Opinion Article

CONFRONTING INSTITUTIONAL SILENCES: A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE TO GENOCIDE AND EPISTEMIC ERASURE

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Across universities in the Global North, institutional resources, silence, and complicity have actively supported Israel's ongoing settler colonial violence and genocide against Palestinian people. Within this troubling landscape, our small collective of students, faculty, and staff has engaged in deliberate, embodied acts of refusal to disrupt institutionalized silence and presumed neutrality that normalize settler colonial violence. Weaving together personal reflections, observations, and artistic modalities, we chronicle our collective's effort to disrupt institutional violence perpetuated by the mantle of presumed neutrality on our campus – seeking to disrupt the deafening silence around Palestinian struggles and resistance. We also reflect on the effects and affects around our efforts to bring Palestinian struggles into focus at a small academic conference. The juxtaposition of these interventions helps unmask the larger project of epistemicide perpetuated by the Global North academy – the systematic destruction or suppression of knowledge systems, ways of knowing, and modes of learning, particularly those associated with marginalized or colonized groups. While we recognize pivotal moments that disrupt the silent (and often violent) status quo, we also contend with the complex challenges of solidarity praxis. We offer this paper as an invitation shaped by the tensions, contradictions, and imperfections of doing this work from our implicated positionalities. The practices we describe are fragmented, situated, and incomplete, but they gesture toward otherwise possibilities: toward worlds where solidarity is not performance but practice, where art is not peripheral but central to resistance, and where knowledge emerges from feeling, relation, and refusal.

***Keywords**: Scholasticide, epistemicide, settler colonialism, transformative solidarity, decolonial praxis*

1. Introduction

Universities, especially in the Global North, tend to present themselves as bastions of free inquiry. Yet, we have witnessed the stark exposure of universities' complicity, silence/silencing, and repression when confronted with settler colonial violence and genocide, specifically the current Israeli assault on Palestine/Gaza with ideological and material support from Western nations. Institutional neutrality, long upheld as a higher principle (Kalven Committee, 1967), is systematically weaponized as a technology of colonial-imperial power and warfare. In fact, each

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day unravels the many contrary and sinister policies lurking in the in-between spaces of this much-prided neutrality; more pronounced than ever is the active investment in and profiteering of US universities from the Israeli settler colonial project (Puar, 2014; Salaita, 2014). Over the last two years, silence, erasure, distortion, and denial of ongoing violence against Palestinian people have been pervasive across university campuses in the United States. This is taking place against the unfolding of scholasticide – the targeted destruction of Palestinian centers of learning in Gaza and the killing of those engaged in critical knowledge production, including university professors, students, and journalists, thus threatening to obliterate Palestinian cultural memory and intellectual heritage (Jebril, 2024; The Palestinian Feminist Collective, 2024). It does not come as a surprise then, that the Palestinian struggle against settler colonial violence has compelled us to direct our gaze to the place that universities assume in the larger socio-political fabric. It behooves us to ask difficult questions about how we live and act as members of such institutions in these times. It is precisely these dynamic processes of questioning, feeling, struggling, building, and acting that we have sought to write about in this paper. Please refer to Appendix A for a glossary of key terms to help clarify concepts crucial to understanding institutional complicity.

We write as part of a small collective of students, faculty, and staff at our university campus who coalesced in our shared rage over institutional silence, complicity, and dehumanizing rhetoric in the face of Israel's genocidal assault against the Palestinian people. The formation of our Palestine solidarity collective was not an isolated action but rooted in long-standing relationships of care, community, and decolonial praxis that we had cultivated through our co-struggles against the marginality imposed on us by dominant epistemic and institutional structures (see Appendix B to learn more about coloniality and anti-Palestinian racism in US universities). This paper emerges from a multivocal collective praxis. Multivocality, as both method and ethic, is an inclusive approach that threads together many voices into a whole (Einola et al., 2020; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). We engaged in a multivocal process to write this paper, weaving together written and spoken dialogue, situated reflections, shared struggle, and resistance art. This paper is not a compilation of individual narratives or a linear history of our group; rather, it centers the broader implications of our context, actions, and the structural forces we seek to confront.

We chronicle our collective's effort to disrupt institutional violence perpetuated by the mantle of presumed neutrality on our campus – seeking to disrupt the deafening silence around Palestinian struggles and resistance. We also reflect on the effects and affects around our efforts to bring Palestinian struggles into focus at a small academic conference. The juxtaposition of these interventions—one on a seemingly apolitical campus and the other in an academic community that prides itself on its progressive and critical values—helps unmask the larger project of epistemicide. We write this paper as an intervention to shatter institutionalized silences – an embodied, politicized act of witnessing and world-making. We write from our implicated positionalities – members of the US (and Global North) academy that is not only deeply complicit, but also a willing perpetrator of the genocide of Palestinian people (Author Collective Scăpa شاهد et al., 2024; Maira, 2018; Qutami & Zahzah, 2020).

In this current sociopolitical moment where naming genocide invariably results in surveillance, criminalization, and reprisal, we acknowledge the uneven risks borne by members of our collective, particularly those with precarious immigration or employment statuses. We calibrate

our political commitments with an ethos of care, choosing to protect the safety and dignity of our members. Therefore, we intentionally withhold certain details of our identities, relationships, tensions, and decision-making processes. These are not omissions, but affirmations of the sacredness of our collective life; what we choose not to disclose is part of our refusal to render our lives fully available for institutional or intellectual consumption (see Atallah & Dutta, 2022; Pillow, 2003). Perhaps there will be a time when we write about these intimate contours of our organizing; for now, we hold them close as part of our fugitive practice (Ihmoud, 2023).

What follows then is a weaving together of theory, context, and lived struggle. We begin by elaborating the decolonial frameworks that ground our praxis. From this grounding, we turn to a critical reading of the sociopolitical and affective landscape of the university, examining the structural violences that shape it and the affective costs of navigating it. We then move into two moments of collective disruption, which serve as case studies of refusal, reclamation, and the complexities of sustaining resistance in the face of co-optation and silencing. These instances are not presented as neat or linear narratives of success (or failure), but as sites of friction, learning, and possibility. Finally, we reflect on the ruptures these moments produce – how they gesture toward new questions, unfinished solidarities, and openings for imagining worlds otherwise. We therefore offer a politically intimate account that insists on the urgency of naming, feeling, and resisting together.

2. Reclaiming How We Know: Praxis, Affect, and Accountability

In this section, we discuss the epistemological approaches that support embodied, collective, and relational ways of knowing. Our work is informed by the Palestine analytic (Qutami & Zahzah, 2020), which contends that Palestine should not be understood as a geographically bounded or exceptional case, but as a critical lens through which to examine the structural logics of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and global imperialism. Rather than aspiring for assimilation within hegemonic political categories, the Palestine analytic reclaims resistance on decolonial and anti-capitalist terms, emphasizing refusal, fugitivity, and the insurgent redefinition of political language. Erakat's (2020) concept of *political intimacy* complements this framework by emphasizing that solidarity is not simply formed through shared ideology or experience, but through affective, embodied, and interpersonal ties forged in struggle. Political intimacy involves recognizing our fates as intertwined and acting accordingly, often across lines of difference. Viewed through the Palestine analytic, political intimacy becomes a methodology that enables us to understand the world from within resistance. Together, these frameworks reject depoliticized allyship or identity-based solidarity, emphasizing instead the collective labor and affective and ethical investments in working toward liberatory futures. We engage these frameworks as epistemological commitments that shape our collective praxis, including co-writing this paper.

We also draw upon the concepts of *participatory witnessing* (Author Collective Scăpa شاهد et al., 2024) and *epistemic witnessing* (Pillow, 2019) as critical methodological approaches. The Author Collective Scăpa شاهد theorizes participatory witnessing as a collective, affective, and situated mode of resistance aimed at challenging the institutional silencing of Palestinian voices in academia. They argue that witnessing is not a detached act of observation but an embodied engagement that insists on visibility, care, and memory-making in the face of violent censorship.

As politically implicated subjects who refuse complicity in institutional erasure, we work to resist structures that attempt to render dissent invisible. This resonates with Pillow's (2019) conception of witnessing as a relational, ethical, and situated act that involves discomfort, self-implication, and a refusal of closure. Pillow critiques the neoliberal tendency to sanitize or instrumentalize witnessing, especially within institutional contexts that seek to depoliticize the experiences of marginalized communities. Both frameworks reframe witnessing as a co-constituted process of accountability, relationality, and action. They allow us to write from within the political, affective, and ethical entanglements of struggle. By adopting witnessing as praxis, we commit ourselves to witness *with,* rather than *about* or *for* Palestinians at the frontlines of decolonial struggle.

Sara Ahmed's theory of affect and emotions offers us another feminist and decolonial methodology. Ahmed (2013) has examined how feelings "stick" to bodies, objects, and discourses in ways that reproduce or resist power. This circulation of affect shapes the social world, often marking racialized, gendered, or queer bodies as out of place or as sources of discomfort. Emotions such as fear, disgust, and love do not arise in isolation; they are formed by histories of colonialism, patriarchy, and racism, and play a crucial role in maintaining social boundaries and hierarchies. Tracing the circulation of affect, then, becomes a method for understanding how power is felt, embodied, and upheld. This involves critically attending to emotions deemed as private or dangerous—such as grief, frustration, and rage—as politically meaningful responses to systemic violence and exclusion; and, thus reclaimed as terrains of decolonial feminist knowledge production. As Ka Canham (2023) writes:

> "TO BE RELEGATED TO THE MARGINS is to be in a state of being perpetually emotionally charged. Feelings coursing near the surface. Catching feelings. Shackled to emotions. In a defensive posture. Touchy. Surly. Chips on our shoulders. Charged in ways that those who are fully human do not have to be. Charged in ways that surprise others. Seeing into the past and future and connecting invisible but sedimented histories of trauma. Over-analyzing. I write this book from the place of catching feelings. From the chip on my prickly body."

We too write from this "place of catching feelings." Reclaiming how we know is, for us, a refusal of academic disembodiment and a commitment to knowing with solidarity, emotion, and resistance. We now turn our attention to the sociopolitical and affective landscape of the university within/against which we strive to engage in these forms of knowing.

3. Dangerous Knowledge: Enacting and Theorizing Resistance in/from the Academic Ghetto

Sweepin' the floors
And runnin' to stores
But all those old heads
Would talk to me About the way
To clutch the eagle
On a buck and truck
And if I'm down
How to get back up
Just survival kid

And it's a struggle worldwide
I'm positive
Shit the ghetto might as well
Be the Gaza Strip

- The Roots, Long Time (2006)

Global circuits of settler colonial violence reverberate within the very architecture of the academy. Within the US context, academia plays a crucial role in legitimizing and enabling violence within the broader interconnected projects of the US empire and Israeli settler colonial occupation and apartheid. In fact, the struggle for Palestinian liberation vividly highlights how Israel's colonial project thrives within institutions of higher education and directly implicates our lives (Maira, 2018; The Love Toward Liberation Collective, 2023; Wind, 2024). Our universities serve as crucial sites where Zionist practices are maintained through economic and epistemic patronage. Dominant institutional narratives systematically obscure the sociological and historical realities of Palestine, framing Israeli settler colonialism and imperialism as extensions of Western democratic values.

This institutional implication is not abstract. It maps itself onto the material, structural, and psychic patterns of violence that pervade all our lives. It is blatant evidence of how tools of imperial and colonial violence are adapted to suppress life affirming solidarities from wherever they sprout forth. We write this paper during ongoing scholasticide. Palestinian scholars and students have been targeted and killed; Palestinian universities have been reduced to rubble. Palestinian epistemology is targeted because it teaches dangerous decolonial truths about dignity, love, and survivance (Atallah, 2025; Desai et al., 2025). As we locate our work within the larger colonial academic matrix characterized by the horrors of ongoing scholasticide, it becomes painfully apparent that all scholarship in service of collective liberation become targets for projects of epistemic violence.

One such project of epistemic violence is the formation of ghettoized academic spaces that serve the function of disciplining and containing resistance. To move toward solidarity at a time of scholasticide, we must first name where we stand, where we pick and prod until we un-erase the parts that belie official discourses. When invoking the term academic ghetto, we speak to the employment of the same colonial and imperial technologies that are used to form economic and social ghetto - confinement, isolation, the severing of marginalized people from their labor and the extraction of said labor, controlling access to resource and capital by making it conditional on compliance. The structure of the ghetto is systematically produced and maintained by what Sylvia Wynter (2003) calls, "the western bourgeois" ethnoclass, that overrepresents itself as the sole benefactor of the academy. This makes the academy one of the many sites where coloniality and racial capitalism are perpetually at work; with BIPOC and Global South scholars working from marginalized epistemologies often relegated to the margins (García Peña, 2022). Our work is branded "secondary," our presence is tolerated but contained, and our embodied knowledge is policed (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002).

The ghetto is a space loaded with imagery including rubble, abandonment, hood, crumbling buildings, and disinvestment. It is the place left behind, deemed unworthy of repair. The bodies that occupy the ghetto are dehumanized, just like the spaces they inhabit. But once everything and everyone within it is stripped of perceived external value, the ghetto becomes ripe for

rebuilding and profiteering, ready to be remade in the image of Western settler colonial occupiers. The academic ghetto is one such terrain: a localized manifestation of the same extractive, hierarchical logics that suppress dissent and erase marginalized voices. The academic ghetto is not a metaphor; it is a material and epistemic reality, shaped by calculus such as which knowledges are resourced, which are abandoned, and who is deemed worthy to produce it. It names those processes that sort, confine, and punish subaltern students. In "post-apartheid" South Africa, Black students confront exclusion through language gatekeeping, housing precarity, and outsourced campus regimes that keep them present but peripheral. In India's premier institutions, Dalit students face routinized indignities, harassment, and deaths–touted as suicides–but aptly named "institutional murder." In Gaza, scholasticide has halted higher education altogether; in the West Bank, raids, checkpoints, and movement bans criminalize ordinary academic life. In the US, Palestinian students and scholars (and allies) are doxed, suspended, and aggressively policed for organizing, with blacklists and encampment crackdowns chilling speech and research. These contexts are not the same, yet the pattern is: the academy works as an instrument of coloniality and caste/racial order that polices language and mobility, withholds resources and safety, and demands the public display of personal suffering as the price of legitimacy.

At our university, students of the academic ghetto are marked by diminished value, in part because our work centers the racialized, the marginalized, refusing to be monetized. Our scholarship, like our physical spaces, is ghettoized. As graduate students, we are tucked away in back offices, distant from the cognitive and developmental psychology labs that represent the department's dominant, West-aligned interests. New students are placed in the central fishbowl, a waiting area where our fate is determined: choose the right field and be elevated. Choose wrong and be cast into the ghetto.

Few venture into the academic ghetto. Those of us who live and work here are labeled as dangerous. Our righteous anger stirs discomfort. Our ideas, rooted in autonomy, resistance, and liberation, spark fear. So dangerous are these ideas that the academy seeks to silence us aggressively. Efforts to discredit those in the ghetto are relentless: tearing down programs and posters, stripping away resources, and erasing any knowledge that hints at liberation. We are reprimanded, belittled, and threatened for the audacity to speak from the margins. And when we manage to build something of our own—something brilliant and autonomous—those in power move quickly to tear it down, to constrain, or appropriate it. Like all colonial strategies, disenfranchisement of the academic ghetto is strategic, deliberate, and violent.

Despite being told that we hold no value, we are constantly reminded of our worth as manifested through our labor. Our ideas are mined. Our time is robbed. Our energy is exploited. We are paid in accordance with the extractive logic of the ghetto: maximum effort, minimum compensation. Our potential is measured only by return on investment, while our ethical and epistemic investments are minimized and defunded. Faculty of the academic ghetto fare no better. The system is rigged to ensure that our numbers remain small. The work that aligns with colonial, Western norms is amplified and rewarded, while decolonial, community-centered work is invisibilized. We are isolated, left to cobble together resources. We are outvoted and often pushed out through subtle and insidious tactics resulting in quiet firing, overwork to exhaustion, and erasure (Garcia Peña, 2022). Initiatives that uplift ghettoized students are labeled as

unnecessary or surfeit. And when students from the ghetto struggle, the blame is laid at the feet of these faculty instead of the conditions of institutionalized marginalization and disinvestment. In this space, women, particularly non-white, non–American- born women, are especially undervalued. Often, they are only acknowledged when they conform to and serve the neoliberal institutional missions.

To be relegated to the academic ghetto then is to have one's aliveness and brilliance ignored. But there is a paradox here: in the alienation of this place, a new kind of connectedness emerges. A ghettoized belonging. A space rooted in care, mutual recognition, and collective resistance. It is here that theorizing becomes not only possible, but essential. To theorize from the academic ghetto means producing knowledge and generating ideas from a position of marginalization, resistance, and embodied experience within the very institution that devalues, suppresses, and extracts from our non-dominant epistemologies. It is our act of survival, defiance, and reclamation of intellectual agency and value from a space that the academic institution dismisses (Bacevic, 2021).

Naming these ghettoized terrains is essential. To name is to refuse erasure. Failing to name this context is itself a form of epistemic and political violence that reinforces the normalcy of marginalization and forecloses possibilities for collective resistance. In recognizing and articulating the academic ghetto, we affirm our struggle for liberatory futures. It is from this critical affirmation that we offer vignettes of action and confrontation as we attempt to disrupt institutionalized silences that sustain the Israeli settler colonial project.

4. Refusal as Intervention: Disruptive Praxis in the Belly of the Beast

4.1 Case 1: Disrupting Institutional Silence and Complicity on Campus

We watched in horror as Palestinians in Gaza dug up their loved ones out of rubble day after day, while university leaders put out empty statements that not only remained silent on this genocidal assault, but offered their unequivocal support for the state of Israel alongside many other US universities. More than a month into the most recent iteration of Israeli settler colonial and genocidal violence against Palestinians in Gaza, our university held its first officially sanctioned event about the "situation in the Middle East." We saw the colonial violence behind the facade of neutrality and alleged "expertise" and decided to take collective action against these enforced silences. Please see Figure 1 for an annotated image of the event announcement that disrupts the façade of institutional neutrality.

We adopted a multimodal approach to disruption. We spread our carefully prepared materials across the tables in the space; such as lists of Gazan journalists to follow on Instagram, explanations of how anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism, printed copies of the Palestinian Feminist Collective's Palestine digital action toolkit and reclaimed maps and timelines of the Nakba. We laid out handouts and signs with community agreements that we had crafted, refusing to let others dictate the terms of engagement.

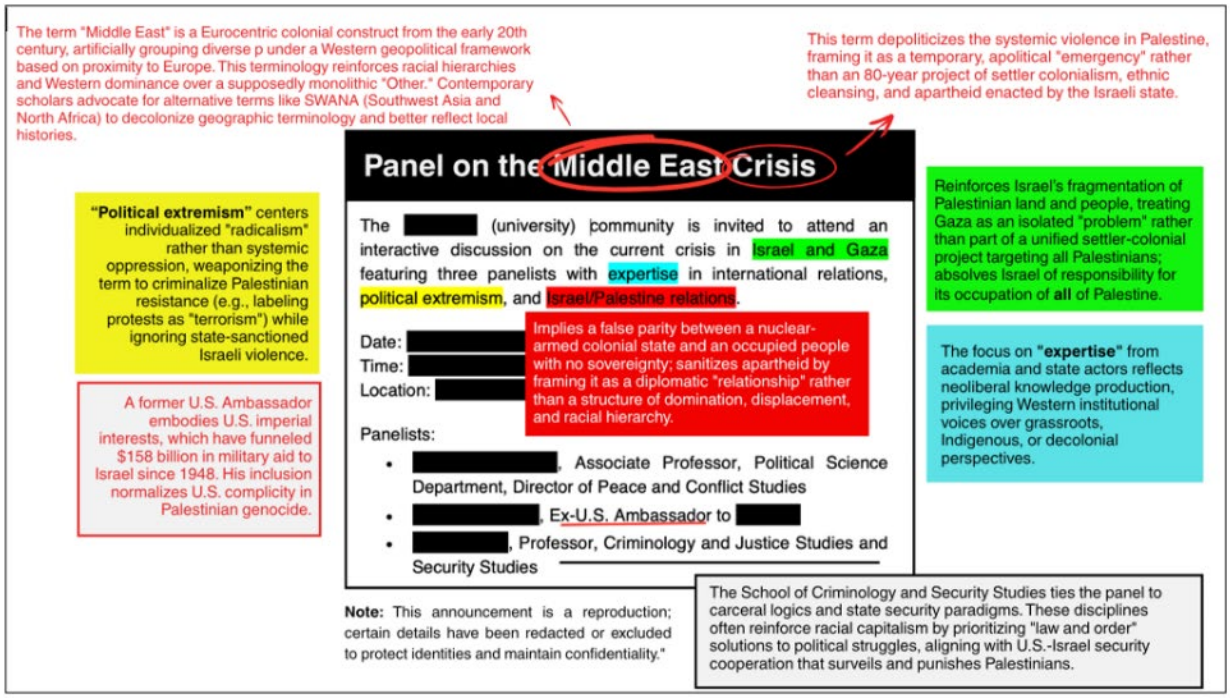

Figure 1: Disrupting the facade of institutional "neutrality"

> "As I walked up the staircase into the communal space that is the library mezzanine, I felt the weight of our purpose settle over me. The Palestinian flag was draped high on the wall behind where the speakers would stand; its presence a bold declaration, a spatial intervention that would set the tone for everything to follow. I draped my keffiyeh, its familiar texture grounding me in the moment. Around me, my fellow organizers wore their own keffiyehs, a symbol of our solidarity."

We claimed a table near the front of the room where foot traffic would be high, and unfurled signs and artwork created by members of our collective for various rallies in the wider community protesting the genocide. *Globalize the Intifada*, one sign proclaimed boldly. Another read, *From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free*[†]. We displayed art and infographics developed, curated, and circulated by grassroots collectives dedicated to Palestinian liberation (see Appendix C). We used the space as a makeshift canvas – lovingly and rebelliously adorning the walls, pillars, and glass windows of the room with art and infographics or discussion to engage with or counter Zionist discourse. We showed up with an urgency to disrupt suffocating silences and to shatter institutional narratives that masquerade as "unbiased," "neutral," or "factual" when left unchallenged. Every element we introduced into the space was a crack in that facade of normalcy.

As people filtered into the venue, they were immediately confronted with the reconfigured space. We observed a range of reactions – scoffs from the organizers, awkward glances from administration, and hostile stares from some faculty. But we also saw students reading the

[†] For those concerned about this slogan as being antisemitic, please refer to the work of British Israeli historian and public intellectual, Ilan Pappé: https://www.palestinechronicle.com/my-israeli-friends-this-is-why-i-support-palestinians-ilan-pappe/.

materials, picking up handouts, and grabbing “Free Palestine” stickers. In those moments, we knew that silence would not reign here today. Palestinians fighting for their land and their lifeworlds would not be rendered invisible.

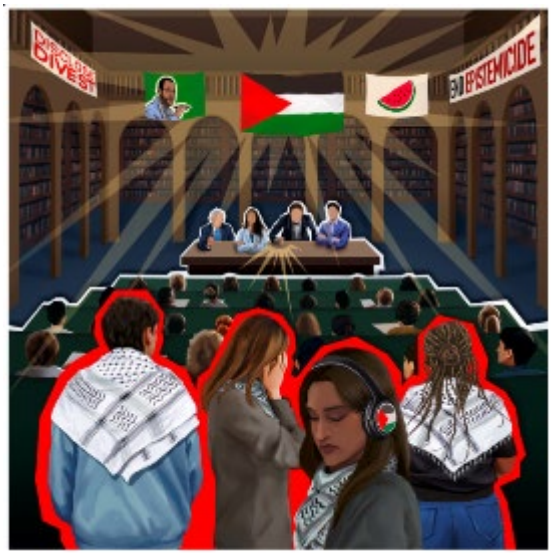

Figure 2: Disrupting institutionalized silence on campus

The reconfiguration of the space was not the only site of visual refusal. Our bodies became part of the disruption. As the panelists' discourse, which sought to normalize settler colonial violence, reverberated through their microphones, they were met with a display of resistance (see Figure 2). Some of us wore noise-canceling headphones, with our profiles or backs to the panel. Others stepped away and left the space entirely, refusing to subject their bodies and spirit to violent settler colonial discourse. Some of us positioned ourselves at the far end of the room, a visual counterpoint to the official panel.

When the panel opened for discussion, we were prepared with statements, questions, and excerpts from various Palestine solidarity declarations. Our intent was clear: we were not there to debate the humanity of Palestinian people or to wrangle over academic definitions of genocide or ethnic cleansing; the very act of such engagement serves to preserve and dignify Zionist settler-colonial narratives. We utilized the discussion portion of the panel as a point of rupture to re-center Palestinian narratives, interrupting and refusing the very structures of Zionism and anti-Palestinian racism that the panel enacted. We named what the panel sought to erase – settler colonial occupation, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

When we push back against institutional power, the backlash is swift and precise. Our refusal was met with a naked display of institutional and Zionist power. The panel organizer—who was also a panelist— interrupted a collective member who had the floor as soon as they uttered the word Apartheid, sensing the dangerous truthtelling that was about to take place. They suddenly changed the rules of engagement. What was advertised as an interactive discussion became a heavily moderated Q&A. The microphone, once openly passed around, was now strictly controlled by the panelists, assuming a unidirectional flow of supposed expertise from the panelists to the audience. But where one collective member left off, another picked up. And

something else happened too: a significant portion of the audience, especially students, responded with visible support for Palestine. They spoke loud and clear, "let them speak!" as panel organizers took away the microphone from our collective members mid-speech. Our fellow students applauded our interventions. They joined in and asked more critical questions. They amplified our refusal. It was a moment of solidarity – raw, unplanned, and resonant.

The reassertion of institutional power operated through both discourse and intimidation. As our dissent picked up momentum, the panelists' claims of "neutrality" quickly unraveled. One panelist, visibly agitated after a collective member asked who benefits from the denial of genocide, argued that the very fact of Palestinian existence disproves allegations of ethnic cleansing or genocidal intent. At a moment when over eleven thousand Palestinian lives had already been claimed by the Israeli military, the panelist chose to reduce atrocity to abstract debate, as though genocide were a matter of interpretation. Worse still, he launched into a tirade against every scholar who had spoken or written in solidarity with Palestinian struggles. Their work, he sneered, was not "real" scholarship or science—it was merely "advocacy," a word he spat out with contempt, as though advocating for justice were somehow shameful. It was not just what was said, but how it was articulated: the derisive tone, the loud volume, and the aggressive body language. These were not neutral affective registers; they were tactics of domination. These were enactments of anti-Palestinian racism and the Palestine exception in real time: policing of language, delegitimizing Palestinian testimony, rules rewritten midstream to silence dissent, and institutional power mobilized against those who demanded accountability (Anti-Palestinian Racism on Campus; Report on Anti-Palestinian Racism; Lloyd, 2012).

> "As the exchange grew more direct, my body responded in ways I have come to recognize: a tightening in my chest, a tremor in my limbs, a familiar fight-or-flight response to masculine violence. I did not expect this in an academic space. And yet, perhaps I should have."

Another moment remains especially vivid. One of the undergraduate students in the audience was deeply disturbed by the panel's refusal to acknowledge the humanity of Palestinians and the scale of destruction in Gaza. She did not raise her voice, but her countenance spoke volumes, her disgust evident in her facial expressions. Yet even that silent dissent was deemed intolerable. A guest panelist—an older white male—responded with open contempt. He mocked her, saying, "Keep making faces," attempting to shame her into compliance while he continued with his vitriolic comments justifying the killing of Palestinians as "the price of peace in the Middle East." It was an assertion of power through the policing of affect, a warning that even nonverbal dissent would be disciplined.

> "Callous, cold, heartless, numb, cut off from humanity.
> Justifying rationalizing normalizing,
> Horror upon horror upon genocidal horror. Unimaginable, unspeakable, abject atrocity.
> Gaslighting, blaming the victims, distorting, denying reality.
> A captive audience.
> Institutional power wielded to silence.
> A collective "FUCK NO."
> Speaking our endless undying rage, grief, refusal.

Speaking through the fear, uncertainty, attempts to repress and silence.
Committing and recommitting.
Planting seeds of resistance and solidarity."

We name these dynamics in order to denaturalize them. These moments of dismissal, silencing, intimidation are not aberrations. They exemplify how Zionist and institutional power circulate in academic spaces, often cloaked in the language of neutrality, civility, and reason. Our goal here—as it was at the panel—is to disrupt this circulation, to expose its mechanisms, and to insist that these spaces are not neutral. The naming matters because without it, these violences remain unspoken, their normalization uninterrupted.

4.2 Case 2: Disrupting Rhetorical Decoloniality at an Academic Conference

We now turn our attention to another site of disruption: an academic conference hosted by a professional society with expressed values of epistemic diversity, ethical inquiry, accountability, and transformative social change. The context of this conference exemplifies another frontier in which the institutionalized silencing of Palestinian lives, lifeworlds, and struggles were enforced. We want to emphasize that what we describe here is neither new nor unusual; nor are we claiming any kind of resolution or vindication. Our goal here—as in the previous section—remains two-fold: we name and unpack such commonplace phenomena of silencing. Through such denaturalization, we strive to disrupt the discursive power and cultural violence that undergird silencing of Israel's settler colonial project and genocidal assault against Palestinians. In this section, we offer a refractive account of the space, its demand characteristics, and our mode of disruption.

With a sense of urgency and hope, we embraced an opportunity to bring Palestine to the forefront at a conference in psychology. Our ongoing work at the time had been geared toward disrupting our university's complicity in the Israeli settler colonial project through its endowments, investments in war profiteering, and the funneling of students into labor markets complicit in genocide and ongoing oppression. We were thrilled at the invitation to think through ways to foster conversations centering Palestine at the conference. We saw this as a critical moment to reflect deeply on our roles and responsibilities within universities and the academy more broadly, while exploring active solidarity with the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

Our initial excitement quickly gave way to disillusionment, as our experience exposed the familiar gap between rhetoric and practice in academic spaces. From the outset, we encountered subtle and disguised signs of censorship. We undertook extensive preparation for two one-hour sessions intended to foster meaningful engagement. In addition, we wanted to set up a community altar and an informational booth inspired by successful campus activities. Our hope was to hold space to nurture connections between those involved in organizing across different campuses and to share thoughtfully curated educational resources. These ideas were met with reservations. First, the organizers cited concern for their host institution, a subtle virtue signaling that "gently" reminded us that they/we need to be respectful of the hosts (a private Catholic school with a troubling history of repressing student activism). In this case, it meant that we should run our ideas by the hosts. Even though this was couched as procedural caution, we understood what this meant in reality – to subject what should have been a moral and ethical

imperative through administrative scrutiny at a time when Gaza solidarity encampments were being brutally suppressed across the country. Another cited concern was that centering Palestine would cause rifts within the organization. The organizers appealed to the labors of many members who have made it possible to hold the organization together in the face of "divisive" forces. They urged us to honor those efforts; the subtext being that any appearance of an organizational stance for Palestine represented an existential threat for the professional society in question. We were taken aback by the notion of "division," though it was all too familiar, where rhetoric prioritizing "comfort and safety," "representing both sides," and "dialogue to keep peace" is routinely used to foreclose discussions centered on Palestine. More than two years into the Israeli genocide against Palestinians, this kind of equivocation continues to be used as a tactic to undermine meaningful conversation and action. This holds true regardless of the underlying motivation, whether it is avoiding discomfort, prioritizing safety, preserving professional relationships, and/or offering conditional support for Palestinian struggles.

This moment represented a microcosm of the broader dynamics of erasure in academic spaces, even within those claiming progressive, radical, and decolonial commitments. What made the equivocation even more infuriating was its timing. Just a week prior, Israeli forces, backed by U.S. intelligence and weaponry, had carried out a devastating raid on Al-Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza to free 4 Israeli hostages; a raid that killed 274 Palestinians and injured nearly 700. Alongside relentless settler violence in the West Bank, we were besieged by horrifying scenes of drones, gunfire in crowded markets, and people trapped under the rubble as we prepared for the conference. This constituted the affective and visceral context in which we showed up at the conference.

In this moment, the urgency of solidarity over silence could not be clearer. But the dynamics of the conference exemplified what Dutta (2024) aptly terms rhetorical decoloniality devoid of genuine material commitment and action. "Our commitment to decolonization," she argues, "cannot just be semantic or rhetorical – it must be material, visceral, affective, and uncompromising." Our experience then raises essential questions: *What is the cost of our silence? Who is most harmed by it? Where does our true commitment lie?* We acknowledge the material risks faced by many faculty, students, and staff in speaking up for Palestine and denouncing Israeli settler colonial and genocidal regime. Yet this moment demands that we confront these risks collectively. As students, we pose a direct question to scholars whose professional careers have benefitted from scholarship on decoloniality: ***How are you actively standing by your decolonial commitments to Palestine today – in tangible ways?*** Now more than ever, Palestine must be centered—clearly, unapologetically, and urgently. To speak openly about Palestine must not be exceptionalized, especially within spaces purportedly dedicated to critical inquiry. It should be recognized as our ethical and moral responsibility.

"Stepping into the conference felt akin to walking into a colonial diorama marked by gothic architecture, settler portraits, forced smiles, and deliberate avoidance. Bearing the weight of witnessing an ongoing genocide, I walked into the presidential address with my body feeling tight, with an indescribable feeling of disorientation. Despite feeling like an intruder or bystander to this scene of normal abnormality, I walked in with some hope given the conference theme focused on reimagination and transformation. I waited to hear someone say the word Palestine, to dare to bring into context what we have all been witnessing. But

during the introduction of the conference all we got were awkward mentions of an ongoing "Israel-Palestine conflict" as one of the many ongoing struggles we continue to face. This cursory mention felt like a slap to the face, a checkbox ticked, something to get out of the way. The welcome speeches were over in the blink of an eye; people clapped, and I found myself in a room full of beautiful stained-glass windows and broken promises. Fred Hampton's quote came to mind: "theory without practice ain't shit." I would be kinder with my words if the stakes were lower, if the violence did not feel so visceral; if at one point or another in my academic career I had not read some of these academics' words with awe, whose words now failed them."

Figure 1: Creative embodied resistance at the conference

And so, we refused. In defiant acts of embodied solidarity, we disrupted the decorum of academic complacency through creative resistance. Ahead of the conference, members of our collective met to paint tote bags that read in bold letters "IN SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINE – LISTEN, LEARN, AND ACT!" The bags, adorned with hand-painted olive branches, keys of return, and red poppies, were filled with zines, educational pamphlets, and QR codes to additional resources (Figure 3). As a subversive reimagining of our squashed tabling efforts, the bags were designed to draw the attention of fellow conference attendees and spark dialogue. We unfurled verses by Refaat Alareer and Mahmoud Darwish, printed on large pieces of fabric that we draped over podiums like sacred interventions. In displaying the poem of martyred Palestinian scholar and poet Refaat Alareer (*If I Must Die*), we reaffirmed our right and responsibility to grieve and honor Palestinian martyrs despite being denied the opportunity to create a community altar. As we relocated from the room of our first session to our second session, we marched across the staircase carrying an outstretched banner that one of our collective members created for a recent Nakba Day rally. The banner read "Palestine will survive the ongoing Nakba," a reflection of the power of Palestinians' decolonial remembrance, hope, and grief.

We transformed hallways and session breaks into living archives of refusal, carrying with us what could not be displayed. Our sessions, unapologetically loud, created space for naming the Palestine exception. We invited all those who joined our sessions to participate in collective art

practices following shared readings of works by Palestinian authors and poets, and discussions about how we might better center Palestine in our work moving forward. Through this process of collective artmaking, we called on our peers to engage in an embodied witnessing that exceeded the intellectual and embraced the affective and relational. We invited participants to make public commitments by writing and drawing on pieces of paper cut into shapes symbolizing Palestinian liberation: kites, in honor of martyred Palestinian poet and scholar Refaat Alareer, and olive leaves in remembrance of every olive tree destroyed under Israeli settler colonial occupation. These individual commitments were assembled into a collage brought to life through two art installations – the image of a clear blue sky filled with kites and an olive tree, deeply rooted in the soil.

Across these endeavors, we remained solidly guided by the path forged by the Palestinian Feminist Collective and generations of resistance before us. What we staged may not have been "much," but it was everything in the register of refusal. In that refusal to be silent, to be invisible, we sought not to speak on behalf of Palestine, but to stand with Palestinians—in body, in word, and in action. This was our way of answering the call to radical solidarity, to make visible the ongoing Nakba in spaces that would rather look away; and to insist that Palestine is not a peripheral concern but central to any decolonial praxis worth its salt. In the face of genocidal violence, our acts were an insistence on Palestinian life, memory, and liberation.

5. Toward Otherwise Worlds: A Call to Fugitive Learning

We offer this paper not as a blueprint, but as an invitation shaped by the tensions, contradictions, and imperfections of doing this work from our implicated positionalities. The practices we describe are fragmented, situated, and incomplete, but they gesture toward otherwise possibilities: toward worlds where solidarity is not performance but practice; where art is not peripheral but central to resistance; and where we recognize that our futures are already being lived in practices of care, resistance, and naming. In this sense, the future we gesture toward is not a horizon waiting passively to be reached, but a set of practices already in motion, practices that prefigure more just worlds in the here and now (Coe, 2024; Esposito & Kellezi, 2020). Gillan, 2020). The moments of refusals we have described in this paper represent flickers of possibility in the here and now. They remind us that institutional scripts can be broken, that knowledge can be forged in community, and that liberation begins with the radical act of naming what is silenced. These moments of refusal crack open the façade of the everyday, unsettling what we are told is fixed and natural, as Lara Sheehi argues:

> if we're disrupting going-on-being, it's disrupting the ways that it might communicate to us that somehow that well-worn pattern is a normative fixture. And what I'm hoping is for us to be like, There's nothing normative about these fixtures. . . a real commitment to disrupting the ways in which those modes ["things that seamlessly hide ideologically in our everyday world"] can go on being without being seen (Disrupting Coloniality, 2024).

We must remember that piercing institutional silences is not a one-off intervention but an enduring practice of care, refusal, and reimagining the world – a world in which Palestinian

liberation guides the possibilities of collective emancipation (Dutta, 2024; Qutami & Zahzah, 2020). Refusal for us is not a bid for "systems change" as policy reform imagines it; it is an abolitionist practice aimed at undoing the systems themselves and making their logics unworkable. And even when refusal is staged in highly local sites, it is never merely local - it reverberates across movements, suturing our actions to longer genealogies of collective struggle.

As academia teeters between rhetorical commitments to justice and structural complicity in genocide, we hope that our collective experiences offer some modalities for everyday resistance: reclaiming physical and discursive spaces, centering marginalized epistemologies, and forging solidarities that extend beyond university campuses.

At the same time, it is vital to trouble the very notion of solidarity. As many have noted, solidarity is not inherently liberatory; it can just as easily uphold structures of violence as dismantle them (Hunt-Hendrix & Taylor, 2024; Morris, 2020). Over the last three years, we have witnessed ever-intensifying *settler solidarity*, as manifested in affective, discursive, and institutional investments that uphold the genocidal logics of Israeli settler colonialism. Rooted in white supremacy, settler solidarities have been fostered by colonial elites to justify and profit from land theft and genocide of Indigenous peoples, and continues today (Dahl, 2022; Wolfe, 2006). Atallah and Awartani (2024) describe it as a transnational "colonial cult of death," implicating states, institutions, and individuals—especially in the Global North—in Israel's genocidal agenda. Settler solidarity is sustained by mythologies of settler innocence and victimhood that frame Indigenous peoples as threats, and genocide as necessary for safety and order (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006).

Universities are, by and large, sites of settler solidarity. Therefore, a commitment to decolonial solidarity necessitates a fundamental oppositional relationship to institutional power and key sites of colonial complicity and control. Therefore, we approach the university as a terrain of struggle where power is concentrated but also where cracks can be made in the colonial machinery. The unyielding machinery of genocidal violence serves as a sobering and instructive reminder that the radical change we seek is not the same as systems change; in fact, radical change is often contingent on dismantling of many systems as we know them. The change we seek cannot be reduced to the outcomes of any singular act of refusal, but is the synergistic effect of persistent disruptions, solidarities, and struggles across time and space. Even when institutions remain unmoved, these acts matter because they affirm life, dignity, and resistance in spaces designed to erase them. They generate affective and relational ripples: students who find the courage to speak up, colleagues who carry the conversation forward, and solidarities that extend beyond the immediate site. In this sense, refusal is not measurable by institutional uptake. Rather, it permeates fugitive spaces through its capacity to seed future insurgencies and imagine otherwise worlds. As Samih Al-Qasim writes:

"You may take the last strip of my land,
Feed my youth to prison cells.
You may plunder my heritage.
You may burn my books, my poems
Or feed my flesh to the dogs.
You may spread a web of terror
On the roofs of my village,
O enemy of the sun,

But
I shall not compromise
And to the last pulse in my veins
I shall resist."

To imagine otherwise worlds, we turn to art as insurgent practice. In Palestine, art springs forth amid siege and ghettoization as a defiant act, reflecting the brutal realities of settler colonialism, occupation, and genocide (Hasan & Bleibleh, 2023). Under settler colonial rule, spaces for Palestinian artists to gather and create have been destroyed, scattering them across the globe. Yet amid this dispersal, Palestinian art resists fragmentation. Despite working under vastly different conditions within the homeland and across the diaspora, Palestinian artists imbue their work with collective memory, grief, and resistance (Boullata, 2004). In the face of relentless settler colonial violence, their worldmaking practices bridge past, present, and future, evoking both remembrance and futurity (see Appendix C). Palestinian artists not only call upon us to bear witness to genocide as implicated actors, but also draw, paint, and sculpt into being the inevitability of a Free Palestine. These works carry critical lessons for all who dare to hope for a world beyond perpetual apocalyptic violence.

This praxis of art as resistance offers not only a mirror but also a method that has deeply influenced the aesthetics and strategies of student-led movements around the world, including the student intifada (see Appendix C). Art is a refusal against institutional/institutionalized silence, disappearance, compliance, and complicity as well as a modality through which radical imagination is made tangible. The student intifada has created a collective mosaic, calling on our institutions to stop producing technologies of settler colonial violence. This mosaic consisted of signs covering grass lawns, banners draped over banisters, posters taped to walls and windows, and chalk messages adorning floors and sidewalks. This art is transient yet unwavering: torn down and washed away, only to be created time and again, hung up and posted anew. Our use of art at both the events (on campus and at the conference) were inspired by this broader collective mosaic of resistance.

Honoring what Palestinian artists teach us about decolonial futurity and centering their powerful use of art as a call to bear witness, we sought to transform the dark, cold walls of our campus into vibrant displays of art for Gaza. Through each banner, collage, stencil, and chalked phrase, we joined a lineage of struggle that refuses to be constrained by the parameters of legibility set forth by colonial institutions. In this way, art became a medium through which we practiced embodied, affectively attuned politics that invited others to feel, to remember, and to act. This practice reflects what Palestinian artists have long taught us: that even amid devastation, the act of creation is an insistence on life.

The limits of our paper notwithstanding, we hope that it speaks to the broader necessity of grounding decolonial praxis in situated struggle and of remaining accountable to the collective resistance that our very survival depends on. In this spirit, we close with Audre Lorde's powerful poem, *A Litany for Survival,* which cracks open a space between vulnerability and resolve, between despair and action. And in that space of possibility, we find ourselves (Figure 4).

Figure 4: "it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive"

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

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APPENDIX A
GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

This appendix lists several of the key words used in the paper and is designed to clarify concepts crucial to understanding institutional complicity, decolonial praxis, and epistemic justice.

Critical: This term refers to an approach or perspective that involves analyzing, questioning, and challenging established norms, ideologies, power structures, and systems. Critical thinking involves examining underlying assumptions and seeking deeper insights to promote a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues.

Power: Power refers to the capacity or ability to influence, control, or shape the behavior, beliefs, and actions of individuals, groups, or institutions. In critical analysis, power is often seen as unevenly distributed, leading to the creation and maintenance of hierarchies, inequalities, and systemic oppression. Understanding power dynamics is crucial for examining social structures and advocating for change.

Normal Abnormality: The concept of "normal abnormality" was coined by assassinated Salvadorian liberation psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró. The term refers to how systemic violence and oppression become so embedded in everyday life that they are perceived as normal or inevitable. In such contexts, suffering, injustice, and dehumanization are no longer seen as anomalies but as routine features of social reality.

Intifada: *Intifada* (الانتفاضة) is an Arabic word meaning "uprising". It refers specifically to two major Palestinian uprisings against Israeli settler colonial occupation – the First Intifada in 1987–1993 and the Second Intifada in 2000–2005. However, the term has also come to symbolize broader acts of resistance against colonial, military, and structural violence. We invoke *intifada* in this paper in solidarity with these liberatory movements and as a call to disrupt systems of settler colonial annihilation and erasures.

Anti-Palestinian Racism: Anti-Palestinian racism is a form of racism that silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, defames or dehumanizes Palestinians or their narratives. It is a distinct form of racism that tends to be ignored or denied, and often conflated with Islamophobia and Anti-Arab racism. Anti-Palestinian racism targets Palestinians as well as non-Palestinians (especially racialized women and non-binary people) who publicly speak in support of Palestinian rights or share Palestinian narratives or openly criticize the state of Israel for their treatment of Palestinians.

Neoliberal Capitalism: Neoliberal capitalism is an economic and political ideology characterized by an emphasis on limited government intervention in the market, deregulation, privatization, and a focus on individual self-interest. It often results in increased economic inequality, market-driven policies, and the dominance of corporate interests.

Colonialism/Colonization: Colonization is the process by which a foreign power establishes control over a territory, usually involving the settlement of people from the colonizing entity and the imposition of its culture, laws, and institutions. Historically, colonization has led to the genocide, exploitation, displacement, and oppression of indigenous populations.

Settler Colonialism: Settler colonialism involves the establishment of colonies by settlers who seek to permanently inhabit and control a new territory. This process often results in the

dispossession and marginalization of indigenous populations, as settlers assert dominance over land, resources, laws, movement, culture, and institutions.

Coloniality: Coloniality refers to the enduring impact of colonial structures, ideologies, and power dynamics on societies even after the formal end of colonization. It encompasses economic, social, cultural, educational, and political dimensions and involves the reproduction of hierarchies and inequalities associated with colonialism.

Imperialism: Imperialism refers to the expansion of a country's power and influence through territorial conquest, colonization, and the establishment of political and economic dominance over other regions. It often involves exploitation, subjugation, and cultural assimilation of the colonized peoples.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a concept that recognizes the interconnected and mutually constitutive nature of various social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. It highlights how these identities intersect and mutually influence an individual's experiences and societal treatment, often leading to complex and unique forms of discrimination or privilege.

APPENDIX B
RESOURCES ON COLONIALITY AND ANTI-PALESTINIAN RACISM IN GLOBAL NORTH ACADEMIA

This list of readings and audiovisual materials is conceived as an extension of the paper's ethos: we do this work in community, alongside our ancestors, elders, and comrades whose footsteps we follow and with whom we struggle. We offer works that contextualize the dynamics of colonialism, imperialism, and epistemic violence in university contexts in the United States for those who wish to engage more deeply. The entries also highlight works that illuminate different registers of decolonial praxis, spanning theory, method, art, refusal, solidarity, and freedom dreaming. The list is both a pedagogical tool and a gesture of solidarity, elevating voices that sustain collective imagination, refusal, and struggle.

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Visualizing Palestine Infographics:

- Anti-Palestinian Racism - Overview and General Definition
- Anti-Palestinian Racism on Campus
- Many "Cides" of Genocide
- Academia Serving Apartheid

Additional Podcasts and Webinars

- The Electronic Intifada Podcast
- Makdisi Street Podcast
- The Palestine Laboratory Podcast
- In Defense of Academic Freedom - Webinar Series by Jadaliyya
- Until Liberation: A Series for Palestine by Haymarket Books

APPENDIX C
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ACTION

This appendix provides a curated set of resources to deepen engagement with the themes discussed in this paper and to support meaningful action.

1. ***Resources for resistance artwork***: Visualizing Palestine, Just Seeds, and Artists Against Apartheid provide powerful visual tools for activism.
2. **Epistemic justice and action toolkits**: such as those developed by the Palestinian Feminist Collective, Palestinian Youth Movement, and Artists Against Apartheid offer practical guidelines for solidarity actions, educational initiatives, and community organizing.