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8. PALESTINE

BDS as Refusal and Resistance in the Settler Colonial Academy

ABSTRACT

This chapter stems from queries by colleagues on how to use their affiliation within the academy to resist the Zionist settler colonial hold on Palestine. With a case study on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement, this chapter provides an anti-colonial examination of Palestinian existence/resistance alongside forms of refusal that scholars and affiliates of the academy can employ in solidarity with Palestinians in their struggle for liberation and self-determination.

Keywords: Palestine, anti-colonial, anti-Zionist, BDS, anti-racist, settler colonialism

I feel a particular type of dissonance in pursuing anti-colonial and anti-racist work within a colonial and racist institution. I learn of processes of decolonization in an academy built on the backs of Indigenous peoples on unceded lands. I learn of justice in an unjust academy and theorize about colonialism in classrooms built on colonialism's benediction. As the proud daughter of two uprooted Palestinians, I search for home in scholarly works made accessible by an institution gravely complicit in deeming home an inaccessible phenomenon for Palestinians. The dissonance serves as a necessary reminder that as scholars within the academy, we are not immune to interrogation. We cannot effectively examine society without uncomfortably examining our roles within it. I write this chapter for scholars in search of pragmatic anti-colonial and anti-Zionist approaches to use their affiliation within the academy to resist the Zionist settler colonial hold on Palestine. With a case study on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement, this chapter provides an anti-colonial examination of Palestinian existence/resistance alongside forms of refusal that scholars and affiliates of the academy can employ in solidarity with Palestinians in their struggle for liberation and self-determination.

Thanks to Zionism, Palestine is "home" to Indigenous Palestinians and foreign Zionists, anti-colonial resistance and colonial violence, and attainable Palestinian dreams and impermanent Zionist realities. It is "home" to the longest military occupation of modern times (Said, 2007) and to conquest since at least 330 BCE (Thomas, 2007). "Home" is in quotations to highlight the settler's sense of "home" on colonized lands at the expense of a sense of unbelonging (Moreton-Robinson,

2003) and “unhomeliness” (Bhabha, 1992) for Indigenous peoples. Since “settler colonialism destroys to replace” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388), colonizers create “home” on Indigenous lands by attempting to destroy “home” for Indigenous peoples. The colonizer’s sense of “home” is thus legitimated through the delegitimization of “home” for the colonized.

I define zionism as a nationalistic (Elkins, 2005) political movement derivative of western settler colonialism and white supremacy that works to erase (Said, 1978; Massad, 2006), racialize (Abu-Lakan, 2004; Bakan, 2005), and vilify (Abunimah, 2014) Palestinians. Theodor Herzl (1941)—the founding father of zionism—summed this settler colonial logic in *Old-New Land* where he wrote, “If I wish to substitute a new building for an old one, I must demolish before I construct” (p. 38). Zionism works to destruct “home” for Palestinians in order to replace it with “home” for zionists through militaristic force and exclusionary policies. Since its political inception, zionism represents the refusal to admit, and the consequent denial of a Palestinian presence in Palestine. The zionist regime—in coming into formal existence in 1948—resulted in the ongoing eradication of Palestinian knowledges and villages and infrastructure (Said, 1979). Palestine, as a distinct land for an identifiable Palestinian people is perceived as uncertain and “questionable” (Said, 1979, p. 5). This is not a reflection of historical geographic uncertainty, rather, it is rooted in the ongoing Euro-zionist need to validate itself through invalidating a historically-situated Palestinian presence in Palestine. In other words, Palestine is perceived as unstable because the zionist regime can only be rooted in the violent uprooting of Palestinians.

Zionism has turned Palestine into a highly contested concept. In *The Palestine Question*, Edward Said (1978) demonstrates that the very pronouncement of the word Palestine is seen by Palestinians and those rooted in anti-colonial and anti-zionist thought to be a gesture of positive assertion. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for zionists to refer to Palestinians as either Arabs or “so-called Palestinians” at best (Said, 1979). Uttering the word Palestine is seen as a political act because it brings into existence a reality that the zionist regime tries heavily to invalidate. This is similar to the erasure of Indigenous names from lands and places that they have been connected to for generations. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) in *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*, writes of Indigenous children in settler colonial schools being forced to remember and validate colonial names and forget or invalidate their original names. These colonial names were then used on official maps and books, which further aimed to erase Indigenous existence on the land and connections to the land.

Mentioning Palestine has become what J. L Austin calls a *performative utterance*. In *How To Do Things With Words* (1963), Austin defines an utterance as performative when “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (p. 6). In other words, an utterance is performative when the act of uttering is deemed an act in and of itself. Distinct from statements that work to describe something—performative statements—in uttering them, actually perform what is being said. Lorenzo Veracini

(2013) asserts, settler colonialism relies on a sense of amnesia and is “characterized by a persistent drive to supersede the conditions of its operation,” (p. 3); thus making its violent processes of erasure seem natural, permanent, and inevitable (Tuck & Yang, 2014). To utter Palestine is to perform its existence and refuse the erasure of Indigenous knowledges. It is an anti-colonial affirmation that counters Euro-zionist claims. As Said (1979) informs us, “to call the place Palestine...is already an act of political will” (p. 10). The word Palestine—when uttered—is not a mere description of reality, but an anti-colonial political act that reaffirms a Palestinian reality undergoing violent figurative and literal erasure. Today Palestine exists as “a political and human experience, and an act of sustained popular will” (Said, 1979, p. 5), publicly acknowledging Palestine—its people, history, and contemporary existence, is a method of affirming Palestinian Indigeneity.

I employ a politics of refusal (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Tuck, 2010; Simpson, 2014) as a method of engaging Palestinian practices of resistance and self-determination within the academy. Refusal works within a framework of desire-based research and is theorized as “not just a ‘no,’ but as a type of investigation into ‘what you need to know and what I refuse to write in’” (Yang & Tuck, 2014, p. 223; Simpson, 2007, p. 72). Here refusal is employed as a framework, method, and a generative stance to highlight methodological and practical tools scholars can employ within the academy in the fight for justice in Palestine.

The BDS movement refuses to normalize zionist settler colonialism in Palestine and is a “strategy of resistance and cross-border solidarity [that] is intimately connected with a challenge to the hegemonic place of zionism in western ideology” (Abu-Laban & Bakan, 2000, p. 29). Abu-Laban and Bakan (2009) refer to Charles Mills’ (1997) notion of the racial contract to contextualize the ways Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island and Palestine are classified as racialized and stateless. Mills (1997) explains that white supremacy is an “unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today” (p. 24) and is embedded in western ideology. BDS is a Palestinian-led movement that counters the hegemonic discourses of white supremacy that portray the zionist regime as progressive. It is rooted in raising awareness of, and challenging zionist colonial violence by refusing the normalization of our complicity, and is thus “flexible in its application and adaptation” (Abu-Laban & Bakan, 2009, p. 43). Abu-Laban and Bakan (2009) state that supporting BDS can “serve as a challenge to a particular element of western elite hegemony in the form of the ideology of zionism.” Furthermore, BDS “contests a post-second world war hegemonic construction of state ideology, in which zionism plays a central role and serves to enforce a racial contract that hides the apartheid-like character of the state of Israel” (p. 16). The zionist hold in the academy is seen in the lack of an anti-colonial and anti-zionist discourse on Palestine. This is rooted in ideologies of orientalism, anti-Muslim sentiment, settler colonialism, zionism, and white supremacy that construct Palestinians as non-existent, void of history, culture and land (Said, 2004). Abu-Laban and Bakan (2009) write:

[BDS] has been hampered, we maintain, by an international racial contract which, since 1948, has assigned a common interest between the state of Israel and powerful international political allies, while absencing the Palestinians as both ‘nonwhite’ and stateless. The unique role of Zionism as an ideology that lays claim to anti-racist ideological space as a response to anti-Semitism in the history of Europe, the US and Canada, while at the same time advancing racialized interests of colonial expansion in the Middle East, renders the ideological terrain of the BDS movement in the West complex. (pp. 32–33)

With that being said, BDS is an organized anti-racist and transnational movement of civil society actors from Turtle Island to Palestine that intensified after the three-week Zionist attack on Gaza, Palestine in 2008/2009. It operates within a context of anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and anti-neoliberalism. BDS is well connected with a new generation of politicized Arabs and Muslims in the post-9/11 climate and the Arab Spring uprisings (Abu-Laban, 2004; Bakan, 2005). The BDS movement focuses on resisting Zionist settler colonialism that denies Palestinian rights. These rights include our right of return, right to mobility, right to education, right to self-determination, right to our land, right to keep our homes and infrastructure free from militarized settler colonial destruction, right to administer our own economy, and the right to resist Zionist settler colonial invasion of our homeland. It works to expose and refuse Zionist brutality against Palestinians. The BDS movement posits that the Zionist regime must recognize the inalienable Palestinian right to self-determination by:

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the 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. (<https://bdsmovement.net/call>)

Here I interrogate academic freedom and academic responsibility within an investigative framework of Palestinian solidarity within the academy. I argue that notions of academic freedom are used to hinder Palestinians from academic freedom, access to education, and our basic right to self-determination, and as scholars within the academy it is our academic responsibility to adhere to the BDS Movement. For far too long academics have used the right to freedom of expression to deny people their right to freedom of expression. The irony of the concept of academic freedom lies in how it is used to justify the perpetual unfreedom of others.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) examines the dangers of academic freedom as it promotes autonomous independence without accountability. She argues that academic freedom “protects a discipline from the ‘outside,’ enabling communities of scholars to distance themselves from others and, in the more extreme forms,

to absolve themselves of responsibility for what occurs in other branches of their discipline, in the academy and in the world” (Smith, 1999, p. 67). Within a settler colonial neoliberalized academy, highly competitive individualistic research fosters an environment where relevancy and quantity are stressed upon, and responsibility and ethical morality are absolved. This is apparent in the ways arguments defending academic freedom are used to refuse others of their academic freedom.

George Sefa Dei’s analysis of academic freedom and his call for academic responsibility is useful here. In his article, “The African Scholar in the Western Academy,” Dei (2014b) analyzed the notion of claiming rights in academic and colonial settings, stating that these rights are “conceptualized as property of dominant bodies” (p. 169). This is most apparent when we see dominant bodies in the academy use arguments defending the right to freedom of expression and the right to academic freedom as a means to further conceal the unfreedoms and non-freedoms of others. In his piece, “Decolonizing the University Curriculum,” Dei (2015) calls to question institutionalized definitions of academic freedom that fall short of holding academics responsible for what they do with said freedoms. He asserts that, “there is no [academic] freedom without matching responsibilities and an ethically conscious engagement in this freedom” (Dei, 2015, p. 42). He defines academic responsibility as “the need to make education more relevant to the diverse communities and institutions they serve” (Dei, 2015, p. 31).

Smith’s (1999) call for scholars to recognize the effects and limits of their research can be included as a form of academic responsibility. When we speak of academic freedom, why is the consistent denial of academic freedom for Palestinian students and scholars under a violent, settler colonial zionist regime routinely ignored? This is illustrated by Cary Nelson, the Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who employs academic freedom to defend zionist academic institutions, while simultaneously ignoring how these very institutions impede on Palestinian academic freedom and Palestinian educational infrastructure. For Nelson and a plethora of legislators and university administrators, scholars who consciously refuse to associate with zionist universities in adherence to the Palestinian call for BDS are in violation of the principles of academic freedom. Yet, these very proponents of academic freedom do not protest the violation of academic freedom Palestinians routinely endure under zionist control. Amjad Barham (2009), leader of the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees (PFUUPE) asked the University and College Union (UCU) Congress:

Is upholding the academic freedom of Israeli academics a loftier aim than upholding the freedom of an entire people being strangled by an illegal occupation? Do Palestinian universities somehow fall outside the purview of the ‘universal’ principle of academic freedom? Israeli academics who argue for the protection of their access to international academic networks, grants, visiting professorships, fellowships and other benefits of the academic system,

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have paid scant attention to the total denial of the most basic freedoms to Palestinians, academics or otherwise.

Some detractors of the BDS movement claim that BDS opposes academic freedom and open exchange so vigorously defended by academics in settler colonial academies, including on Turtle Island and within the Zionist regime. I must make note here that, as Dei (2014a) foresees, it is settlers or dominant bodies that view academic freedom as innately theirs while violently erasing Palestinian scholars and students from the conversation. Dozens of university presidents within the settler colonial academy have condemned BDS and many have stated that BDS violated the universal principle of academic freedom as a means of justification (Kapitan, 2013). After the American Studies Association (ASA) endorsed BDS, some university administrators who condemned this as a breach of academic freedom decided to cut ties with the ASA (Jacobson, 2013). It is ironic that the university administrators who opposed the ASA's decision to adhere to BDS on the basis that it hindered the free exchange of ideas, cut ties with the ASA and thus hindered the free exchange of ideas. Some states introduced legislation to counter it with definitions of academic freedom that selectively left out the unfreedoms of Palestinian students and scholars.

A special issue of the *American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Journal of Academic Freedom* was published where scholars asserted that academic freedom is a "manipulative political double standard and ideological cover for the complicity of Israeli universities in the occupation" (Dawson & Mullen, 2015, p. 16). The Zionist regime regularly denies Palestinians our basic rights as human beings, including the right to open exchange and academic freedom. Moreover, Joan W. Scott (2013), the Harold F. Linder Professor in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, wrote an article in the *Journal of Academic Freedom* titled, "Changing My Mind about the Boycott". In her article she posed: "What did it mean, I wondered, to oppose the boycott campaign in the name of Israeli academic freedom, when the Israeli state regularly denied academic freedom to critics of the state, the occupation, or, indeed, of Zionism, and when the blacklisting of its critics is the regular tool used by state authorities against its own academic institutions?" (p. 2). Scott (2013) highlights that the Zionist military impedes on "Palestinians' access to university education, freedom of assembly, and the right to free speech" (p. 2). She continues, "it is because we believe so strongly in principles of academic freedom that a strategic boycott of the state that so abuses it makes sense right now" (p. 3). Palestinian students and academics are forced to go through humiliating and precarious Zionist checkpoints, interrogations, and border crossings in attempt to get to school. Palestinian students in Zionist and Palestinian universities and schools experience racist policies and physical and psychological violence (USACBI.org).

George Dei (2015) states that, "there is nothing 'free' about freedom! [Academic] Freedom is fought for and is maintained at the expense of the non-freedoms and the cumulative unfreedom of others" (p. 42). BDS is one method to hold the

zionist regime accountable and to reclaim Palestinian freedoms. As Dei (2014b, 2015) makes clear, we cannot speak of academic freedom without speaking of our academic responsibilities. As scholars within an academy that is horrendously complicit in perpetuating unending militaristic violence and settler colonial erasure, it is our academic responsibility to push for BDS in our respective institutions and personal lives.

Rima Najjar Kapitan (2015), a civil rights attorney and the president of Kapitan Law Office, in her article “Climbing Down from the Ivory Tower: Double Standards and the Use of Academic Boycotts to Achieve Social and Economic Justice,” distinguishes between academic freedom and academic entitlement and asserts that the academic freedom to boycott must be included in notions of academic freedom. We are obliged to work together to ensure the freedom of students and scholars who choose to endorse BDS. We have the right to disassociate ourselves from zionist institutions until Palestinian freedom and self-determination is acknowledged. When notions of universal academic freedom are used to hinder the academic freedom of others, the academic entitlement of dominant bodies supersedes their academic responsibility and limits the academic and nonacademic freedoms of others. Kapitan (2015) asserts that academic freedom “must be flexible enough to allow professors to use expressive disassociation (example, BDS) to bring about education, social and political change” (p. 2). Kapitan (2015) states that,

It is not a violation of anyone’s ‘academic freedom’ if American institutions freely choose to disassociate from Israeli universities until they cease reinforcing Israeli apartheid...So, with respect to many of the demands of the boycott movement, academic freedom is not implicated at all. (p. 137)

We must give attention to the ways in which the academy is gravely complicit in perpetuating the non-freedoms of Palestinians, and we must consider the political context of our scholarly locations when considering false universal notions of academic freedom. For whom is this freedom for? And is it a freedom that avoids responsibility? To speak of academic freedom without acknowledging how settler colonial universities from Turtle Island to Palestine work to deny people their right to academic freedom is to speak from a location of privilege within a violent academy. The settler colonial academy is deeply complicit with militarization and racial dispossession on Turtle Island and Palestine (Maira, 2015), and thus our affiliation within the academy means we are implicated as well. It is our academic responsibility to adhere to BDS on an individual, interpersonal, and institutional level. If we truly believe in the principles of academic freedom for all people and if we are to fulfil our academic responsibility, we must strongly take up BDS in order to pressure the zionist regime to stop denying Palestinians our basic freedoms. As Sunaina Maira (2015), a professor of Asian American Studies at the University of California, Davis states, this is more than just about passing BDS resolutions, this is about changing the discourse about Palestine in the academy; “that is, we have been waging a war of position, not just a war of maneuver” (p. 83). As scholars

within an academy that works to prolong and normalize Palestinian unfreedom, our solidarity with Palestinians must be stronger than our fear of alienation or discomfort when endorsing BDS. When we recognize the very real violence and alienation Palestinians face under the Zionist regime, we will be less likely to succumb to counterarguments, maintaining that an affirmation of Palestinian freedom will somehow cause divisiveness and alienation. As students and scholars within this settler colonial academy, we must understand that the academy is on the frontlines in the struggle for Palestinian freedom and self-determination. Ashley Dawson and Bill V. Mullen (2015) state that “it is urgent that scholars and students around the world boycott Israeli universities” (p. 1) and endorse BDS fully and publicly.

Students and scholars on campuses across Turtle Island work to make visible the effects of the Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine, disassociate from institutions that benefit from this project, and take part in the BDS movement. In “Canada,” at least 12 student unions and associations have endorsed the BDS movement; including Ryerson’s Students’ Union in 2014, the York Federation of Students in 2013, and Concordia’s University Student Union in 2014. At the University of Toronto, the Graduate Students’ Union (2012), the Mississauga Students’ Union (2013), and the Scarborough Campus Students’ Union (2013) have all endorsed the BDS call. The University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union developed a BDS Ad Hoc Committee in response to BDS and has since created a tri-campus campaign (UofT Divest) to demand the University of Toronto to divest from companies that are complicit in the Zionist regime’s violation of human rights. The Ontario branch of the Canadian Federation of Students representing over 300,000 university students unanimously passed a BDS motion in 2014 and university workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) representing 200,000 government and other sector workers joined the BDS movement in 2009. In 2008, Faculty for Palestine (F4P) was formed in Toronto out of a sense of seriousness to break the silence among faculty and to support Palestine solidarity groups on campuses. F4P consists of over 500 faculty members of all ranks from over 40 universities and 15 colleges across “Canada.” The Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid (CAIA) formed in 2006 as a Canadian coalition in support of the BDS movement. Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA) was formed in 2008 in Toronto to combat Israel’s pinkwashing campaigns. Most Palestine solidarity groups remain largely in isolation organizing on their particular campus, in spite of broad coalition groups such as QuAIA, CAIA, and F4P. Currently, several Palestine solidarity groups are campaigning for the implementation of BDS on their respective campuses across “Canada.” These successes are continuing to gain momentum in the academy as the BDS movement proves to be a venue for intellectuals to voice their solidarity with Palestinians by joining the Palestinian call in affirming Palestinian self-determination and justice.

As scholars it is part of our academic responsibility to affirm Indigenous knowledges and modes of resistance. We must use our positions within the academy

to actively resist settler colonial projects from Turtle Island to Palestine. In this chapter, refusal is a generative stance and an anti-colonial tool rooted in Indigenous, and particularly Palestinian methodology. Scholars can employ refusals to critically address their complicities and better stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. The grassroots BDS Movement is one form of Indigenous refusal that will continue to rise despite racist pressures to suppress it. Palestinian refusals can be understood within a wider politics of anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-zionist solidarity and resistance. Scholars searching for methods to use their affiliation within the academy responsibly should consider publicly endorsing BDS and other methods of Indigenous refusals to affirm Indigenous knowledges, resistance, and self-determination.

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