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Chapter 6

Recognizing and Saving Black Lives, Recognizing and Saving Palestinian Lives

The Power of Transnational Rhetorics in Locating the Commonality of Liberation Struggles

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So that the question of how to bring movements together is also a question of the kind of language one uses and the consciousness one tries to impart. I think it's important to insist on the intersectionality of movements. In the abolition movement, we've been trying to find ways to talk about Palestine so that people who are attracted to a campaign to dismantle prisons in the US also think about the need to end the occupation of Palestine. It can't be an afterthought. It has to be part of the ongoing analysis.

(Angela Davis in *From Ferguson to Palestine*)

From America to Palestine

In my previous contribution to *Activism and Rhetoric*, I looked at how the charge of anti-Semitism has often been used against critics of Israel to shift attention away from the United States' and Israel's rejection of a comprehensive diplomatic settlement of the Israel–Palestine conflict to a focus on the character attributes of the critics themselves—by accusing the critics of being anti-Semitic. Here, I broaden the field of investigation by looking at the intersections between two seemingly different subject positions, the African American facing the prospect of racial profiling and state violence in the United States and the Palestinian living under Israeli occupation and hence debilitated by the matrix of Zionism.

These two subject positions meet in the common conditions of precariousness, premature death, and in the constant surveillance of their targeted bodies. Activist movements have emerged to address both subject positions—the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the Palestinian liberation movement associated with the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. The question I have is: How might the activist energies that have emerged within these two movements converge to harness the potential within each to resist white supremacy and Zionism?

With the rise of expressions of white nationalism with the election of Donald Trump, we have witnessed that expressions of anti-Semitism and white supremacy by Steve Bannon supporters were tolerable because Bannon and the Breitbart constituency were reflexively pro-Israel. The question foremost on everyone's minds was: how could supporters of Israel be supportive of Bannon in light of the anti-Semitism of those who associated with him? The overwhelming answer was that Bannon met the litmus test of being an ardent supporter of Israel, so he could be forgiven for being in league with racists and anti-Semites. Sources suspected, of course, that Bannon was advising Trump in August 2017 as to how to handle the aftermath of the Charlottesville controversy around the protests for and against the Confederate statutes. In the aftermath of Charlottesville, when Trump claimed that there good and bad people on both sides, he seemed to indicate selective support for white supremacists and Anti-Semites. Trump has enabled a noxious blend of racism to make claims to respectability, and in turn, leads us to consider the plight of African Americans and Palestinians.

In this chapter, I will examine why comparisons between the Black Lives Matter movement and the various international efforts to liberate Palestinians from Israeli occupation are apt and consistent with rhetoric and composition's focus on transnational and intersectional rhetorics. Both efforts represent attempts to find commonalities in the struggles of oppressed peoples seeking to transcend colonialism, white supremacy, and the oppression of people of color in specific contexts. By finding commonalities in these struggles, we can develop rhetorical strategies for resisting various forms of anti-Semitism, terrorism, or even anti-white racism. Such rhetorical strategies would include symbolic protests that would bring attention to dissenting positions about race and colonial power, structural racism and violence in the contexts of the United States and Israel–Palestine, and the specific stories of loss and trauma associated with specific victims of racist and settler-colonial violence.

Not-so-Disparate Narratives

By now, we are familiar with the this all-too-common narrative: police pull over a car during an ordinary traffic stop; after a brief encounter words are exchanged, a scuffle ensues, and then shots are fired; a Black man dies; a riot ensues—the community expresses outrage at how insensitive the police are to the needs of Black subjects in local communities. The community asks, “Why are our young men being racially profiled and denied the due process of law?” This narrative has become firmly part of the American landscape. Equally well known to Americans who follow the international headlines is this narrative: Israeli Defense Forces kill hundreds of Palestinians at the international border with Gaza, claiming to be defending the border even though Israel has never declared its borders. The casualties spark outrage in the Palestinian community and among international observers. What could these two seemingly disparate

events possibly have in common? What are the transnational sentiments contained in these well-worn narratives and how do they contribute to the production of rhetorics of resistance and change? How might such rhetorics help to facilitate resisting populations in their quest for recognition and liberation from oppressive circumstances? Rhetoricians are considering how the oppressive circumstances surrounding minority communities in the United States are connected to and have historical relationships with the suffering of minority communities on other continents.¹ The turn toward considering transnational rhetorics, that is the rhetorical connectivity informing how such communities signify to and communicate with one another, becomes especially important in the context of drawing parallels between the fate of the Palestinian community in Israel–Palestine and the historical suffering of African Americans.

The slow convergence between Black liberation in the United States and Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation and enclosure seems to come from a felt necessity, a recognition that both movements are working against political forces rooted in racism and neo-colonialism. In this sense, the movements need each other to move across and between different audiences. The circulation in social media and other online outlets of these expressions of solidarity, especially after Ferguson, have assumed a prominence in the public sphere that signals a shift in previous forms of activist engagement. By simply proclaiming that “Black Lives Matter” one works against the discursive and materially constructed reality that Black lives have historically *not* mattered in the United States. Through this performative invocation that affirms the reality, agency, and importance of Black bodies and the significance of those bodies in relation to the civil rights movement and the emerging protest movement in relation to the escalation police violence against African Americans, one affirms the humanity of Black lives. A similar movement is emerging in the United States and globally to affirm the importance and reality of Palestinian lives ruled by Israeli occupation to affirm the humanity of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. While pockets of support exist in dissident communities, the Palestinian lives matter movement has not achieved anything near the levels of support that the Black Lives Matter movement has. How, then, might the Palestinian lives matter movement draw energy, sustenance, and support from the Black Lives Matter movement? What are the intersections between these two movements that would lead to transnational solidarity? The convergence of interests between the two movements is rhetorically significant and interesting precisely because of the subject positions of Palestinians and African Americans in relation to the US and Israeli governments. Both populations constitute a problem to be managed, surveilled, and kept at bay through police force.

An FBI report published in August 2017 on Black extremist groups represents a moment of recognition by the state. This report shows that the subject positions associated with Black Power and assertions of Black identity represent a discursive target in need of state management and control. The

threat such assertions of Black identity pose to police officers and other government officials led to the publication of a confidential FBI report on “Black identity extremists” (BIEs) and how to handle the growing problem from the standpoint of law enforcement. The exact title of the report, “Black Identity Extremists Likely Motivated to Target Law Enforcement Officers,” indicates the supposed threat associated with these groups.

According to the report, these BIEs have been motivated since the Michael Brown shooting in August 2014 to take revenge on law enforcement for what they perceive as historical racial injustices against African Americans and that the “grand jury’s decision in the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson would likely be exploited by some individuals to justify threats and attacks against law enforcement and critical infrastructure” (3). Furthermore, according to the report:

The FBI defines black identity extremists as individuals who seek, wholly or in part, through unlawful acts of force or violence, in response to perceived racism and injustice in American society and some do so in furtherance of establishing a separate Black homeland or autonomous black social institutions, communities, or governing organizations within the United States.

(footnote b, 2)

The report stipulates that:

[t]he FBI defines sovereign citizen extremists as individuals who openly reject their US citizenship status, believe that most forms of established government, authority, and institutions are illegitimate, and seek, wholly or in part, through unlawful acts of force or violence, to further their claim to be immune from government authority.

(footnote c, 3)

Black identity extremists then are to be vigilantly guarded against because of the potential threat they pose to state authority and those who represent that authority. In the report itself, we see that Dallas, TX, shooter Micah Johnson, who killed five white police officers “during a First Amendment protected protest” is called a “BIE” because of his journal writings. As the report states, “Based on Johnson’s journal writings and statements to police, he appeared to have been influenced by BIE ideology.” In October of 2014, Zale Thompson conducted a hatchet attack against four police officers in Queens, New York, revealing in his writings that he “advocated for armed struggle against the ‘oppressors’ and mass revolt against the US social, economic, and political systems,’ which he perceived to be white dominated.” Johnson and Thompson, who were both African American, were shot and killed in their standoffs with police. The report goes on to state, “The FBI further assesses it is very likely additional controversial police shootings of African Americans and

the associated legal proceedings will continue to serve as drivers for violence against law enforcement.” Furthermore, “The FBI assesses it is likely police officers of minority groups are also targeted by BIEs because they are also representative of a perceived oppressive law enforcement system” (7).

Given what is described in the report, it is difficult not to wonder about the existential condition of Black life in the United States, as the precarious conditions that inform how Black lives are viewed by those who have the biopolitical power to take those lives away with a split-second decision. How police officers come to relate to and with the Black lives they are surveilling and controlling brings together a whole of host of considerations that force one to take account of the history of Black oppression in the United States. In assessing the existential conditions of Black life in the United States, one must take into account how Black life, Black subjectivity, is conditioned in relation to the demands of the police state. How are one’s life prospects diminished by the state’s categorization of a citizen as “Black”? If one’s phenotypical race emerges as a function of how well a policeman’s gaze conforms to historical stereotypes about non-white races that have been generated by state and federal law enforcement agencies, then “driving while Black” or being “pulled over while Black” are seeming precursors to being subjected to state violence when one refuses to adequately genuflect before the state’s authority and its monopoly of violence.

Palestinians living under occupation know all too well the experience of being detained, surveilled, and harassed by the Israeli Defense Forces as they go about their daily activities. “Walking while Palestinian” or “Shopping while Palestinian” are activities subjected to surveillance and evaluation by state authorities. How might the subject position of the Palestinian living under Israeli occupation be theorized in relation to Black subjectivity if we think in transnational terms by creating a line of solidarity between the seemingly disparate histories of Palestinians and African Americans through the history of settler colonialism and the predicaments of both populations in the context of the modern security state? With the rise to prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement and BLM’s successful use of social media to raise public consciousness about police mistreatment of African Americans, even before they are suspects in a crime, a serious challenge to police and state authority has emerged. As a movement committed to documenting the challenges associated with and the precariousness of Black lives, BLM disrupts the discursive hegemony of white supremacy in the context of policing. The discourse of continual suspicion that Black subjects contend with limits their ability to live free and fulfilling lives, leading to acts of desperation when their circumscribed freedom is in danger of being totally taken away.

In April 2015, when the video showing Walter Scott being shot in the back by Columbia, South Carolina police officer Michael Slager, as Scott ran away from his car after being pulled over for a broken taillight and for outstanding child support payments became public, it confirmed what many African Americans have argued for years—that cops plant evidence to solidify their narratives that they are shooting Black citizens in self-defense to cover

up what is in fact cold-blooded murder. Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers have committed similar actions to justify killing defenseless Palestinians in the name of counterterrorism. For example, in March 2015 in the town of Hebron, IDF soldier Elor Azaria killed an incapacitated Palestinian (Abdul Fattah al-Sharif) lying on the ground by shooting him in the head. The killing was caught on video. After one of the most divisive trials in Israeli history, Elor was given a brief jail sentence. He was released from prison in May 2018. The case revolved around whether Elor shot al-Sharif because he perceived a threat or out of malice. Elor claimed that he saw al-Sharif reaching for a knife laying on the ground and shot him in the head to defend his fellow IDF soldiers. However, the knife is not present in the video at the time of the shooting, only afterward, suggesting that it was planted to solidify Elor's story that he acted in the defense of his fellow soldiers.² Elor's commanding officer reported that, immediately after the shooting, Elor declared that the "terrorist was alive and needed to die." How might we go about teaching our students about the precarious lives that Scott and al-Sharif lived as subjects targeted for extrajudicial killing by agents of the state because of their race/ethnicity?

Furthermore, how do we teach students about the rhetorical strategies informing the tactics of both the activists seeking to bring attention to the precarious lives of Scott and al-Sharif, as well as those countering the activists? This is an interesting form of rhetorical expression in how it goes about creating lines of solidarity between seemingly disparate movements that are separated by geographical distance, ideological space, and time. Just as Black lives *should* matter, Palestinian lives should matter to those advancing an anti-imperialist frame to understand world conflict. That there has not been more solidarity expressed between the two movements is hard to explain, but that there has been recent convergence in expressions of solidarity between the two movements is deserving of consideration.

Convergence of Interests

The use of military-grade combat equipment in American cities as a form of riot control to intimidate protesters, paralleling riot-control efforts in the Middle East, the United States in Iraq, and Israel in the occupied territories, led to the recognition that domestic and international policing efforts were linked. Much of this US military equipment given to local police resulted from surpluses produced after 2001 up through to the US invasion of Iraq. The American homeland became the place to dump military-grade equipment, eagerly received by local police departments, for surveilling and controlling the public space. What does this transfer of military equipment to police departments reveal about the government's attitude in terms of policing its citizens? The public space is a zone of enforcement that can be militarized in moments of political crisis to contain certain forms of social organization and protest.

Identity Extremism?

The release of the FBI report on Black-identity radical groups that I examined earlier raises questions about how race, and more specifically a specific racial politics that challenges the domination of the state. Racial minorities challenge this domination by exposing the differentialized treatment they experience in various spheres of social life. The criminalization of activism in this way suggests that expressions of a racial or religious identity can be reframed as a form of extremism that challenges state formations. That an identity can be activated in this way because racial politics makes claims of injustice against the state that are radically disruptive. Similarly, the ways in which Israel bans and makes illegal protests by Palestinians seeking to disrupt the occupation. The flashing of a peace or resistance sign can lead to arrest. Throwing rocks can subject one to arrest and humiliation. Such actions can lead to social incapacitation, as Palestinians of all ages can be imprisoned for indefinite periods of time for engaging in political protests. By criminalizing protests against its occupation, Israel can create a deterrence model for those Palestinians contemplating throwing rocks, confronting IDF soldiers, and challenging laws that are differentially applied between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. The subjectivity of the African American inner-city youth, alienated and underserved, seems to present a distant parallel to the Palestinian who faces the deprivations introduced by the Israeli occupation. However, an examination of the specifics of how alienation is produced by supremacist ideologies (white supremacy and Zionism) that distance Blacks and Palestinians from the respective societies in which they live reveals the dehumanization of Black and Palestinian life. Black and Palestinian subjectivity, then, emerges in relation to white supremacist and Zionist frameworks that position the Black and Palestinian body in a subordinate position requiring continual surveillance.

On the Ground

Last year, Cornell history professor, Russell Rickford, created controversy when he chanted “Free Palestine” at a knee-in protest at Cornell to honor Black athletes who took a knee during the playing the national anthem at National Football League games. Colin Kaepernick has been the most visible example. Rickford was accused of bring in a wholly irrelevant issue to the protest by using this chant. To contextualize his act of protest, Rickford explained that the colonization of Palestine is wholly about white supremacy, suggesting that Zionism is grounded in a racist supremacist logic that meshes with white supremacy.³ As an article describing the protest explained, “Rickford said his rhetorical strategy in leading the crowd in the chant ‘Free Palestine’ was precisely aligned with the aim of the protest” (Yoon). Unsurprisingly, Rickford was excoriated for his views by pro-Israel supporters for seemingly expressing taboo sentiments. While these supporters could get behind the message of Black liberation from oppression in a racist America, they seemingly balked

when the analytical lens shifts to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and seeks to draw a comparison between the treatment of these Palestinians living under occupation and the treatment of African Americans in the years leading up to, throughout, and after the civil rights movement.⁴ This cognitive dissonance experienced within the US public sphere is worthy of a full analysis, for it reveals how highlighting certain intersectionalities and expressions of solidarity are intolerable to elite opinion if they highlight and problematize Israel's occupation of the Palestinians. If one draws parallels between Israeli occupation and Jim Crow racism, accusations of anti-Semitism may very well follow. Israel's liberal supporters strongly resist the suggestion that the Israel-Palestine conflict is based in racial discrimination. Anti-Arab sentiment, as the thinking goes, is supposedly grounded in Arab resistance to Israel as a Jewish state. Descriptions of Israel's occupation as being a colonial occupation are denounced as wrong-headed for the simple reason that the occupiers of Palestinian land are Jewish.

The controversy surrounding Black National Football League players who take a knee during the playing of the national anthem at the beginning of games helps to illuminate the place of African Americans in the national imaginary. The felt-sense of betrayal expressed against these players from the White House to Main Street seeks to condemn the symbolic act of protest, revealing how Black dissent from nationalist appeals disrupts the US image as a benevolent empire. We do well to remember how many Americans reacted angrily to the Black Olympic athletes, Tommy Smith and John Carlos, when they raised their fists in solidarity with the Black Panthers at the Olympic ceremonies in Mexico City in 1968. Both Smith and Carlo wore black gloves and black socks with no shoes. How has this expression of American patriotism, standing at rapt attention during the national anthem, become implicated in the oppression of racial minorities? Of course, the controversy that has emerged between President Trump and several NFL teams and players extends back to representations of the Black Lives Matter movement in the media and popular culture in the wake of several high-profile killings of African Americans by the police. The narrative promoted by BLM and others that racial discrimination is so endemic to the national fabric of the United States has taken hold. NFL players such as Colin Kaepernick believe it is the responsibility of Black athletes to not acknowledge the national anthem at the beginning of professional sporting events by taking a knee. This of course has led to a showdown between many professional athletes, such as LeBron James and Stephen Curry, and President Trump. Trump has called for the firing of protesting players, insisting that owners should "fire the sons of bitches." As Trump stated on Fox and Friends back in May, "You have to stand proudly for the national anthem or you shouldn't be playing, you shouldn't be there. Maybe you shouldn't be in the country." In response to the controversy, the NFL passed a new policy allowing any player or staff member not wishing to stand during the playing of the national anthem to remain in the locker room, but those players and staff members who do come onto the field must stand when the anthem is played.⁵

The precarity of Black lives and the seeming insensitivity expressed toward those lives when one stands during the national anthem have collided with the narrative of patriotism that insists that not standing during the national anthem disrespects those soldiers who have sacrificed their lives in the defense of the US nation. Displays of solidarity with those who have been racially profiled and harassed by law enforcement are completely understandable in light of all that has happened in the last five years with respect to the development of the BLM. By increasing society's consciousness about the intense surveillance Black and brown bodies face in the United States, and by forcing the realization that Black and brown lives were being cut short by state violence, BLM provided ample reminders that the United States remains a white supremacist society based on a racial supremacist logic that placed people of color in a subordinate status. This awareness has been promoted by writers such as Ta-nahesi Coates and Angela Davis, who have come to assume positions of significant prominence in speaking to the racial problematic in the United States in the post-civil rights era.⁶

Conclusion

By exploring the transnational rhetorical intersections between anti-racist forces behind BLM's promotion of Black liberation in the United States and the push to increase awareness of the Palestinian predicament in the West Bank in Gaza, in the midst of Israeli occupation and enclosure, rhetoricians can view the commonalities of the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle. This effort is not simply an attempt to compare the possible connections between BLM and organizations and individuals seeking to bring Israel in conformity with international law through the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement. This movement has made significant strides within the US public sphere. One indication of this success comes in forms of resistance to it: the number of legislative attempts to criminalize participation in BDS. It is reminiscent of the attempts to criminalize efforts of those participating in the desegregation movement in the 1950s and 1960s. One of the ironies that has emerged in the contest of the promotion of Palestinian rights in the United States is that aspects of the Civil Rights Act have been deployed to crack down on critics of Israel. That legislation that has historically been associated with the protection of the civil rights of African Americans was being used against those seeking to advance the rights of Palestinians living under occupation and enclosure in the West Bank and Gaza because of their supposed anti-Jewish sentiments demonstrates how discourse can be reoriented to the circumstances of time and place, sometimes in pernicious ways.

In this context, one must note the points of connection and solidarity that have been created and drawn between the focus on the precarity of Black lives and the precarity of Palestinian lives as result of Israel's occupation and enclosure of West Bank and Gaza. While the Black Lives Matter movement has

focused on racial profiling in the context of policing in cities, and how racial minorities are disproportionately stopped for traffic violations and other policing investigations, those who have been involved in the Palestinian liberation movement have focused on the effects of Israel's occupation on the everyday lives of Palestinians, while paying particular attention to specific human rights and international law violations, which have received increasing attention in the public sphere. The coincidence between the rising interest in both states of precarity, of African American populations in the United States and Palestinians in the Middle East, forces a recognition of the convergence and overlapping of various spheres of concern that should be of interest to critical rhetoricians.

The transnational dimensions of the emerging solidarity between Palestinian and BLM activists has been taken on by Angela Davis in her book *From Ferguson to Palestine*, as well as by Ali Abunimah in his *The Battle for Justice in Palestine*. Davis and Abunimah highlight the significance of the Ferguson protests for thinking about transnational connections with Palestine. One of the most poignant moments during the protests in Ferguson was when protesters received tweets of solidarity from activists in the West Bank and Gaza. The tweets from Palestine provided advice about how Ferguson protesters could protect themselves against police tear gas.⁷ In such moments, we see the emergence of a sort of conjoined solidarity that combines the civil rights struggle with the anti-colonial resistance movements that have occurred throughout the Middle East—from the Algerian Revolution, the First and Second Intifada, through to the Arab Spring. These movements implicate the United States in a history of domestic segregation, the promotion of CIA-backed coups to overthrow Mossadegh in Iran in 1955 to solidify US oil interests, the support of US-supported dictatorships throughout the Middle East, as well as US military and diplomatic support for Israel's occupation since 1967. The parallels between the US civil rights movement and the Palestinian liberation movement are significant; their common struggles and the historical contexts from which they have emerged should not elude the field. Each movement places the legacy of US imperialism and white supremacy squarely in focus, which is precisely why Israel's supporters have been intent on targeting BLM as an anti-Israel movement, placing defenders of Israel's occupation in a strange position.⁸ The irony should not be lost on those who study rhetoric.

Notes

- 1 See Rebecca Dingo's *Networking Arguments: Rhetoric, Transnational Feminism, and Public Policy Writing*.
- 2 See William Booth and Ruth Eglash's "The military trial that is tearing Israel Apart." Also see Adam Horvitz's "Elor Azaria and Israeli Moral Core," and Yaniv Kubovich and Noa Landau's "Elor Azaria, Israeli Soldier Convicted of Killing a Wounded Palestinian Terrorist, Set Free After Nine Months."
- 3 Yoon, John. "Professor Has No Regrets After Controversial Chant."
- 4 The blog Legal Insurrection accused Rickford of "hijacking other social justice causes." See William Jacobson's "Cornell Take-A-Knee Protest hijacked, Professor leads chant of

‘Free Palestine.’” It bears pointing out that Professor William Jacobson who runs Legal Insurrection played a key role in characterizing Professor Steven Salaita as anti-Semitic in the lead-up to Salaita’s derailed appointment at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign.

- 5 See P.R. Lockhart’s “Trump praises national anthem rule, say kneeling players ‘maybe shouldn’t be in the country.’”
- 6 See Coates’ *Between the World and Me*.
- 7 See Marc Molloy’s “Palestinians Tweet Tear Gas Advice to Protestors in Ferguson.”
- 8 See Jonathan Greenblatt’s “Anti-Semitism is Creeping into Progressivism.”

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