or Genghis Khan, and others. Consequently, despite the devastation wreaked by Europeans on the rest of the world throughout modern history, the only European who is unanimously acknowledged as evil is Adolf Hitler, whose victims were primarily Europeans. In other words, when Europeans ravage non-European countries, their crimes are not viewed as

such, but are misrepresented and generally sanitized instead as “discoveries” (as in the case of the Spanish conquest of the Americas), “mandates” (as in the case of Britain’s cavalier deciding of the fate of Palestine), or “civilizing missions,” as in France’s devastating colonization of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The U.S. has even coined what must be one of the greatest euphemisms of all times, describing its brutal enslavement of millions of Africans and their descendants as “the peculiar institution.” In North America, in what is today the United States of America, ninety percent of the Indigenous peoples were killed within 150 years of the arrival of Christopher Columbus. Yet he is celebrated as a discoverer, rather than a murdering conqueror. Somehow, genocides of the magnitude of what Columbus launched against the Indigenous peoples of North America, or what the European slave trade did to Africans, do not register like that of Europe’s Jewish communities, because the victims were not European. Indeed, the frequent statement that six million Jews perished in the Holocaust, or more correctly the omission of the fact that an almost equal number of other communities also perished in the Holocaust, because of whatever accident of birth made them “other,” is proof that Jewish suffering is elevated above the suffering of others: the Roma, twins, gays and lesbians, as well as Africans. Yet Hitler was also intent on “cleansing” Europe of those “undesirables,” who are so often forgotten.

In such a whitewashed context, it is surprising, to say the least, to read Gloria Steinam stating that her own feminism had always been indebted to black feminism. “I learned feminism disproportionately from black women,” Steinam said in a December 2015 interview (qtd. in Tisdale, 2015, p.1), adding that, in her view, feminism had always been intersectional, because it had always been aware of class and race. She went so far as to say that Black women “invented feminism” (qtd. in Tisdale, 2015, p.1). But even if one were to grant that Steinam’s feminism had indeed been aware of both class and race, merely acknowledging a white debt to black contributions in the U.S. does not translate into a critical understanding of structural oppressions as lived by people of color. All too often, it is no more than bad-faith lip service to “diversity,” an attempt to alleviate white guilt by professing that one has been “influenced by,” rather than exploitative of, the experiences of people of color. This is most obvious in the music industry, which acknowledges the seminal contributions of African Americans to rock and roll, jazz, hip hop, rap, yet continues to disproportionately reward white artists exploiting these black genres over African Americans performing them.

Breaking through the censorship: Zionism is racism

Growing up in the Global North, women of color who did not intentionally seek out political analysis from the Global South around the question of Palestine assimilated the white, mainstream presentation of the resistance of the Palestinian people as another episode of violent anti-Semitism, continuing the age-old (if European) hounding of the Jewish people. The hegemony of white feminism began to crumble and fritter away in the 1980s and 1990s, with the publication and overwhelmingly positive reception of groundbreaking anthologies like *This*

*Bridge Called My Back, Hacienda Cara, and Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism.*⁴ At long last, a more nuanced analysis began to gel, and infiltrate most feminist communities. Young women now still read Steinam and de Beauvoir, as if de rigueur, but also became familiar with bell hooks and Audre Lorde. Introduction to Women's Studies courses, which had once been as exclusively white as history textbooks were exclusively about men's conflicts and territorial battles, began to incorporate one or two essays by women of color. But these essays frequently remained "oppositional," even optional, denouncing and thus simultaneously reinforcing the white meta-narrative. Concepts such as double-jeopardy and multiple jeopardy, while dealing a blow to the sense of victimhood of middle-class white women suffering from ennui in the luxury of their comfortable houses, were still viewed as the plight of "minorities," rather than that of the majority of people everywhere.

And many women of color still held on to the hegemonic representation of Palestine, despite an otherwise critical analysis of colonialism. Specifically, many women of color, including Indigenous women, held on to the mainstream vilification of the Palestinians, now viewed as the age-old enemy of the Jewish people, rather than the recent victims of Zionism. With the global "War on Terror," the Orientalist fascination with veiled women, the odalisque, the harem, gave way to an unbridled Islamophobia that viewed all Palestinians, women, men, and children as would-be murderous terrorists harboring evil intentions of "throwing the Jewish people into the sea." The supposedly-feminist Israeli prime minister Golda Meir is reputed to have declared "Peace will come when the Arabs [Palestinians] love their children more than they hate us." While the accusation cannot be directly sourced, its wide currency in Zionist circles is a clear indication of a mindset that blames Palestinians, a colonized dispossessed people, for "hating Jews," rather than seeking to overthrow their occupier.

The transposition of centuries of European anti-Semitism onto the Palestinian people, even though Palestinians had historically been a genuinely diverse community, both racially and religiously, remains one of the successes of the Zionist narrative of victimhood. Today, we hear that "Muslims and Jews have been fighting for centuries," a statement that simply cannot be corroborated despite an extremely well-documented history of the region, or that "the Palestine-Israel conflict is an ancient one," an a-historical statement if ever there was one, as Israel was only created in 1948, with Palestinians resisting their dispossession since they learned about the plans to carry it out. And despite the (erroneous) claims that "the people in that region have always been fighting each other," the accusing finger in such statements is always pointed at the non-Jewish communities, to perpetuate the victimhood and historical suffering of the Jews. There is no acknowledgement that, as far as diverse communities go, the people of Palestine are actually exceptional in how little internecine fighting they engaged in, until Zionism rent them asunder, and privileged some of them (the Palestinian Jewish community, and later, other Arab

⁴ *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Eds. Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa. Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 2nd ed. 1983. *Making Face, Making Soul/Hacienda Caras, Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, Ed. Gloria Anzaldúa, Aunt Lute Press, 1990. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, Indiana University Press, 1991.

Jews) over the rest of the Indigenous people. Regional and European Jews, then, non-native to Palestine, became Palestine's new colonizers, and Palestinian resistance was not predicated on their religion, but rather on the fact that the Palestinian people were being dispossessed, displaced, disenfranchised, and denied their most basic human rights by a newly settled immigrant community, with special rights and privileges only they could enjoy. And Zionism was certainly not recognized for the racist ideology that it was, and remains, in its determination to grant the settler-colonial members of one specific community privileges that the non-Jewish Indigenous people of the land, now rendered "outsiders," do not enjoy. Even amongst feminists-of-color circles in the West, very few questioned that narrative. There were exceptions, of course, as stated above.⁵ Yet, overall, the experience of many Arab American feminists denouncing Zionism was one of alienation, invisibility, and, frequently, outright hostility.⁶

In "The Forgotten '-ism'," members of the San Francisco chapter of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association broke through decades of print censorship when they courageously named Zionism for what it is: an oppressive and violent system of racism that lashed out at anyone questioning its righteousness. The authors of this courageous essay wrote,

As Arab women activists, we had been calling for Palestinians' right to self-determination, resisting the censorship of Arab voices on multiple fronts: in the media, in public lectures, in our classrooms, in our workplaces, and among our friends and colleagues. Upon comparing notes and experiences, we found that each of us had been harassed, intimidated, and sabotaged by supporters of Zionism trying to silence our resistance. We realized that while we had been feeling alienated and unsupported in our daily claims for Arab human, social, political and national rights and human dignity, we were not alone—the voices of Arab American women activists are regularly policed and silenced. (Naber, Desouky, & Lina Baroudi, 2006, p. 97)

For, while the groundbreaking women-of-color anthologies had opened the floodgates of intersectional feminist scholarship and analysis, Arab women remained censored, because Zionism—meaning the evil they denounced above all else—was misrepresented, "whitewashed" by the mainstream, made to look—as so many crimes committed throughout history by Europeans are—as a "civilized" (if not quite civilizing) mission, beset by hostile attackers. "The Forgotten '-ism,'" a collective project of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, San Francisco chapter, with Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi as principal writers, was first published by the Women of Color Resource Center, and reprinted in *The Color of Violence*, edited by the INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence collective. INCITE!, which did not necessarily start out with a solid understanding of the question of Palestine, nevertheless fully understood it when some members introduced it to the national steering collective, and has

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the long-standing alliances between Arab diasporan feminists and the WRC in San Francisco, see Nadine Naber's *Arab America: Gender Politics and Activism*. NYU Press, 2012.

⁶ I have documented instances of this hostility in "The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out," in *Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*, Eds. Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn al-Sultany. Syracuse University Press, 2011.

centralized it in its analysis since the early 2000s. Indeed, INCITE! has made an endorsement of its Palestine Points of Unity a requirement for national chapters, has created popular education materials on Palestine, and has facilitated or sponsored workshops on Palestine for years now. One cannot overestimate the courage and integrity it took for the Arab diasporan activists to research and write “the Forgotten ‘-ism,’” or for the Women of Color Resource Center, and later INCITE!, to publish it. Even today, speaking out against Zionism requires courage that few have, and comes with very harsh consequences, as evidenced by the vicious personal and professional attacks on organizers for Palestinian rights, the calls for firing faculty who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, the actual firing of some such faculty, and the fully-justified fears of pro-Palestine students and teachers that they will not be hired. There are over 30 Zionist organizations in the U.S. monitoring the syllabi, lectures, and publications of faculty who are supportive of Palestinian rights, and the recently formed Canary Mission focuses on student organizers and tries to influence potential employers not to hire them. As these McCarthyist organizations multiply, coalitions and legal defense teams are organizing to counter them. But almost three decades ago, it was best for most not to profess views that acknowledge the humanity and oppression of the Palestinian people. And very few who were not directly impacted by Zionism did.

In his documentary “Peace, Propaganda, and the Promised Land,” University of Massachusetts-Amherst Communications and Cultural Studies Professor Sut Jhaly (2004) explained that for years, he regularly conducted surveys of his first-year students geared at revealing their general knowledge of international affairs. These surveys showed that 75% of students believed the Palestinians were occupying Israel, and not the other way around. This statistic is significant in revealing the level of ignorance amongst otherwise privileged people, and likely reflects the national unquestioning absorption of the Zionist lies. Palestinians and their allies were always put on the defensive, always presumed guilty, racist, anti-Semitic. Since we were overall viewed as the attackers, the invaders, the occupiers, our resistance was necessarily interpreted as terrorism, not decolonial struggle. Even today, the Zionist hold on the national discourse around the Question of Palestine is such that progressives (not conservatives) celebrate condemnations of Israel’s “disproportionate response” with little awareness that they are reinforcing the lie that Israel is merely “responding” to Palestinian provocation, rather than initiating provocation because it is the occupier, the invader, the oppressor.

With the success of Zionism in dispossessing and vilifying the entire Palestinian people, (men, women, and children, rather than a few hundred or thousand fighters), Arab and Muslim women no longer fit into the reductionist Orientalist lens that viewed them as oppressed by the Arab patriarchy. Besides, Palestinian women and their allies were actively rewriting that Orientalist narrative, explaining that they are more oppressed by Zionism than Islam. Rather than denounce conservative Arab society, these feminists were denouncing the harm that Zionism had inflicted on to their communities. They were speaking out against colonialism and racism in ways that challenged white/Zionist hegemonic feminism, even as they remained invisible in women-of-color circles. Joanna Kadi (1999), editor of *Food for Our Grandmothers*, the first

anthology of Arab American and Arab Canadian feminists, spoke of Arab American feminists as “the most invisible of the invisible,” while my own essay, “The White Sheep of the Family,” published in *This Bridge We Call Home*, also decries our exclusion from women-of-color feminism (Elia, 2002). The extremely hostile environment that Arab American women encountered in the discussions amongst contributors to this anthology, prior to its publication, are revealing of how many so-called radical women of color still spouted Zionist hatred of Palestinians and their allies, and sadly, the editors, Anzaldúa and Keating, sought to censor rather than support the latter, thus reinforcing the hegemonic, Zionist discourse.⁷

But there is a special kind of power in having nothing to lose. Stripped of homeland, freedom, dignity, and self-determination, Palestinian women continued to speak out. They wanted other feminists, activists, scholars, and organizers to see not only “beyond the veil” but also, more importantly, “beyond the hasbara” (Hebrew for propaganda). Along with the workshops and popular education we have been engaging in since the 1980s, some have organized and led delegations of Global North activists to Palestine, so they would see for themselves the reality of Palestinian life under occupation, besieged and disenfranchised in our own homeland. The statements issued by members of these delegations upon their return to the Global North bear testament to the harshness of life under Zionism, as well as the determination of the Palestinian people to persevere, resist, and overthrow settler colonialism. Neferti Tadiar (2012), for example, wrote that

To take a stand in solidarity with and to be involved in the struggle of Palestinians to resist and transform the conditions of their own dispossession and disposability—to join in their aspiration for collective freedom and self-determination—is also to participate in the remaking of global life, which cannot but be a paramount feminist act. (para. 4)

Tadiar was part of a delegation organized by the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. Other women of color joined another delegation, organized by Palestinian scholar-activist Rabab Abdulhadi, and they, too, upon returning to the U.S., issued eloquent statements of solidarity with the entire dispossessed Palestinian people. Change was finally afoot, and based on the multiple inroads we are making in various radical communities, looks unstoppable.

Ending Zionism as decolonial praxis

Despite the occasional pain of betrayal by would-be allies, Palestinians are unwavering in their determination to explain to the world that their desire for freedom does not stem from some irrational ancient indelible strain of anti-Semitism, but rather from the very human impulse to be free, sovereign, and live a life of dignity. Palestinians know they have been dispossessed by colonialism, and that ours is a decolonial struggle. I argued in the opening of this article that the NWSA vote did not necessarily reflect a “browning of the organization,” if only because such a

⁷ I discuss this sad episode in “The Burden of Representation.”

statement would suggest that “brown feminists” have always been onboard the Palestine struggle for decolonization. Decades of activism in the U.S. tell a different story, one of Palestinians and their allies struggling hard to chip away at the hegemonic Zionist narrative that depicted us, rather than our occupiers, as violent racist terrorists. This transformation happened first amongst feminists of color, but it was certainly not spontaneous.

Nevertheless, despite the progress made in the Global North, a progress consisting mainly of the shattering of the Zionist narrative, Israel’s racism is becoming more violent by the day (an average of three children were killed each day in October and November 2015). And each Israeli military assault on Palestinians not only takes the lives of hundreds of Palestinians but also causes miscarriages, pre-term labor and stillbirths. Palestinian women in the Negev have the highest rates in the world of still-birth, deaths during labor, and newborn fatalities. And these deaths are directly linked to Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement and Israeli denial of access to health care to Palestinian women.

But it’s not just Palestinian women and children. Even as we focus on women and children, we need to problematize the idea of “women and children” as worthy recipients of pity, sympathy, help, and solidarity as distinct from men, who do not deserve such help. As Maya Mikdashi (2014) points out in her aptly titled “Can Palestinian Men Be Victims?”

The killing of women and children is horrific—but in the reiteration of these disturbing facts there is something missing: the public mourning of Palestinian men killed by Israel’s war machine. . . . We should be aware of how the trope of “womenandchildren” is circulating in relation to Gaza and to Palestine more broadly. This trope accomplishes many discursive feats, two of which are most prominent: The massifying of women and children into an undistinguishable group brought together by the “sameness” of gender and sex, and the reproduction of the male Palestinian body (and the male Arab body more generally) as always already dangerous. Thus the status of male Palestinians (a designation that includes boys aged fifteen and up, and sometimes boys as young as thirteen) as “civilians” is always circumspect. . . .

In this framework, the killing of women and girls and pre-teen and underage boys is to be marked, but boys and men are presumed guilty of what they *might* do if allowed to live their lives. (paras. 2–3)

The denunciation of the killing of women and children, an expression introduced by Cynthia Enloe in the 1990s, makes one ask if men can ever be victims. In my own research, I have also often commented on the fact that we keep hearing of a “disproportionate number of victims” being women and children, and so I ask “what is a proportionate number of victims of any gender or age?” In reality, every Israeli policy, every Israeli assault, every massacre, can be named “Operation Kill Them All”: men and women, children and the elderly, straight and LGBTGNC, Christian and Muslim. Feminism should not be so narrowly focused on one segment of the population that it ignores other oppressed communities. And all Palestinians are oppressed

by Israel. This understanding is finally becoming central to the analysis of a growing number of intersectional, women-of-color feminisms.

Justice is indivisible. As we look at our diaspora in North America, one mighty woman of color looms large as one of the greatest heroes of this land: Harriet Tubman. Tubman was determined to free as many slaves as she could. She did not say, “If you are committed to non-violence, come with me. If you have never committed a crime, come with me. If you believe in my God, come with me.” She knew slavery was wrong, and she was going to free anyone she could who was enslaved. She knew that justice is indivisible, that freedom is a right for all.

Similarly, we need to understand that genuine solidarity with the Palestinian people cannot be selective, when the entire people is dispossessed. Haneen Maikey (2016), co-founder and executive director of the Palestinian gay group Al-Qaws put it most succinctly when she told Western queer groups, “We don’t want your solidarity if you only support us. You need to be in solidarity with all our people.”

Even as we focus on how Israel’s policies impact Palestinian women, children, and queer people, we must keep in mind that intersectional feminism is not limited to improving the circumstances of some people. All Palestinians suffer from Israel’s occupation, just as all Native Americans suffered from Europe’s theft of this land, and just as all African Americans have suffered from enslavement and continue to suffer from institutional racism and structural violence.

Conclusion: Intersections, not parallels

There are many long-standing alliances between Palestinians and various progressive women-of-color feminists and radical anti-colonial communities in the U.S. generally. These may not have been highly visible until recently, when movements such as Black Lives Matter opted for a national disruption of (the) business of (death) as usual, and insisted on publicizing the brutality of a murderous police force frequently trained in Israel. The shattering of the Zionist narrative that resulted from decades of Palestinian organizing in the Global North has also led to a greater understanding of the gendered aspects of settler colonialism in Palestine, leading many feminists in the Global North to a realization that the fight for Palestinian self-determination and Indigenous sovereignty is indeed a feminist issue. Along with the alliances that have sustained us, even housed us, for decades, we are now forging new ones. These alliances are long overdue, and not to be taken for granted. They have required intentional work in getting to know each other’s histories, in prioritizing strategies, in enacting and reciprocating solidarity when someone else’s body was on the line, because of a deep understanding of intersectionality. Today, more than ever, there is growing consciousness that our struggles are not parallel—a term which suggests that they will never meet—but intersectional, coming together at various nodes. Our hope is that the enactment of reciprocal solidarity is a long-term movement, not a “moment.”

Today, Palestinians and other racialized, criminalized communities are coming together around imprisonment, law-enforcement violence, immigrant rights, border violence. We stand

together in the struggle against gendered violence but also against militarism and settler colonialism. And it is incumbent on anti-colonial activists and scholars to understand that the solidarity we are celebrating today is neither recent, nor a moment. Instead, it is a long-standing movement, always in flux, ebbing and flowing as circumstances evolve and develop for our communities, but always there, always engaging with the greater oppressor, the system of racist colonial heteropatriarchy. With that understanding, and with the understanding that the system we are fighting is global, we can better appreciate that solidarity amongst disenfranchised, criminalized communities is not self-serving, but mutually beneficial.

Globally, the connections we have made as BDS organizers are also very important, and must not be abandoned once (not if) we achieve our goals. As the delegation of women of color and Indigenous women wrote in their statement, upon returning from their visit to Palestine:

We were deeply impressed by people's insistence on the linkages between the movement for a free Palestine and struggles for justice throughout the world; as Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted throughout his life, "Justice is indivisible. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." (Ransby, 2011, para. 4)

Speaking at the 1997 International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people, South Africa giant and Nobel laureate Nelson Mandela stated: "But we know too well our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians." Today, we can say in all confidence that "from Gaza to Ferguson" is more than an opportune statement, it's an understanding of long-term interconnectedness. And just as veterans of the South African anti-apartheid struggle are joining forces with us today, one day, Palestinians will say "we know too well that our freedom is incomplete until all criminalized communities are free."

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