

Opinion Article

INTERROGATING ACADEMIA'S LACK OF SUPPORT FOR DECOLONIZATION: BRIDGING DECOLONIAL THEORY AND ACTION

Scholars for Collective Liberation*

Over the past year, mass student movements across academic institutions in the United States advocating for Palestinian liberation have grown. This paper invokes critical reflection and analysis that centers on the experiences of students engaged in advocating and organizing for decolonization in Palestine within higher education. Through a community psychology lens, this paper explores the gap between academia's theoretical support for decolonization and the challenges faced by students actively standing in solidarity with decolonial movements in real time. Reviewing concepts of colonialism and imperialism in the context of Palestine, the current paper highlights various community psychology values in relation to Palestine, such as social justice, wellness, and liberation, and how universities often claim to champion similar values. This paper employs a reflexive case study method to center personal voices and lived experiences as critical sources of knowledge. Data sources utilized include media coverage of student protests that took place during the 2023-2025 academic year and personal experiences from authors. These case studies highlight instances of students being silenced and censored, retaliated against, doxed, and more, for demonstrating solidarity with Palestinians on campus. The findings reveal how deeply embedded academia is within colonial and imperial structures, especially through the collaboration with the state to suppress political speech in support of Palestine, and authors recommend ways to challenge and transform these conditions. Analyzing the contradictions of academia is significant for understanding these institutions' role in society, as education should enrich students with knowledge and critical thinking skills, not contribute to social injustices.

Keywords: Student movements, Palestine, decolonization in academia, community psychology, higher education

1. Introduction

We are scholars who have felt deeply betrayed by U.S. academia's widespread repression, denial, and silencing of the Pro-Palestine student movement. We are Acehnese-Indonesian, Caribbean-Southeast Asian, Black-Haitian American, Palestinian, Coptic Egyptian, and Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) scholars with backgrounds in Community Psychology, Sociology, and Global Health Studies. We ground our political commitments in lived experiences of intergenerational dispossession, colonization, war, and racialized state violence. Our narratives

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are informed by the personal and political struggles of our communities as Muslims, descendants of refugees and revolutionaries, and first-generation students. Our communities have long resisted imperialism and settler colonialism, shaping our scholarly and political commitments. We believe that our liberation is interconnected.

Although advocating against genocide, settler colonialism, apartheid, and occupation comes with risks, we believe in the need to challenge systems of power and show fierce solidarity to the marginalized. As recently passed revolutionary Assata Shakur (1987, p. 139) points out, “Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them.” Instead of appealing to the sensibilities of the status quo, we write this paper to bear witness to the oppression of Palestinians, U.S. academia’s suppression of that reality, and call for universities to live up to the values they claim to uphold.

We ground this paper in the desire to cultivate a brave space where we do not shy away from difficult conversations that make people in power uncomfortable but rather build communities of co-learning and care that requires brave confrontation of injustice (Dutta, 2024). Recent trends in academic critical scholarship recognize the limits of fostering “safe spaces” and challenge us to cultivate brave spaces instead. Safe spaces seek to avoid conflict whereas brave spaces are committed to unpacking dominant narratives, holding awareness of how oppression shapes our interactions, practicing responsiveness rather than defensiveness, and honoring differences while recognizing their roots can be situated in violent, colonial, heteropatriarchal histories (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

We do not accept ignorance and silence as neutrality but rather an active avoidance and complicity to injustice (Ohito, 2016). Safe spaces often receive challenges, critiques, and calls to change structural oppression as attacks on individual safety instead of recognizing that these conversations can be confrontational and uncomfortable for those that hold power and have internalized that status. Brave spaces call for enduring the discomfort that comes with understanding systems of oppression and how one might be an accomplice. We need to recognize that we have all been socialized into oppressive structures and unlearning entails working through feelings of shame and defensiveness to reach accountability.

Through this paper, we seek to analyze how current conditions in academia contradict the institution’s references to decolonization, academic freedom, and social justice. Given that most of us are situated in the discipline of community psychology, we offer a critique of decolonization in that context as well as academia as a whole. Research questions that guide our analysis include:

1. How do the experiences of pro-Palestinian student activists in the U.S. expose academia’s complicity with systems of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism?
2. What material and political interests drive academia’s lack of solidarity with Palestine?
3. How do these contradictions between decolonial theory and practice manifest in the treatment of students within U.S. universities?

2. Historical Context and Colonial Dynamics

A large portion of this section is dedicated to explaining historic and ongoing colonial dynamics in relation to Palestine. Understanding these dynamics is vital to contextualize the lack of support for decolonization within academia. Across the Global North, our institutions, whether they be

academic or governmental, cynically twist the narrative about Palestine to falsely depict cries for liberation and an end to genocide as “anti-Semitic hate speech” by erasing the context of historical and ongoing colonial violence perpetrated by both Israel and the U.S. By explaining these colonial dynamics in depth, we seek to resist this erasure of history and provide context for the case studies to follow.

2.1 Settler Colonial Origins of Israel

Settler colonialism differs from classical colonialism in that it necessitates the destruction and replacement of the indigenous people and their culture rather than just exploiting the land and the people for resources and power. With this definition in mind, we can dive into the settler colonial roots of Israel. The ideology underpinning the State of Israel is known as zionism—a nationalist movement that emerged in Europe during the late 1800s, aimed at the establishment of a Jewish state through the colonization of a land outside of Europe, proposing it as the solution to European anti-Semitism as a means of justifying its settler colonial project (Alroey, 2011). Theodor Herzl, the founder and leader of the zionist movement, considered various territories such as Mozambique, Argentina, and more before focusing on Palestine for colonization (Rovner, 2014). Herzl stressed the importance of disappearing the native population of Palestine in order for zionism to succeed (Khalidi, 2020). In 1897, the first zionist Congress convened in Switzerland and called for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine (Naor, 2002). Since its inception, zionism has explicitly been a colonial enterprise, especially with organizations like the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association (Ussishkin, 1973). The problem that zionism encountered, however, was that the land they wanted to transform into their homeland was already inhabited and would need the help of a great power independent of the native population, which became Britain (Khalidi, 2020).

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the British gained control over Palestine in 1917 and issued the Balfour Declaration, a document that pledged Britain’s support for zionism’s aim of creating a Jewish state in Palestine (Khalidi, 2020). At this time, Palestinian Arabs made up over 90% of the population (Khalidi, 2020). However, despite being the majority, indigenous Palestinians were ignored in this declaration, and their land was promised to others by a foreign government. The declaration launched a colonial conflict aimed at creating an exclusivist national home at the expense of Palestinians. Many natives opposed zionism because they recognized it would require the removal of non-Jewish inhabitants (the majority), leading to resistance against British and zionist colonialism (Khalidi, 2020). Their fears became true when zionist militias, trained by the British army, launched their ethnic cleansing campaign against Palestinians from 1947 to 1948, known as the Nakba, which is Arabic for catastrophe. By the end of it, 750,000 people, which was 80% of Palestine’s native population, were forcibly expelled from the land, and 536 villages were destroyed, massacring thousands (Pappé, 2006). This led to the establishment of the State of Israel, which would have been impossible without the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. The Nakba represents the collective trauma of the Palestinian people and should be seen as a continuous process of dispossession and displacement, not a single event, as can be seen through the ongoing genocide in Gaza, which Palestinians call the second Nakba (Amnesty International, 2024).

2.2 Parallels Between the U.S. and Israel

The ties between the U.S. and Israel are deep, as both countries were founded through European settler colonialism and the ethnic cleansing of the native population in order to gain land and power (Fernandez, 2017). This shared history has resulted in solidarity between Palestinians and colonized people in the U.S., particularly Native Americans and Black people due to many of their shared struggles, such as police brutality, denial of equal rights and self-determination, medical apartheid, land dispossession, exploitation of labor, and mass incarceration (Naber, 2017). These similar experiences are the result of the same colonial system. Today, the U.S. and Israel are close allies due to their shared colonial goals, which can be directly seen through their exchange in military tactics. A report by Jewish Voice for Peace and Researching the American-Israeli Alliance found that thousands of law enforcement officers from the U.S. have been sent to Israel to train with the Israeli military (RAIA & JVP, 2018). The sharing of practices and technology has led to the normalization of mass surveillance, criminalization, and violent repression, impacting mostly Black and Brown people because they are viewed as “threats.” American police officers essentially reproduce the same state violence tactics on marginalized communities in the U.S. that Israel practices on Palestinians.

2.3 Imperialism

Imperialism, particularly U.S. imperialism, is the driving force of global destabilization and conflict (Brito, 2024). U.S. support for Israel is tied to imperialism because of its interest in the petroleum resources in Palestine and SWANA, as well as having dominance over the SWANA region, for which Israel acts as the U.S. outpost (Farbman, 2021). We see bipartisan support for Israel in our political system because many politicians are bribed by foreign lobbies like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) (Kulwin, 2019). The Palestinian genocide is only one example of the devastating consequences of colonialism and imperialism. U.S. imperialism has created a war machine that has brought immense wealth to the U.S. empire at the expense of the Global South (Cheng, 2025). Countries like Sudan, Congo, Yemen, and more are suffering from global imperialism that exploits their people, land, and resources (Brito, 2024). By stripping them of their resources, these countries become dependent on imperialist powers, which creates an unequal power dynamic and reinforces the never-ending cycle of poverty. While the oppression of people in these regions may look different, we can attribute their suffering to the same imperialist system. Global oppression is interconnected, and that is why global solidarity with anti-colonial and anti-imperial causes is imperative to dismantling these harmful structures (Tabar & Desai, 2017).

3. Decolonization in the Context of Academia

Now we wanted to take a critical examination of academia’s iteration of decolonial theory. In Tuck and Yang’s (2012) essay “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” they talk about how decolonization has often been reduced to a change in consciousness rather than material change. We can observe in academia how we are too comfortable limiting decolonization to the realm of

consciousness by “decolonizing the mind” rather than recognizing and showing solidarity to decolonial struggles in real time, like that of Palestinian resistance against settler colonialism. Academia’s references to decolonization through performative gestures like land acknowledgements serve more to soothe settler guilt and complicity with colonial systems rather than enact an actual transfer of land back to indigenous people. These symbolic gestures rarely grapple with the material implications of enacting decolonization (Ahenakew, 2016).

Frantz Fanon’s (1963) *Wretched of the Earth* exposes the contradictions in dominant understandings of decolonization in academia. In settler colonies, violence such as land theft, ethnic cleansing, and displacement has been historically rationalized through narratives that dehumanize indigenous peoples while bestowing divine rights to settlers. For example, the colonizers of the Americas invoked “manifest destiny” to justify conquest while painting Native Americans as savages that needed to be civilized. These narratives get reproduced in different colonial situations and create a double standard where settler violence is normalized yet resistance to that violence is portrayed as “terrorism”. Such framing ignores the colonial roots that contextualize that reaction. Fanon insists that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (Fanon, 1963, p. 35) because it is a natural response of oppressed people defending themselves against the brutality of settler colonialism.

While we admire efforts to diversify and decolonize curriculum, references to decolonization in academia are largely disconnected from urgent colonial struggles. Academia is often complicit in colonial structures by employing the theory performatively through things like land acknowledgements that do not translate to material reality. The dominant silence among intellectuals at universities is not neutral but an active alignment with colonial structures that benefit them. Academia’s suppression of the pro-Palestine movement exposes the colonial roots of the institution. In order for academia to truly decolonize it would have to cease existence because decolonization is not a reform but rather “sets out to change the order of the world” and “is not a discourse but a historical process” (Fanon, 1963, p.36).

4. Values of Community Psychology: Principles and Practice Gaps

Community psychology rests on values such as equity, inclusion, respect for diversity, empowerment, collaboration, and collective well-being (Prilleltensky, 2001; Kloos et al., 2012). These principles are widely recognized in academic programs and professional practice, guiding psychologists to address inequality, support marginalized groups, and promote systemic change. However, a persistent gap exists between the discipline’s stated values and their consistent application. In the U.S., community psychology often emphasizes institutional change and academic–community partnerships, while in the Global South it tends to focus on liberation, decolonization, and grassroots struggles. Both contexts share a commitment to justice, yet their priorities are shaped by different socio-political realities. This variation sometimes leads to cognitive dissonance, where values are proclaimed but not fully practiced.

Palestine highlights this tension. While community psychology has been vocal about other struggles against oppression, it has not consistently addressed the realities of occupation, displacement, and systemic inequality Palestinians endure. This silence creates the perception of double standards, where justice is defended in some contexts but neglected in others. This does

not mean that community psychology is without tools or potential. On the contrary, the field's core values provide a strong foundation for engaging with Palestine through a justice-oriented, multidisciplinary approach. By drawing on its traditions of liberation, empowerment, and community collaboration, community psychology can take a more active role in supporting Palestinian communities, amplifying their voices, and addressing systemic injustice. Doing so would not only align the discipline with its stated principles but also strengthen its global credibility and relevance.

4.1 Community Psychology in the Palestinian Context

The central issue in Palestine begins with the undeniable fact that Palestinians are the original owners of the land. Any theoretical calls for justice, equality, or coexistence cannot be understood outside this reality. Appeals to equal rights in the abstract risk overlooking the most fundamental principle: the right of the indigenous Palestinian people to reclaim their land and to resist the historical and ongoing processes of settlement and displacement that privileges a settler population. The struggle is not merely about equal access to land, water, or resources but of restoring land to its rightful owners and ending the structures of occupation that deny Palestinians their most basic rights. The ongoing genocide in Palestine underscores the urgency of this struggle. The deliberate targeting of civilians, the martyrdom of Palestinian students and scholars, and the complete destruction of all universities in Gaza represent not only crimes against humanity but also the systematic erasure of Palestinian knowledge, culture, and future leadership. Thus, structural violence extends beyond physical displacement to the destruction of intellectual and social foundations.

Within this context, community psychology values require an integrated and justice-driven framework. Such a framework must confront chronic structural inequalities, protect human rights, including self-determination, freedom of movement, and protection from systematic violence, and demand accountability through international legal frameworks (UN OCHA, 2020). Legal reforms must address historical injustices, including the right of return, while centering Palestinian sovereignty as the foundation for peace. Collective well-being also depends on preserving culture, language, and identity while expanding access to healthcare and addressing the widespread mental health crisis caused by war and displacement. Empowerment and participation remain essential, requiring investment in grassroots leadership, community activism, and Palestinian-led initiatives that reflect local needs and values. Masud, Kayyal, Khaled, and Al Najjar (2022) remembered the life and legacy of the Palestinian community psychologist Ibrahim Makkawi. Makkawi has pioneered a decolonial and liberation-based framework, emphasizing the political roots of psychological suffering under occupation (Atallah & Masud, 2023). His work illustrates how collective resistance, community engagement, and participatory research can shape both therapeutic practices and liberation strategies. Ultimately, translating these values into practice requires coordinated political advocacy, international solidarity, and educational and developmental strategies that directly support the Palestinian struggle for justice, liberation, and sustainable futures.

5. Methods

This paper employs a reflexive case study method to interrogate the gap between academia's theoretical support for decolonization and its material actions toward student organizers and liberation movements. We center our personal voices as students, activists, and emerging scholars within Global North universities, treating lived experiences as critical sources of knowledge. Data sources utilized for the case studies include media coverage of 2023-2025 campus protests, personal experiences, and anecdotes. Our method is grounded in critical reflexivity, acknowledging our positionalities as scholars, activists, and student organizers embedded within these struggles. Our unique positionalities allow us to critically analyze academia's contradictions with its theoretical support for decolonization alongside its often repressive actions.

The three scenarios were intentionally selected to demonstrate the progression from epistemic violence to state violence that Global North universities have enacted on students. The first scenario highlights the erasure of Palestinian epistemologies from academic institutions in the U.S.; the second demonstrates the escalation into surveillance, silencing, and repression; and the third shows the targeting of individual student leaders with extreme state violence. Following the case studies, we offer analyses of the presented situations. The analytic strategy used to make meaning of these cases is dialogic reflection. We draw our reflections and analyses of these case studies from real-world experiences, observations, and empirical data on student organizing, liberation movements, and institutional responses. Our method prioritizes situated knowledge, challenging traditional academic detachment by explicitly acknowledging our stakes in these reflections. Through a reflexive lens we aim to offer a framework for scholars and activists to challenge institutions for decolonial projects.

We do not see the values, assumptions, and lived experiences that guided our selection and analysis of case scenarios as a limitation. Neutrality was not the aim with this paper but rather depth and honesty that goes beyond complicity towards solidarity. That being said, one limitation is our case studies are based in the U.S. which might not apply to dynamics in other institutional settings. Another is this paper looks specifically at the Palestinian decolonial struggle which may not generalize to other indigenous struggles in the Global South. Lastly, the cases presented in this paper are recent and ongoing so future developments may expand the interpretations we provide.

6. Findings: Reflexive Case Analyses

6.1 Case scenario 1

A group of pro-Palestinian college students at a private university in the U.S. began organizing on campus to raise awareness about the plight of the Palestinian people and advocate for their liberation. They planned a variety of initiatives to bring students together in solidarity including issuing a statement across different spaces in the university, organizing a teach-in, and creating an official pro-Palestine student organization. The first event they planned was a student-led teach-in on campus. The student organizers went through all the proper channels at the university to get the event approved, however, they were met with censorship from faculty, verbal attacks from peers and visitors on campus, and intimidation from university administrators. In one

instance, the students were warned by university administrators to not say certain traditional Palestinian liberation chants due to complaints received from parents. This type of censorship and intimidation coming from faculty and administrators would continue throughout the school year and influenced new institutional regulations around demonstrations and student advocacy. Students were now required to be affiliated with a registered student organization in order to protest and would have to pay for police presence at demonstrations, which was implemented after the student organizers were reprimanded for organizing their own system of protection from agitators during the student-led teach-in. Another incident occurred when the students collaborated on issuing a statement of solidarity with Palestinians facing apartheid, occupation, and genocide. The statement was shared by a graduate student to a research team group chat that traditionally espouses decolonial and antiracist theory in its projects. However, the primary investigator (PI) removed the statement from the group chat, without any warning, because students with zionist views on the research team took offense, and shut down a proposed dialogue on genocide saying, “People are not ready for this conversation,” “I must protect students’ right to feel safe,” and “We are not experts on this issue and people have different versions of history.”

6.1.1 Reflection and analysis: Safe Space for Whom?

Universities in the U.S. claim to be spaces where students can practice academic freedom to question, criticize, and dissent without threats of censorship or retaliation, even when challenging dominant narratives. The repression of resistance against the genocide of Palestinian people (United Nations, 2024) across public and private universities in the U.S. demonstrates a concerning trend where there are obvious limits to the values universities profess. This case exhibits how quickly advocacy towards people suffering under conditions of apartheid (Lynk, 2022), occupation (United Nations, 2024), and ethnic cleansing (Albanese, 2023) can be repressed under the guise of university regulations to “protect” individual students, but all it really does is protect systems of power like capitalism and imperialism.

Universities often display bias against students challenging oppressive systems, placing red tape in their way to hinder their efforts. While these regulations may appear neutral or routine, they often function as bureaucratic barriers designed to suppress progressive movements on campus. It is concerning that advocacy for the victims of genocide can be twisted into hate speech instead of recognizing the dignity, humanity, and right to freedom that Palestinian people deserve. This society has emboldened ideologies of zionism that paint pro-Palestine activists as anti-Semitic instead of acknowledging the long history of oppression Palestinians have faced especially with the help of the U.S. government (Halabi, 2024).

Students often fall in love with academic institutions for challenging them to think critically with paradigms such as critical race, decolonial, and queer theory, but what happens when these theories lack application in their surrounding environments? Concepts like decoloniality, for example, implies a material transfer of land back to native peoples, yet universities emphasize and hard stop at land acknowledgements. It is concerning that universities want to treat colonization as a thing of the past instead of supporting present day decolonial struggles. At most there are efforts to restrict decolonization to the realm of consciousness, painting our primary task as an effort to “decolonize the mind” rather than applying decolonization to material reality.

This complicity, censorship, erasure, and repression that targets Palestinian epistemologies in the Global North parallels scholasticide in Gaza that attempts to destroy Palestinian educational infrastructure. It also demonstrates the colonial matrix of power that seeks to control what counts as valid knowledge, who is worthy of producing scholarship, and which kinds are marginalized (Quijano, 2000). These contradictions are not accidental but show that academia is a colonial institution that is designed to protect their image and eliminate threats to their power.

6.2 Case Scenario 2

U.S. universities have demonstrated complicity in settler colonialism and the ongoing genocide in Gaza through financial and epistemic means. Many institutions maintain investments in weapons manufacturers, receive Israeli-funded grants, and engage in academic collaborations that reinforce occupation. Simultaneously, universities regulate knowledge and political expression, surveilling, silencing, or punishing Palestinian solidarity while protecting pro-Israel organizations. These dynamics led students to organize encampments demanding accountability.

At a private university, hundreds of students established a Gaza Solidarity Encampment, pitching tents out on a lawn on their campus and calling for divestment from companies tied to Israel. In response, administrators authorized local police in full riot gear to arrest over 100 students. Many faced suspension and lost access to essential resources, including housing, dining, healthcare, and more.

This pattern is not isolated as students at a public university in the U.S. spent months demanding disclosure and divestment from Israeli-funded research, weapons manufacturers, and partnerships with zionist organizations. Protestors also noted the differential treatment between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine organizations on campus, with the latter often surveilled, silenced, sanctioned, or denied access to campus spaces. After a week-long peaceful encampment, the protest was disbanded, with several arrested.

Within these encampments, students created Liberated Zones—spaces for decolonial community building through sharing art, food, literature, and music. These zones embodied alternative educational and social structures grounded in solidarity and collective care, enacting the principles of decolonial and anti-colonial education that universities often teach but fail to uphold in practice.

6.2.1 Reflection and analysis: Universities as colonial enforces and the reimaging of decolonial education

As student activists, we were not surprised by the reactions of administrators to Gaza Solidarity encampments. Long before tents were pitched, students wrote letters, requested meetings, and organized teach-ins. Encampments emerged after administrators ignored these efforts and the values expected of institutions of critical inquiry: to bear witness and to resist complicity in colonial, imperial, and capitalist structures. Rather than listening and learning from students, administrators chose suppression, legitimizing violence and reproducing the logic of settler states to preserve ties to capital and empire.

From what we have seen, universities claim to cultivate critical dialogue, yet punish students who enact those critiques. For us, these experiences have revealed how the university's role as

regulators of knowledge, policing which forms of resistance are considered legitimate versus extremist. Institutional calls for “neutrality” are colonial tactics designed to erase power asymmetries. Universities fear truths that challenge the legitimacy of their power. Thus, complicity is not only material but epistemic. Universities are not neutral actors; they operate as colonial enforces who regulate what can be taught, voiced, or made visible. Calls for Palestinian freedom are mischaracterized as anti-Semitism, illustrating how epistemic borders are enforced through silencing, surveillance, and punishment. Only dissent that does not threaten institutional power is tolerated.

Students were labeled “terrorists” for expressing solidarity with Palestine, yet it was the university that imposed terror through physical violence, institutional silencing, and suspending basic rights like healthcare, housing, and freedom of speech. Students were not simply protesting, they were challenging the status quo of the very foundations of institutional power, exposing the university’s ties to the war machine that protects capital, control knowledge, and suppress global solidarity for Palestine (Makkawi, 2013). The repression of solidarity for Gaza illuminates the contradiction of the “liberal university” committed to knowledge and justice in theory, but invested in the empire in practice.

Student-led protests have historically driven social change in the U.S., from Vietnam War protests to the South African anti-apartheid movement, confronting universities’ role in reproducing colonial power. Gaza solidarity encampments continue that tradition, emerging as decolonial practices that embody alternative visions of education. There is a stark juxtaposition between the decolonial scholarship taught in classrooms and the social justice principles many universities claim to uphold, versus the student-led decolonial education present in the encampments. Within these Liberated Zones, students enacted the principles of decolonial education, in sharp contrast to the hollow rhetoric of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) espoused by institutions that reinforce colonialism (The Love Toward Liberation Collective, 2023).

Reimagining a liberated education requires more than symbolic inclusion; it demands structural transformation and difficult dialogues (Atallah & Masud, 2023). We envision an education that is explicitly anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-patriarchy, and anti-capitalist in practice, not as buzzwords, but as commitments to structural change. Universities must confront how global imperialism is linked to local injustices: school pushout, over-policing, the militarization of classrooms, and the targeting of poor youth for military recruitment. As Davis et al. (2016) reminds us, all systems of oppression are interconnected, and so are our struggles for liberation.

Attending class at a university while children in Gaza have had their school year cancelled because too many of their peers were murdered is deeply dystopian. Encampments as prototypes of decolonial education are the latest reminder that liberation will not be handed down by colonial institutions, but must be built through solidarity and collective struggle.

6.3 Case scenario 3

Consider the case of a Palestinian student activist at a private university. They are a legal permanent resident who was involved in organizing pro-Palestine encampments. One day, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agents in unmarked clothing took the student from their apartment on university property without a warrant and put them into a detention center. The student had no criminal charges, and the State Department admitted that their detainment was

because presence in the U.S. “compromises a compelling United States foreign policy interest.” A day before, the student emailed their university that they feared for their life and begged for protection and legal support following an online doxxing campaign led by university affiliates. This email was ignored by the university. The student has since been released after 104 days in detention, causing them to miss the birth of their first child, but remains at risk of deportation. However, this is not an isolated incident. Another Palestinian legal permanent resident and activist involved in pro-Palestine demonstrations at their university was detained by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents during their Citizenship interview. In another instance, a Turkish national on a F-1 student visa was captured on video being detained by masked, plainclothes ICE agents. Their arrest occurred after co-writing a campus op-ed criticizing their university’s response to Palestine protests.

6.3.1 Reflection and analysis: The Weaponization of State Violence to Silence Pro-Palestinian Advocates

This case demonstrates how higher education often fails to uphold the ideals it claims, especially when they conflict with state and geopolitical power. Not only does this betray the fundamental tenets of community psychology, but it exemplifies academia’s entrenchment in colonial and imperial power structures, despite the growing rhetoric of “decolonization.” Students being forcibly disappeared by the U.S. government for their political speech in support of Palestinian liberation sets a deeply troubling precedent. This new effort to deport immigrant students protesting for Palestine stems from the U.S. attempting to salvage its increasingly unpopular foreign policy interests after years of student movements challenging the Palestinian genocide funded by U.S. tax dollars. The unprecedented visibility of the Palestinian plight in the U.S. is perceived as a threat by the government, which relied on the population remaining ignorant about Palestine. Thus, it has resorted to a crackdown on freedom of speech under the guise of fighting “anti-Semitism,” “terrorism,” and “anti-American activities.”

This scenario can be understood through the colonial matrix of power, a global system of domination that persists after formal colonization and operates across multiple domains to suppress Palestinian solidarity (Quijano, 2000). The control of knowledge and subjectivity is evident through how the university dictates which systems of knowledge are legitimate. Universities have continuously labeled the Palestinian cause as “complicated” and “controversial” rather than a liberatory movement rooted in historical settler colonialism. It sets the bar for permissible expression—genocidal zionist sentiments circulate freely, while anti-zionist rhetoric is censored and marked as threatening. This selective neutrality erases indigenous Palestinian perspectives from academic discourse. Academia’s use of labels such as “terrorism” and “anti-Semitism” to describe pro-Palestine advocacy, often without credible evidence, is a tactic to discredit the cause and deem its actors illegitimate. This mirrors colonial practices of criminalizing indigenous resistance to justify suppression. Overall, universities use their institutional power to enforce a Eurocentric, colonial perspective of Palestine.

The control of the economy is apparent in the financial motivations underpinning the university’s response to pro-Palestine actions. Many students protested their university’s investments in the Israeli occupation. Universities rely on contributions from donors and politicians who can threaten to withdraw funding if pro-Palestine protests continue. Violent

suppression through deportation demonstrates a desire to protect institutional wealth and prestige over student safety and freedom of expression, while ignoring its complicity in the genocide of Palestinians. The control of authority is perhaps the most glaring aspect. The university cooperated with state authorities to criminalize and dismantle pro-Palestine activism. Collaborating with ICE to suppress dissent reveals how academic institutions can be extensions of state control. The specific targeting of immigrant students reveals how colonialism singles out racialized subjects to intimidate them and others into silence for daring to resist. An academic institution with integrity would protect students' right to free speech rather than comply with fascist state orders.

Analyzing this case through the colonial matrix of power reveals that this was not an exception or an isolated incident, but rather the predictable outcome of a colonial institution functioning as designed. It reflects a persistent effort to silence those who dare to challenge the state. By refusing to intervene, the university revealed its complicity in reproducing colonial violence. Its silence was not neutral—it was an active alignment with state power. When universities tolerate the abduction of their students under the guise of foreign policy, they reveal how deeply embedded academia is within colonial and imperial structures. Universities simultaneously present themselves as havens of critical inquiry while collaborating with the state to police dissent. This contradiction highlights the limits of academia's rhetorical commitment to decolonization and the urgent need to push beyond symbolic gestures toward material solidarity with the oppressed. This means reconsidering institutional loyalties, redistributing power, and centralizing the safety and autonomy of the most vulnerable.

7. Discussion

The repression of the pro-Palestine student movement has exposed academia's ties to the capitalist-imperialist state. Rather than serving student interests, universities answer to the board of trustees and wealthy donors, functioning more as corporate businesses designed to profit from imperialist projects rather than as institutions of critical free thinking. Examples like universities having military contracts producing weapons for Israel (The Anti-War Initiative, n.d.; MIT Faculty Newsletter, 2024), as well as the use of police force against pro-Palestine student activists show academia's interconnection with the state. Nevertheless, U.S. universities have long engaged with militarized knowledge and research, which has intensified since 9/11 (Giroux, 2008).

The unwillingness of universities nationwide to divest from Israel's occupation demonstrates how such demands threaten their material interests aligned with the ruling class rather than oppressed masses. Universities reproduce capitalist ideology, training students to compete for spots in the capitalist class that at best creates reforms within the system, rather than equipping them with critical tools and class analysis to enable people to transform the root of these conditions. The case studies, alongside personal experiences of censorship, silencing, and harassment have revealed the need for students to unite with the working class to dismantle the systems of capitalism and imperialism that are driving this genocide and the U.S.'s complicity. It is our duty as scholars to examine the institution we operate within critically and hold it accountable to the values and theories it espouses.

Across the three case studies, we learn that it is mostly students of color who risk disciplinary action for solidarity with Palestine. Marginalized students have been systematically dehumanized, unheard, and disciplined as “the other” in academic spaces (Fernandez et. al., 2023; The Love Toward Liberation Collective, 2023). Dehumanization is a colonial tactic used to degrade the colonized to feel inferior and cause perpetual trauma (Atallah & Masud, 2023).

Another important theme between the various scenarios is representation in academia. While universities champion values like diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), their actions reveal an adherence to colonial and capitalist structures, masking systemic oppression under the guise of progress. Representation in leadership with people of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds is necessary but insufficient for liberation if those in power uphold the status quo. This became clear as institutions, led by leaders from diverse backgrounds, violently shut down student protests. DEI initiatives frequently prioritize visibility over dismantling institutional racism and economic injustice, making these kinds of symbolic gestures meaningless when student protests are met with repression. Yet, as Audre Lorde (2018) reminds us, “Without community, there is no liberation”. Despite the response from university administration and government officials, the students continue to resist. Liberation can only be brought upon through the collective struggle and solidarity of oppressed groups. The resilience of student organizers underscores that true change requires solidarity and systemic transformation not merely Black and Brown faces in high places.

Despite these case scenarios that show universities’ widespread repression, in some other universities, we have seen more alignment between decolonial theory and practice. At one metropolitan private university, a group of faculty members decided to hold a virtual emergency teach-in at their campus titled, “Palestine unveiled: Examining the war in Gaza and its far-reaching consequences”. The speakers reviewed the historical, political, and social aspects of the situation happening in Gaza and connected it to community psychologists’ role in applying community psychology’s values in such circumstances. Similarly, on the eighth day of a Gaza solidarity encampment at a public university, student protestors peacefully ended their encampment after the university President met the demands for divestment. This created a new “Policy on Socially Responsible Investments” that “excludes direct investments in corporations that profit from genocide, ethnic cleansing, or that violate fundamental human rights.” These kinds of actions give hope that decolonization in academic spaces is possible when they exercise their power to do so.

Connecting decolonial theory and practice requires universities to consider the perspectives of folk from marginalized racial and class identities as well indigenous perspectives. Yet many institutions adopt a progressive except for Palestine stance, exposing the hypocrisy of celebrating diversity while silencing Palestinian solidarity. This contradiction is reinforced by the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2016) definition of anti-Semitism which conflates critique of the Israeli state with anti-Jewish hatred, to delegitimize calls for Palestinian liberation. As scholars committed to decolonial practice, we must remain critical of our academic institutions that reproduce colonial logics by rejecting these framings and distinguish between anti-Semitism and critique of state violence.

Reimagining a decolonial academic space requires uplifting knowledge rooted in people’s struggle for liberation, justice, and self-determination, while interrogating narratives that legitimize colonialism (Dutta, 2024). Furthermore, we must co-create counter-spaces that resist colonial and repressive forces (Atallah & Masud, 2023). Scholars, particularly in community

psychology, must reflect upon the social justice and well-being values that they teach and apply them in the context of Palestine (The Love Toward Liberation Collective, 2023). Imperialism and white supremacy have a strong grip on our world, which is evident through the impact of the U.S. and its allies: their histories of violence, the culture they produce and impose, the values they uphold, and the ways they control, consume, and distribute resources. Scholars in the U.S. and the Global North must reckon with our own complicity in these systems.

8. Radical Dreams and Desires

Since 1948, Palestinians have lived under Israeli apartheid, settler colonialism, and the Nakba. Palestinians have documented their experiences for decades, yet only recently has widespread circulation of content from Palestinian journalists on social media shifted global narratives. After over 75 years of violence, Palestinians remain unshaken in their identities and belief in their fundamental rights to self-determination. Our hope is with the Palestinians, who will be liberated within our lifetime. We can no longer be complicit in the systems of oppression that fund genocide with our tax dollars. We are the system that needs to change and it must be radical. Real change requires collective thought and collective action. As scholars committed to decolonial practice, we call on universities to move beyond symbolic gestures and enact material solidarity. Our demands are:

1. Accountability beyond land acknowledgement: Universities must recognize the cost of silence and explicitly name and address ongoing oppression, including the occupation of Palestinians (Makkawi, 2013).
2. Material solidarity: Universities must divest from weapons manufacturers and corporations that profit from war, and reinvest resources in programs that sustain the learning and well-being of marginalized communities and decolonial education, and provide divestment metrics and audits for transparency and accountability.
3. Spaces for critical dialogue: Universities must cultivate brave spaces where students can engage in critical conversations even when these challenge institutional power or cause discomfort for those in positions of privilege. Students should be able to confront dominant narratives, name oppression, and advocate for change without fear of repression.
4. Curricular transformation: Research and teaching curriculum must extend beyond theory. Universities must make a conscious effort to reshape courses to center anti-colonial epistemologies, interrogate media and text-book bias, and connect present colonial struggles to the classroom.
5. Honest pedagogy: Educators must model and encourage critical thinking. Be honest with students, question single narratives, and help students confront their own biases, refusing the false neutrality that upholds injustice.
6. Universities must move beyond token gestures to create education that is transformative in nature—one that celebrates the ideas, cultures, traditions and contributions of diverse groups of people while confronting the colonial and imperial structures in which they are embedded.

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The authors declare no financial or institutional conflicts of interest exist. Our work is situated on Turtle Island and is fundamentally driven by a commitment to decolonial solidarity. We commit to critical self-reflection on our privilege and standpoint in relation to the systems critiqued herein, acknowledging the foundational role of settler colonialism.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Apartheid: A system of colonial domination that enforces separation and control through laws, borders, and knowledge regulation. In the Palestinian context, it extends beyond physical segregation to the capture of land, memory, and truth, aiming to normalize dispossession and delegitimize resistance. (Atallah & Masud, 2023).

Classic colonialism: Classical colonialism occurs when a dominant power establishes control over and exploits the inhabitants and resources of a foreign land (Pappé, 2017)

Cognitive Dissonance: The discomfort people feel when their beliefs conflict with new information often leads them to rationalize or deny it.

Decolonization: Reclaiming land, recovering, and restoring a new humanity denied by the colonizers.

Folx: A way to write "folks" as an inclusive term for commonly marginalized groups

Global North: Countries in the northern hemisphere that are generally associated with industrialized nations that have higher standards of living, advanced economies, and greater political and economic power on the global stage as a legacy of colonialism (Oglesby, 1969)

Global South: Countries in the southern hemisphere that are generally associated with less economically developed countries with history of colonization and resources exploitation by the Global North (Oglesby, 1969)

Imperialism: Advanced stage of capitalism characterized by the dominance of monopolies that export capital internationally and the divided territories across the globe among capitalist powers (Lenin, 1939)

Liberation: Breaking the chain of personal and social oppression through collective action, rooted in political awareness and community critical conscientization.

Scholasticide: A term coined by Palestinian Scholar Karma Nabulsi, which refers to the systematic and intentional destruction of education infrastructures and personnel in Palestine by Israeli forces (Ahmad & Vulliamy, 2009).

Settler colonialism: A violent system that dehumanizes the Indigenous and native populations to justify domination and violence that is both physical and psychological.

Situated Knowledge: Knowledge is shaped by a specific and partial perspective of the social, cultural, and historical location and experiences of the person who produce it (Haraway, 1988)