

ASSUMING BOYCOTT

RESISTANCE

AGENCY

CULTURAL
PRODUCTION

EDITED BY

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AND LAURA RAICOVICH

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RESISTANCE, AGENCY, AND
CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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BY COLONIAL DESIGN, OR: WHY WE SAY WE DON'T KNOW ENOUGH

Ann Laura Stoler

Stoler presented this paper at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) on December 4, 2014, on a panel entitled "Anthropologists and Controversial Engagements: The Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions," which also featured Nadia Abu El-Haj, Lara Deeb, Ghassan Hage, Lisa Rofel, Magid Shihade, and Jessica Winegar. The text was subsequently published online by Jadaliyya. For the present volume, Stoler has written a brief update regarding the AAA's June 2016 vote on the boycott of Israeli academic institutions, which follows the original article. We are grateful to Jadaliyya co-editor Noura Erakat, also a contributor to this volume, for permitting us to reprint Stoler's essay.

I am honored to be here and to have been asked to speak in this forum today. I do so at once eagerly and with discomfort and dis-ease, and I doubt I'm alone with those sensibilities, knowing on the one hand that there is too much to say in fifteen minutes and, on the other, that nothing need be added to what has been said so many times before. Discomfort also in knowing that our usual protocols may be strained,

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giving way to further inquiry, disparate starting points, challenges, and conclusions that don't necessarily align. And given the current explosion of conferences, special sessions (even at the American Historical Association next month), teach-ins, and coverage of the Steven Salaita "affair," it would seem we are perhaps neither as untimely nor as vanguard as one might expect anthropologists to be as we consider and think aloud about where and how we position ourselves with respect to the Palestinian-Israeli situation. If an ethics of discomfort is one definition of effective critique, we are plunged deeply within it.

Controversial sites have long been at the center of anthropology's engagements and conversations. We have taken brazen pride in our capacities to disclose, to dissect, to make uncommon sense of the commonsenses that go without saying because they so obviously need to be said, may not be said, or are removed from the ready repertoire of conceptual convention or censored to speech by politics. We are schooled and school our students to challenge what evades scrutiny and doggedly pursue why and how that is made so. In that process, we have taken positions individually and collectively that call into question our own cherished political investments, their epistemic valence, and affective implications.

This is business as usual in a critical anthropology—however defined—for decades: with respect to the Vietnam War, exported/offshore drug-testing, drone targeting, decimation of forest preserves, Department of Defense deployment of "strategic culture" in warfare, and not least with respect to the privations and disenfranchisements that earlier imperial and colonial formations have cast and continue to cast across the lives of so many of the people with whom we've been privileged to work. These sorts of engagements, however, have for the most part pitted some portion of an ever-changing "we" that makes up our discipline against multinationals, government policy makers, and more recently the goodwill of humanitarianism's advocates. (These are commitments

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that join us and make us feel better about our collective edginess and disobedience, and thus about our insubordinately fashioned selves.)

But for many of the same reasons, the dispossession of Palestinians and the colonial nature of the Israeli state have stayed on the outer fringes of anthropology for too long. It seems to me that to consider the situation in Israel-Palestine as a site of “controversial engagement” (our topic today) is perhaps to understate and bypass what makes this site of contest and governance so charged and seemingly unlike the rest: inordinately discomfiting, rendered until so recently at once impolitic to broach and impolite, tactless to raise in collegial company with whom we might otherwise avidly engage and find common ground. Our critical anthropology follows in the amorphous tradition of respecting differences but here in uncharacteristic ways, as if a sizeable contingent among us has drawn a protective shield around Israel, U.S. government backing, and the Israeli lobby in the United States in ways we would otherwise neither abide by nor have submitted to before.

The question is, why this is so. Is it that it traces an invisible corridor, a wide berth around some of our own intimate affiliations and family alliances, cultural heritages, and semi-sacred sites—notably, initially (or is it fundamentally?) around guarding the memory of the Holocaust? (As if equal Palestinian rights would somehow betray and negate that memory.) These issues are not only not to be touched, but so sensitive that we have devised carefully guarded, implicitly agreed-upon protocols (in both private and public conversation) that ensure that the issues don’t “need” to be raised. Being labeled anti-Semitic or a self-hating Jew, or interpellating our colleagues as such are the epithets we disdain, the domain of Campus Watch and zealots of whatever persuasion, but hover unarticulated over conversations. Among some colleagues, even such thoughts are unseemly, uttered or not, no matter where or how one was raised.

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It seems to me that support for Israel or for the Palestinian right to have rights raises a red flag indicating that self-censorship is more civil and appropriate despite the disciplinary norm that so values challenges to convention. One could hazard something rarely stated: namely that anthropologists of Jewish background cannot see themselves desecrating their own family's memories of gas chambers, or the fiction that Zionism as originally conceived was a liberal and liberatory project, only later to warp into a surrogate colonialism (as Scott Atran called it some thirty years ago), that kibbutzim pioneering the wastelands outside Jerusalem were intrepid freedom fighters made up of family, fellow students of another generation, and family friends rather than the blue-eyed labor power of settler expansion.

This may be part of the issue—one rarely discussed—but I think it misconstrues how deeply support for Israel and its survival as a special Jewish state pervades a much broader geopolitical field and Euro-American imaginary. Israel has stood as a buttress of much more than an imagined utopian homeland freed of anti-Semitism. Israel has stood as the bulwark of a Euro-American colonial civilizing mission against Islam, woven into the fabric of European imperial pursuits, and U.S. “foreign policy” for a much longer time. It is not my case to make nor do I have time to do so. It has been made, traced in more documents than any one person could read or name. Ahmad Sa'di's recent study describing the genesis and unfolding of a systematic Israel policy in the 1940s (and many would argue Zionism's project earlier) to manage, surveil, and control Palestinians, to ensure that they would be reduced to a minority, is only the last installment of what is so extensively documented again and again.

Why have those of us, so otherwise attuned to the severed histories that have laid bare the connectivities tying imperial formations to the distribution of inequalities in so much of the world, for so long refused to make the connections between U.S. and Israeli investments,

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shared technological infrastructure, and media monopoly where we would otherwise find these deeply embedded political collusions and financial arrangements the very meat of our inquiries? How can we abide by accounts that position Israel as a democracy, when we would otherwise scathingly indict any other polity that has expanded and continues to expand at the expense of a population and a people—Palestinians—who have been so boldly and blatantly disenfranchised over decades of dispossession? How does the notion of apartheid not fit (and this is not to say that every feature of South African apartheid and that of Israel is the same)?

Given this, it is difficult to comprehend any argument that one did not and could not know. It also almost renders repetition superfluous, and makes unclear even *what kind* of things one needs to say. Do we really need to say again that Israel has only been a democracy in the most distorted sense of the term, *for some*, not for roughly 4.5 million Palestinians subject to its rule—some precarious residents of Jerusalem, others living under occupation and siege, often in camps, dispersed and pressed outside its borders? Ignorance and ignoring, as I have argued for some time, share a nefarious wedded political etymology. Contrived ignorance is an achieved state in which colonial governance invests. “Learned ignorance,” as Pierre Bourdieu once put it, is what people hide from themselves—but as much at issue is *how* they/we do so. And it is more than that: ignorance and ignoring are intimately bound to an ongoing operation, a labored effect that makes knowing and not knowing, regard and disregard conjoined and easier to achieve.

I signed the BDS statement in 2010 and as I wrote at the time, I did so from a specific location—steeped for some thirty years teaching, studying, uncomprehending, and attempting to understand again colonial governance and the intimate consequences and enduring duress of imperial effects.

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It was a measured decision, but also a visceral one, a response to an uncanny shock of recognition that reasserted itself with each stay in the Armenian quarter of Jerusalem and in Ramallah, each trip to Hebron, Nazareth, Haifa, Jaffa, Nablus, to refugee camps squeezed on their borders, to village homes cut off from their own working fields by the “security” wall, to Al-Quds University on a morning and the plush Van Leer Institute in the afternoon, and to Beit Sahour outside Bethlehem. It was accentuated at Israeli checkpoints that could appear and disappear in a day. These were not those (much more publicized) fixed structures between the occupied territories and Israel but the makeshift bottlenecks constructed of massive boulders placed and displaced at the entrances to Palestinian villages. It struck me as I watched other bus passengers quickly pull scarves over their noses as I gasped unprepared at the stench of settler waste dumped in the lower village of a Palestinian colleague, or at the account of a Birzeit colleague arriving late to our seminar because her car was awash with excrement thrown on her by Israeli settlers outraged that she drove a car on their Sabbath. And then there was the shock of recognition that was more deeply wed to what I had studied for so many years, when I found myself jolted in Tel Aviv, by that bastion of well-heeled European comforts, where one could imagine that nothing was happening at all.

My Israeli friendships are as strong as ever, and since that time I have returned to Palestine to teach mini-courses at Birzeit, to partake in a project on “Archiving Palestine,” to stand with Palestinian villagers (and, yes, Japanese tourists) at Bil'in outside Ramallah, to be part of and witness a staged choreography of Israeli soldiers who shoot tear gas pellets at the hilltop crowd while the family members of a man slain by Israeli fire several years earlier pose every Friday afternoon for international newspapers.

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These are poor credentials. I am not a Middle East specialist and can only barely make out some of the letters in the Arabic alphabet to the chagrin of my able teachers. This is merely to say that I am here for three reasons: first, because I signed on to the BDS campaign; secondly, because I have felt compelled to be in Palestine as often as I can over the last five years; thirdly, and more importantly, because so much of what I have studied for decades about colonial security regimes, their technologies of rule, gradations of sovereignty, and degradations of rights underscores by the year, the day, and the hour that expansionist settlements, confiscation of land, secondary citizenship, discrimination on the streets, ransacking of homes—as well as the privations that come when schools are policed, infrastructure is denied, water resources are confiscated—are all part and parcel of, and constitutive of, colonial situations.

I have no interest in proselytizing or suggesting that the rightness of my choices impels others to my position (an unfortunate tactic in this discussion on both sides). I do not want to make the case that a boycott of Israeli institutions is unconditionally the only course of action that makes sense. I take it to be both a choice with material effect and symbolic weight. Noam Chomsky's speech this July, parsed as unequivocally against BDS and a cautionary tale against equating South Africa's apartheid regime with Israel's, went viral, to the glee of those who still felt they should not or could not sign. But Chomsky's message was much more subtle and well conceived than this takeaway from it. As he said a month later, in an interview with Amy Goodman, "Far from being critical of BDS, I was strongly supportive of it....That article strongly supported these tactics. In fact I was involved in them and supporting them before the BDS movement even existed. They're the right tactics."¹

Chomsky may not be the last word for all of us, but what is important is to see how swiftly and easily he was misconstrued. Many

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would argue that BDS does not stand a chance and that it plays into Netanyahu's hands. I see it differently. I see it as a call to attunement and a call to attend, *not the choice of committing an act so much as committing to a set of practices and priorities that creates in itself a political space, that puts demands on oneself, to know, to look, to discern, to question the comparisons relinquished and those refused to be made, to marshal one's resources, to account for oneself, and to know better what the consequences of those choices are.*

But there is something else I wanted to talk about today: to consider what is so troubling around the issue of Israel-Palestine—the elisions that are its effect, the suspension of those analytic tools we have honed in our craft, to question the conditions that have made Israel's commitment to decimation and dispossession so off our radar and out of bounds.

There is something strange about it. We certainly do not come early to this conversation. We are not close to the forefront in asking about “freedom of speech” and censorship in and outside the academy. But something is afoot vis-à-vis Palestine. It is not only Salaita's case that has made this evident, nor the cascade of European states finally recognizing Palestine, nor the latest call by Netanyahu for enforcing what has de facto been the rule in Israel, a nationality law that further inscribes those who are Palestinian as second-class citizens. I am not alone in noting that there is probably no issue that has been more radically avoided in the allegedly collegial world we inhabit than the colonial situation of Palestinians vis-à-vis the Jewish, allegedly democratic state of Israel. Not for the first time, freedom of speech in the academy is on the line: the consequences of not supporting Israel are real if still in a minor register. But they are there: where fellowships for our students, jobs and promotions for ourselves, invitations to speak may be and are rescinded if one disobeys the respectable boundaries of civil disagreement, appropriate for a well-mannered dissension.

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Let me end (or just begin) by outlining what I see as a set of queries that demand attention:

Among those who have signed for support of a boycott as well as those who have uncomfortably refrained, there is a common, almost whispered comment that goes something like, “I’m not sure I really know enough.” “Do I know enough?” “I should know more.” Why is it that in the case of Israel’s incursions, many of us feel we don’t know enough? What protection does this offer? Would we claim not knowing enough in other contexts and at other times? I know I don’t know enough. But there are facts on the ground and they are not Golda Meir’s “facts on the ground”—and they are hard to miss.

Taking considered positions on controversial issues in the public domain has been, if not our *raison d’être*, at the very least what continues to beckon a fearless new generation of anthropologists in the making to zones of damage and hope and regeneration. I would hope that my generation could join with them to embrace the challenge of pursuing what Foucault learned from ancient Greeks and what we might, too; namely, that *parrhesia*, truth, must be a form of fearless speech in the agora of public space—a fearless speech that can only be measured by the incivilities it embraces, the transgression of which it is accused, the displeasures it invokes, and the risks one is willing to take.

—

The day after this paper was delivered at the 2014 American Anthropological Association meeting, AAA members resoundingly defeated a resolution against a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.² In June 2016, when votes were cast on a resolution to boycott Israeli universities, those favoring the boycott lost by less than one percent, a mere 39 votes: 2,432 members opposed the resolution,

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while 2,384 supported it. What became increasingly clear during the lead-up to the vote was that “pro-Israel organizations devoted considerable resources to defeating the AAA boycott.”³

One could see the bottle as half-empty. But I would argue that we should see it as half-full. Rarely if ever have the mechanics and practices of Israeli policy been so minutely described and discussed in such prominent academic and media spheres within the United States. It is no longer possible to claim we don't know enough about the incessant expansion of Israeli settlements in Palestine, the widespread evictions in the South Hebron Hills, or, as one legal scholar puts it, the “room-by-room” evacuations of Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Nor can we say that we do not know about the blacklisting and harassing of Palestine solidarity activists. This year the Modern Language Association (MLA) will vote on a similar resolution to support the boycott of Israeli academic institutions. With nearly 25,000 members, the MLA is one of the largest academic organizations in the world. Thus the very fact of the vote, and the careful delineation of arguments for it, should place “ignorance” and one might call the “will to ignore” further out of reach for us all.