"State Racisms, Academic Boycott, and the Stakes of Life Writing in the United States and Israel"¹

On December 24, 2015, Israel’s channel 10 aired footage from an Orthodox Jewish wedding. In it, guests celebrate the murder of Palestinian toddler Ali Dawabsheh, burned alive in July 2015 when settlers torched his family’s home in the occupied West Bank town of Duma. The wedding video shows Israeli youth dancing with knives and military-grade rifles and pistols. A masked partygoer raises a firebomb, while another stabs a knife into a photo of baby Ali.

Although Israeli politicians decried the wedding guests’ actions as shocking and hate-fuelled, this gruesome heteronationalist celebration that conjoins marriage and its promise for propagation of the Jewish people with militarism and murder of the Palestinian child is entirely in keeping with Israeli policies that are designed, above all else, to maintain and expand the Jewish nation state, with a majority Jewish population (unless, that is, they are black—Ethiopian Jews, upon entry, have been injected with long-lasting contraception without consent). Of the 1,026 cases filed that involve settler violence, the Israeli courts have failed to indict on 91.6 percent of them. And the same week that politicians condemned the wedding guests, they passed a new law expanding the settlements in the Occupied Palestinian territories that are home to over 550,000 Jews. Netanyahu, who has vowed that there will never be a Palestinian state on his watch, not only has expanded the architecture of apartheid and occupation in the West Bank. Racist laws, policies, and regulations also define the state of Israel itself—over 50 laws discriminate, on their face, against Israel’s Palestinian citizens. Palestinians in Gaza experience Israeli racism more spectacularly—rather than supporting Apartheid, policies for Gaza, an open-air prison predicted by the World Health Organization to be unlivable by 2020, have been described as genocidal, and the Israeli state regularly tests, and internationally markets, high-tech systems of surveillance and weaponry upon its captive Palestinian population.
In short, racism, which takes different forms in the West Bank and Occupied East Jerusalem than it does inside Israel or in Gaza, is at the very heart of Israel’s statecraft and governance, and the most extreme acts of violence, both vigilante and military, are a direct result of the state’s policies and practices.

In maintaining these practices, Israel crucially depends upon the support of its main sponsor, the United States, which gives well over $3 billion per year in federal aid. The US is not only complicit in what we might call Israel’s various intra-state forms of racism: its support is inextricable from the US’s own racism. Today after sketching out this dynamic, I consider how, in the context of academe, and for scholars of language and literature, support for the Palestinian-led Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) offers a way to counter that racism, as does, in a complementary if perhaps more modest way, making space for narratives about life in Palestine. To develop this contention, I discuss my experiences co-editing a special issue of Biography, “Life in Occupied Palestine” and participating on the Organizing Collective for the US campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI).

“Life in Occupied Palestine,” coedited with Ibrahim Aoude and Morgan Cooper, includes 20 contributors, 18 from various parts of historic Palestine. When it came out last spring, I participated in launches in London, Ramallah, Abu Dis, Birzeit, Nablus, Haifa, and Occupied East Jerusalem, in the San Francisco Bay Area with the support of chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace, and, via skype, at the University of Malaya, and in Gaza. Participating in these events while encountering obstacles to getting hard copies into Palestine reinforced for me accounts from contributors about the extent to which state racism structures every aspect of their lives. After highlighting some of the workings of state racism that became clear to me through co-editing the special issue, I consider how this experience enabled me to understand not only the sharing of life stories, but also support for the academic boycott, as ways to support academic freedom and the right to education—and to enable anti-racist dialogue, friendship, community, and political organizing.
We finished editing the volume in the summer of 2014, a period during which the Israeli army killed over 2,200 Palestinians, 551 of them children.\(^4\) While waging this war on Gaza and terrorizing Palestinians throughout the rest of Israel/Palestine, Israel incurred 73 deaths, five of them civilian.\(^5\) As contributors made their final revisions, their first hand accounts brought home the horror of these numbers and their asymmetry. Refaat Alareer lost his brother and four other family members along with his family home during a “humanitarian ceasefire”; another Gaza contributor, Yousef Aljamal, lost his closest childhood friend; Rima Najjar witnessed the demolition of her friend’s home in Abu Dis; and Sa’ed Omar lost vision in his eye when an Israeli soldier shot him with a rubber bullet at a West Bank protest.

Just as these unfolding events informed the making of the special issue, we launched it mindful of conditions that followed this summer of violence. These included Israel’s violations of its ceasefire agreement (Gaza remains under siege, blockade and occupation);\(^6\) the Israeli elections followed by the formation of the most blatantly racist coalition government in the history of Israel;\(^7\) a commitment from the US to increase military aid to as much as four billion dollars a year;\(^8\) the mainstreaming of the BDS movement;\(^9\) and renewed forms of solidarity. Black-Palestinian solidarity had become especially vibrant given the convergence of racist state violence in Ferguson and Gaza.\(^10\) So, too, since then, we have seen a “war on BDS” that conflates anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, and includes an uptick in McCarthyist blacklistings, renewed pressure on universities from Zionist donors,\(^11\) and a rash of anti-boycott legislation in the US, Canada, France and Israel.\(^12\) A particularly clear and egregious example of this repression is the case of Steven Salaita, “de-hired” from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign for his tweets expressing outrage over the 2014 slaughter of children in Gaza.

During the period of launching the special issue, articulations between state racisms were becoming ever clearer, including how what Salaita has called “the Palestinian exception” to free speech and academic freedom in the US works in tandem with human rights violations in Israel-Palestine.\(^13\) The repression of free speech in the US is accompanied by the demonizing of critics of Israel, especially if they are Palestinian, in a way that relies on anti-Arab and anti-Muslim
racism, as it distracts from and distorts criticisms of the Israeli state’s systematic dehumanization and erasure of Palestinians. These attacks, that increasingly take the form of laws and university policies, convert analyses of the racism of Zionism or any support for Palestinians into hateful expressions of anti-Semitism.

In such a climate, Palestinian life writing, even at the most basic level of asserting Palestinian existence, is inescapably political, and in a way that can complement the efforts of political groups that support the struggle for justice in Palestine. Accounts of life in Palestine can expose the decidedly uncivil structure and undemocratic practices that define—and normalize—daily life in Israel-Palestine, while also evidencing Palestinians’ ordinary and extraordinary heroism in resisting and surviving Zionism’s land theft and dehumanization. As contributors, through the telling of their stories, engage in a struggle for liberation, they contest the dominant narratives upon which US-funded Israeli occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid depend—narratives that render Palestinians as either agents of terror, or as nonexistent. Palestinians’ narratives make a much-needed intervention into how Palestine and Palestinian lives are narrated as they also issue a challenge for readers to counter the essential support the US provides for Israel.

Collections of Palestinian life writing can accomplish this not only as textual objects, but also as events. Moreover, because they are framed as literary celebrations, these events can occupy institutional spaces that censure or criminalize forms of direct political protest, especially those associated with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign. At these events, in telling their stories, participants often discuss how the boycott movement supports Palestinians in their struggle for human rights, including the right to education. The kind of dialogue and alliances this sharing of stories engenders circumvents institutional silencing of discussions of BDS, while also puncturing—and providing an alternative to—“soft” Zionist narratives that package imperialism as “balanced dialogue” between two equal if opposing sides.

Opponents to an MLA boycott resolution often contend that academic boycott restricts dialogue and academic freedom. In refuting such claims, I want to begin by discussing the
difficulties of getting the special issue into Palestine. These difficulties illustrate the conditions of blockade—including of books—that show academic boycott to be a remedy rather than a cause for the denial of academic freedom. Because my co-editors and I knew Israel restricts the entry and exit of books and other goods into and out of Palestine, we committed early on to making the volume open access, and thanks to support from Biography, the University of Hawai‘i Press and Project MUSE, we were able to do this.

It is good that we did, because although Biography went to enormous expense and trouble to mail hard copies through FedEx and the US Postal Service, we failed to get the journals into Palestine in time for the launches. Most of the boxes mailed in March 2015 (sent in small batches in hopes of escaping detection) have still not reached their destination. I can say more about this in Q&A, but for now, a quick example: One package of two journals, sent Fed Ex for 133 USD to contributor Sonia Nimr at Birzeit University, arrived in mid-July with a tacked-on custom’s fee of 440 Israeli New Sheqels, approximately 120 USD. On our instructions, Sonia did not pay, and the package began accruing storage fees starting at 90 USD. When critics of academic boycott worry that it entails a loss of academic freedom, I think of Israel’s blockade on books that are part of a systemic state restriction on and denial of Palestinians’ academic freedom and right to education—and that are also part of a larger blockade on sending the most ordinary of goods into the West Bank, be they energy efficient light bulbs, or computer batteries. (And it is also worth mentioning that getting any educational materials out of Palestine—books, business cards, maps—is also difficult—it is too risky to bring them through the airport, and if mailed, you might receive in their stead, as has happened to friends, a Greek Torah, or a crotched potholder).

My experience with the launches also made dramatically clear that if goods do not flow freely, Palestinians face even greater impediments to movement. When launching the special issue in Palestine-Israel, of the contributors who participated—my co-editor Morgan Cooper (an American whose West Bank identity card, under Israeli military law, cancels out the privileges of her US passport), Falastine Dwikat, Yasmine Saleh Hamayel, Rima Najjar, Sonia Nimr, Sa‘ed
Omar, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, and Raja Shehadeh—I was the only one who could attend them all. Morgan and the other contributors with West Bank IDs cannot under Israeli military law enter Occupied East Jerusalem, only a few kilometers away, let alone go to Haifa.

Although as a white Jewish American, I possessed basic freedoms not available to any of the contributors, through every step of my trip, I got small glimpses into the constant stress and difficulty that characterizes life under conditions of occupation and apartheid. Whether traveling to launches by cab, bus, shared taxi, or private car, the looming Apartheid wall, 85 percent of which runs inside the West Bank, rarely left my sight. And each trip, I was witness to instances of the humiliation and physical violence that soldiers and settlers directed towards Palestinians, as I also experienced delays and difficulties (for example, what should have been a 30 minute bus ride to East Jerusalem from Ramallah took me several hours, because Israeli soldiers had opened live fire at Palestinian women engaged in non-violent protest at the Qalandia checkpoint to mark International Women’s Day).

The contrast between my mobility and that of the other contributors extended beyond Israel. Falastine Dwikat had been invited to a double-launch at London’s Free Word Centre that paired the Biography issue with a Palestine-themed issue of Wasafiri, to which she also contributed. At the last minute, the UK denied Falastine a visa because her bank statement was in Arabic. Rima Najjar, in possession of a US passport, went in Falastine’s stead, taking the arduous journey to London via Jordan—a journey that proved more doable than traveling the few kilometers from her home in the Jerusalem suburb of Abu Dis to the Educational Bookshop in East Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Yousef Aljamal, studying in Malaysia, did not know whether he would be able to attend the Gaza launch until the last minute, as he could not count on Egyptian officials to allow him through the briefly-opened Rafah crossing, and Lina AlSharif, skyping in from Qatar, spoke of her inability to return home to Gaza, or for her family to visit her.

The launches, then, provided a lesson in the different ways Palestinians—whether living under siege and blockade as in Gaza; or under Apartheid in other parts of historic Palestine; or in
exile, banned from their homeland—are denied forms of mobility that take from them not only their academic freedom, but curtail their other human rights, including the right to education.

At the same time, these launches also conveyed ways Palestinians continue to nurture their connections to one another and to Palestine despite these conditions of virulent state racism. As I witnessed how Lina’s small daughter, perched on her lap as Lina Skyped in for the Gaza launch, was welcomed into the proceedings as a treasured participant in the still-unfolding stories of resistance and survival so central to “Life in Occupied Palestine,” I learned how the work of storytelling is carried forward often through the very smallest of exchanges, sometimes in a way even more moving than the largest or most sweeping of narratives.

In addition to witnessing such connections, the welcome I received from contributors, students, and others attending the launches not only affirmed the importance of the special issue, but also offered a profound rebuttal to charges that academic boycott is purely negative and punitive, and that it closes down dialogue and offers no positive form of support to Palestinians. The launches made clear that for Palestinians, support for academic boycott is a starting point for dialogue, and offers a form of solidarity that is complementary with making life narratives available outside as well as inside Palestine. This was evident when Rima Najjar, who organized the launch at Al-Quds, spoke of our work together on the USACBI Organizing Collective, and her students, colleagues, and the campus administrators loudly cheered. So, too, at An Najah and Birzeit Universities, students and faculty uniformly embraced boycott as a crucial form of international support, and care. The students at An-Najah also analyzed Malcolm X’s autobiography in the contemporary contexts of Ferguson and Palestine, and as they investigated the links between Israeli settler colonialism and anti-Black racism and militarism in the US, they also explored their differences and the importance of reciprocal solidarities, which may be regarded in this context as the corollary to the comparative state racisms of Israel and the US.

In addition to reinforcing the importance of forging solidarities to resist articulated forms of state racisms and intersecting imperialisms, the launches gave me insights into the significance of generosity. The repeated instances of generosity I experienced in Palestine came
not only in the context of the launches, which were occasions for constituting political solidarity, but also from complete strangers—the woman in a shared cab who delayed her visit with a friend to ensure I safely met my Nablus host at the station; the elderly man in another cab, who sang me Bob Dylan songs as we idled at a checkpoint; such encounters were not exceptions but the rule. This generosity constitutes a refusal to be dehumanized by a nation-state that attempts to deny Palestinians their humanity at every turn, and that institutionalizes divisions between people.

I want to conclude by recounting a dramatic instance of the strength, integrity, and vision that informs this generosity, one that took place on my last night in Palestine, from Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a law professor at Hebrew University and the director of the Gender Studies Program at MADA Al-Carmel. During the panel discussion that she organized, she elaborated on the Biography piece she co-wrote with Sarah Ihmoud. The essay opens with Sarah and Nadera telling of white feminists who turn their backs on them at the border, immediately after a conference in Amman on Palestinian health (378). As Sarah and Nadera are detained, these women, who during the conference had called for solidarity with Palestinians, walk past them as if they are invisible, unwilling to jeopardize their research trip. After the MADA event, Nadera took participants to dinner. Despite the excellent company, I was ill-at-ease. My impending departure was on my mind—both uncertainty about how to get from Ramallah to Ben Gurion, and fear of the airport “security.” I didn’t want to mention my nervousness, not only in light of the panel discussion, but also because it felt trivial when hearing Nadera describe over dinner the daily discrimination, harassment, and humiliations that she experiences from colleagues at Hebrew University. She also told us of the relentless violence Jewish Israeli citizens, soldiers, and police in the Old City of Jerusalem where she lives perpetrate against Palestinian residents, whether it be arresting of small children on suspicion of throwing plastic beads; tipping over coffins as mourners bear them through the streets to mosques; or calling women trash and pushing them into rubbish bins for speaking Arabic—all everyday acts that resonate with those of the hilltop settlers. Nonetheless, when Nadera asked when I was flying out, she was immediately sympathetic. She told me of a white Jewish American friend who was
held up for hours at Ben Gurion because she forgot to remove new shoes from their Ramallah shopping bag. If I ran into difficulties, Nadera said, I must call on her and use her married (Armenian) name. I was overwhelmed by this generosity. I had asked for and been denied far more modest forms of help from Israeli friends of friends. As I have had time to reflect on Nadera’s generosity, I have come to appreciate it as one driven not only by a capacious empathy, but also as an act of solidarity that bespeaks a fierce unwillingness to abdicate one’s humanity in the face of the Israeli state’s machinery of violence and dehumanization.¹⁸ This is the subject of Nadera and Sarah’s essay, and is integral to the home space that is a radical place of love, belonging and becoming that, in the act of theorizing, they realize.

In foregrounding stories that emphasize the importance of generosity, and the power of forming relationships, and engaging in embodied forms of exchange and dialogue, my standpoint is admittedly humanist, but not, I hope, liberal. Liberalism or “soft” Zionism calls for a dialogue between two opposing sides that, in the refusal to acknowledge Israel as a settler colonial state, maintains that state. When instead, the starting point for dialogue and exchange is a shared opposition to intersectional US and Israeli racisms and imperialisms, solidarities, connections, and friendships can emerge that exceed the workings of race and empire, and point towards a freer and more human future. This is why I believe that not only opening institutional spaces for narratives of Palestinians’ lives, but also supporting academic boycott, provide ways humanities scholars can understand and contribute to interconnected anti-racist struggles at home and abroad, and expand rather than curtail academic freedom—and the right to education.

¹ Some of this talk draws on my essay “The Afterlife of the Text: Launching Life in Occupied Palestine,” which just came out in Biography 38.3 (Summer 2015): 396-424.
See “Life in Occupied Palestine,” Biography 37.2 (Spring 2014), co-edited with Ibrahim Aoude and Morgan Cooper.  

These launches are documented on the website for the special website, “Palestinian Lives.” See http://palestinianlives.net/events/.  

For an account of Israel’s 51-day offensive, see Noura Erakat’s “Israel Will Invade Gaza Again, the Only Question Is How Soon,” The Nation (July 8, 2015). http://www.thenation.com/article/israel-will-invade-gaza-again-the-only-question-is-how-soon/  


6 See Erakat.  


9 Forms of solidarity between Blacks in the United States and Palestinians, while not new, became especially vibrant and visible during the summer of 2014, given the convergence of anti-Black violence in Ferguson and the Gaza onslaught, and have strengthened in the past year. The historic “Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine—Summer 2015,” an initiative undertaken by two young activists, Kristian Davis Bailey and Khury Petersen-Smith, was signed by over 1,000 Black artists, activists, scholars, students, and organizations, including Angela Davis, Patrisse Cullors of BlackLivesMatter, Mumia...
Abu Jamal, several student groups, and three of the original signatories of the New York Times ad that ran in the 1970s, created by black activists in support of Palestinians (see Black Solidarity). For perspective on Black-Palestinian solidarity, see “Roundtable on Anti-Blackness and Black-Palestinian Solidarity,” moderated by Noura Erakat in Jadaliyya (June 3, 2015). http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21764/roundtable-on-anti-blackness-and-black-palestinian. See also Keith Feldman’s A Shadow Over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America (U of Minnesota P, 2015), and Alex Lubin’s Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary (U of North Carolina P, 2014).

Perhaps the most dramatic and sordid example of this is the firing of Steven Salaita. As more documents came to light under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the influence of donors is becoming increasingly apparent. See David Palumbo-Liu’s “Steven Salaita, Professor Fired for ‘Civil’ Tweets, Vindicated in Federal Court,” The Nation (Aug. 11, 2015). http://www.thenation.com/article/steven-salaita-professor-fired-for-uncivil-tweets-vindicated-in-federal-court/.


Because Israel, a settler colonial state, has never declared and is always attempting to expand its borders and also because it so thoroughly exercises control over the Occupied Palestinian Territories, making decisions about when to use “Israel” or “Palestine” or both is not always easy. When I use “Israel-Palestine,” it is to mark this problematic in a way that acknowledges both the power Israel wields as a nation-state, and also the claim Palestinians have to their land even as it is occupied.

I discuss this more fully in “Eichmann and his Ghosts: The Unstable Status of the Human, and Uncivil States,” Cultural Critique 88 (Fall 2014): 79-124.


This special issue of Wasafiri, “Beautiful Resistance: A Special Issue on Palestine,” v. 29, issue 4 (2014) was guest edited by Rachel Holmes, who powerfully addressed the issue’s significance alongside contributor Selma Da. The driving force behind the Free Word Centre’s double launch was Wasafiri editor Sharmilla Beezmohun, with support from the Free Word
Centre director Rose Fenton and staff members. The Free Word Centre has archived a podcast of the event: https://www.freewordcentre.com/events/detail/palestinian-voices.

This travel, though, was costly. Upon exiting the West Bank to participate in the London event, she lost her visa permit extension. Israel does not issue work-permit visas in the West Bank for internationals working at Palestinian institutions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs does issue multiple-entry work visas for certain international organizations. The tourist visa extensions arranged for by the university for international faculty through an Israeli military post in Ramallah (Beit Eel) are tourist visas and never multiple entry. In fact, they are stamped with a “not permitted to work,” and “PA areas only.”

While completing this essay, a friend of mine, Lena Ibrahim, posted a request for help on Facebook. A family member of hers who needed to get to the United States to see her seriously ill parent had been denied by Israel the tasreeh or pass she needed to get from the West Bank to the US embassy in Jerusalem, where she would be able to get a visa for this medical emergency. Within an hour of Lena’s posting, responses for help poured in from scores of people, many friends of friends she had never met, some providing tips and legal advice, others offering forms of assistance that put their own safety at risk. This instant outpouring resonated for me with Nadera’s generosity, as did Lena’s words to me about her experience. She wrote, “The cruelty of the Israeli government . . . truly cannot break our spirit as Palestinians but more importantly, I am finding, it cannot break our compassion for one and other.”