



# Black-Palestinian Transnational Solidarity: Renewals, Returns, and Practice

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This introductory essay outlines the context for this special issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* on Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity (BPTS). Through the analytic of “renewal,” the authors point to the recent increase in individual and collective energies directed toward developing effective, reciprocal, and transformative political relationships within various African-descendant and Palestinian communities around the world. Drawing from the extant BPTS literature, this essay examines the prominent intellectual currents in the field and points to new methodologies and analytics that are required to move the field forward. With this essay, the authors aim not only to contextualize the field and to frame this special issue, but also to chart new directions for future intellectual and political work.

COMMEMORATING MARTIN LUTHER KING Jr.’s birthday in 2019, acclaimed legal scholar and writer Michelle Alexander used her tribune as a *New York Times* columnist to “break the silence” on what she described as “one of the great moral challenges of our time: the crisis in Israel-Palestine.”<sup>1</sup> In honor of King’s legacy, particularly the internationalist vision captured by his critique of the United States’ imperial war in Vietnam, Alexander argued: “We must condemn Israel’s actions: unrelenting violations of international law, continued occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, home demolitions and land confiscations . . . must not tolerate Israel’s refusal even to discuss the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes . . . and, with as much courage and conviction as we can muster, speak out against the system of legal discrimination that exists inside Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

Alexander’s poignant essay caused a furor. Though she was not the first prominent writer to speak out in support of Palestine, or even the first prominent Black person to do so, Alexander’s article hit a deep nerve. As a *New York Times* columnist, a perceived part of the liberal mainstream, and perhaps most significantly, coming on the heels of several high-profile incidents involving other Black leaders on the issue of Palestine, Alexander’s intervention generated considerable reaction from multiple political and ideological quarters. In response, the *Times* broke with its policy of not publishing editorial rebuttals and ran an op-ed by columnist Bret Stephens titled “The Progressive Assault on Israel.”<sup>3</sup> In the piece, Stephens framed the U.S. progressive movement’s growing incorporation of Palestine into its political

agenda as a new form of anti-Semitism. According to Stephens, U.S. progressives, including African American voices such as activist Tamika Mallory, were part of a hypocritical movement that “can detect a racist dog-whistle from miles away [but] is strangely deaf when it comes to some of the barking on its own side of the fence.”<sup>4</sup>

In making his claim, Stephens conflated Zionism with Judaism, reiterating the well-worn (and faulty) contention that an anti-Zionist position or a critique of Israeli state policy is, ipso facto, anti-Semitic speech. More interesting, however, was Stephens’ neglect of a key component regarding Alexander’s argument concerning Israel’s Black critics. Critiquing Israeli policy is neither a domestic question nor purely a referendum on the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma or on Black American-Jewish relations. Rather, it is part of a Black radical tradition that has always been transnational in character and multivalent in scope.<sup>5</sup>

Black internationalism, or what Russell Rickford describes in this issue as a “global Black imaginary,” considered the U.S. Black struggle as part of a global one against racial capitalism epitomized by imperial domination. Beginning in the early twentieth century, Black internationalism has continued to develop in response to significant historical junctures, especially World Wars I and II, as well as the anti-colonial revolt that defined the 1960s and 1970s. Black solidarity with the Palestinian struggle crystallized during the anti-colonial turn and particularly after the 1967 war. Elements of the Black radical tradition that allied with the Palestinian struggle understood it not only as a principled response to a specific historical injustice, but also as the signpost of an analytical understanding of imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy as global phenomena that subsume the Black American condition. Palestine, which represents the fulcrum of U.S. imperial exploits in the Middle East, vividly evokes this internationalist analytic and has thus been a touchstone of multiple Black radical movements. Stephens’ swift and unfair dismissal of this legacy as anti-Jewish bigotry masquerading as progressive politics belies the political analyses underlying this rich tradition. His dismissal also ignores the current moment’s fervent renewal of Black internationalism, sustained by an activist praxis and analytical framework for Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity (BPTS).

In this brief introductory essay to the *Journal’s* special issue on BPTS, we unpack the meaning and consequences of this moment of renewal, highlighting some of the key terms and ideas that inform its discourse. In doing so, we aim to contextualize the contributions to this volume, as well as spotlight areas for future scholarly inquiry.

## Framing Renewal

The renewal of BPTS can be linked to the summer of 2014, with the concurrent bombardment of the Gaza Strip and the occupation of the U.S. city of Ferguson, Missouri. Israel’s fifty-one-day onslaught against the besieged Palestinian territory, featuring thirty-two thousand artillery shells and six thousand airstrikes leading to over two thousand deaths and ten thousand injuries, again invited witness to the scope of imperial power and violence.<sup>6</sup> The killing by U.S. police officer Darren Wilson of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown Jr., who was left lying on the ground for four and a half hours on 9 August 2014, was the latest highly visible killing of an unarmed Black

civilian that provoked a trenchant analysis of state violence and criminalization as the afterlife of U.S. slavery.<sup>7</sup> These two spectacles of violence not only underscored the necropolitical capacity of the modern nation-state,<sup>8</sup> but also spotlighted its particular commitment to the devaluation, dehumanization, and destruction of both Black and Palestinian life.

During this period of civil unrest, organic articulations of solidarity between Blacks and Palestinians emerged from the ground. In Ferguson, Black activists could be seen wearing Palestinian kaffiyehs and chanting internationalist political slogans like “From Ferguson to Palestine, occupation is a crime.” At the same time, a great deal of attention was given to tweets sent by Palestinians based in the West Bank offering advice to the predominately Black group of Ferguson protestors on how to properly protect themselves from tear gas. Media outlets, activists, and scholars celebrated these articulations as a watershed moment of mutual recognition and affirmation. These gestures helped to constitute the “Ferguson-Gaza moment,” what Kristian Davis Bailey aptly described as “an increase in mainstream U.S. political awareness and momentum shift for both Black and Palestinian liberation struggles.”<sup>9</sup> However, as Robin D. G. Kelley emphasizes (in this issue), that moment emerged from years of organizing and collaboration such that “we might think of the Ferguson-Gaza convergence as catalyzing rather than commencing the resurgence of BPTS.”

Indeed, the Ferguson-Gaza moment precipitated increased intellectual and cultural production related to Black-Palestinian solidarity. Since summer 2014, a range of collaborative art exhibits, multimedia collaborations, delegations, solidarity statements, speeches, and scholarly essays have continued to spotlight the fecund political connections and possibilities between Blacks and Palestinians.<sup>10</sup> We mindfully deploy the term “renewal” to describe these contemporary articulations of BPTS. With this term, we refer to the regeneration of individual and collective energies within various African-descendant and Palestinian communities throughout the global diaspora for the purpose of developing effective, reciprocal, and transformative political relationships. By “renewal,” we do not imply an interruption, at any juncture in history, of solidarity praxes between Blacks and Palestinians. To do so would be to discount the longstanding political work of numerous activists, politicians, scholars, and cultural workers who, since the Nakba and even more significantly since the 1967 war, have shaped, forged, and sustained transnational bonds of solidarity.<sup>11</sup> However, a series of tectonic shifts, including the end of the Cold War and the establishment of the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s, radically reconfigured the global geopolitical landscape and diminished these political commitments as a global analytic. Within the United States, these global reconfigurations were complemented by significant shifts at the domestic level. State repression of radical Black organizations through programs like the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s COINTELPRO, the dismantling of counter-public spaces such as Black bookstores, and the growing centrality of neoliberal logics in shaping post-civil rights-era Black political thought all contributed to a turn away from radical internationalism as an organizing feature of the Black political tradition.<sup>12</sup>

The framework of renewal invites us to consider those factors—such as policy interventions, relations of capital, and sociocultural practices—that have animated Black-Palestinian solidarity historically, contributed to its nadir in the early 1990s, and has helped to revitalize it as an analytic today. While we must acknowledge the seemingly permanent nature of particular constitutive factors (capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy), we also recognize the role of new elements

(such as globalization and digital technologies) in catalyzing current renewals. One key moment representing the confluence of these persistent and new factors was the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), a nationwide network of U.S. activist groups. Sparked by the increased visibility of state-involved killings of Black people, as well as the use of new media as a form of organizing, activism, and knowledge dissemination, the M4BL has emerged as a key site of political mobilization. M4BL's policy platform, published in 2016, explicitly criticized the Israeli occupation, illegal settlement expansion, and outright "genocide . . . against the Palestinian people."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the M4BL deployed the language of "solidarity," which contributed to the mobilizing energy toward the renewal of BPTS.

## Solidarity as Engaged Praxis

Perhaps because of the nascent character of such renewed articulations of solidarity, these contributions have been largely celebratory and have routinely framed the relationship between Blacks and Palestinians through the language of common interest, contextual similarity, and shared struggle. While indispensable, such frameworks are insufficient for developing a critical and nuanced analysis of contemporary Black-Palestinian solidarity politics. As Nadine Naber argues, the language of "sharing a common enemy" undermines an analysis of key historical and contemporary differences between Black and Palestinian struggles. This language also obscures how sectors of the Arab American community deploy the very same oppressive frameworks (for example: anti-Blackness and heteronormativity) that undermine the viability of Black life.<sup>14</sup>

A pillar of this work involves critically interrogating the meaning of solidarity itself.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, we must examine the ways that notions of engagement through active witness,<sup>16</sup> critical reciprocity,<sup>17</sup> critique of state violence,<sup>18</sup> and recognition of difference,<sup>19</sup> among others, have been central to Black-Palestinian solidarity projects. An example of this arose in 2015, when the U.S.-based activist network Black for Palestine released its "Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine." The statement, signed by over one thousand people and thirty-nine organizations, offered a critique of Israeli occupation, settlement expansion, and various forms of material and symbolic violence. The signatories also pledged to pressure U.S. politicians on Israeli-Palestinian policy; identified specific targets for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement; and promised to "finally take action" as part of a commitment to "ensure Palestinian liberation at the same time as we work towards our own."<sup>20</sup>

Such examples spotlight the particular ways that many BPTS activists conceptualize solidarity as an engaged praxis. They also demonstrate the need to further examine solidarity as a unit of conceptual and empirical analysis. How do different actors define and mobilize particular conceptions of solidarity? What are the various affordances and constraints of solidarity as an analytic? What are the ethical and moral contradictions of solidarity as a political telos? In his article, "Troubling Idols: Black-Palestinian Solidarity in U.S. Afro-Christian Spaces" (this issue), Taurean J. Webb argues such questions allow us to conceive of "new ways to imagine coalitional politics [that are] less bound with organizing around vaguely common interests and more grounded in building ethical, trusting, and sustainable relationships." Webb's article scrutinizes Afro-Christianity in the United States as a "major battleground for the solidarity movement." Webb attempts to

show how formative mythologies central to Afro-Christian affinities for Zionism are afflicted by analytical blind spots with regard to colonialism and white supremacy. Webb gestures toward correcting these omissions by drawing on the Black radical tradition and putting it in conversation with intersectionality as a prevalent analytic in contemporary renewals of BPTS. His intervention heeds a cautionary note regarding the need to avoid essentializing the Black struggle and helps to illuminate the limitations and horizons of BPTS.

## Transnationalism Continues Internationalist Traditions

Like many scholars, we deploy the discourse of “transnationalism” as a means of framing both historical and contemporary formations of Black-Palestinian solidarity. Specifically, we use the term to acknowledge the ways that Black-Palestinian solidarity has always been a global project that transcended the borders, purview, or control of particular nation-states. This is not a novel concept, but one that continues the rich tradition of twentieth-century internationalism. The convening of the Bandung Conference in the aftermath of World War II, when colonial powers were significantly weakened, marked an early milestone in the consolidation of Third Worldism. This current, which encompassed Black internationalists, became a critical site of intellectual and political resistance to colonialism and imperialism, understood as global projects that transcended the material and juridical borders of the modern nation-state.<sup>21</sup> Within the United States, the internationalist analytic also framed white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and other forms of European hegemony as articulations of the same colonial and imperial power structure. Internationalism, like our conceptualization of transnationalism, framed global solidarity among colonized nations and newly independent states as a necessary component for resistance.<sup>22</sup>

In this vein, we follow the lead of numerous anti-colonial thinkers and activists who did not fetishize the modern nation-state or view nationhood as an ideal space in which to fully embody the radical imagination. To the contrary, they deployed the language of self-determination as a proxy for a more nuanced “freedom dream” and a sustained revolutionary practice of “worldmaking.”<sup>23</sup> In doing so, they simultaneously rejected Western impositions of juridical borders that marked the Global South for conquest, exploitation, and settlement while pursuing national independence as a predicate element of broader reconfigurations.

In their essays in this special issue, historians Kelley and Rickford make critical interventions that further our understanding of the history of the present and particularly the enduring legacy of transnationalism. Kelley provides an intellectual history of BPTS referencing contemporary controversies involving Black leaders and intellectuals (including Michelle Alexander, Ilhan Omar, and Angela Davis, to name a few) as moments with instructive legacies. Using them as signposts, Kelley digs into an archive of Black thought and activism to help explain how contemporary controversies also reflect ongoing legacies. In particular, he argues “that a vision of worldmaking rather than a politics of analogy or identity has been the real cement for BPTS, and that the eruption of post-1967 history into present struggles to end occupation, dispossession, exploitation, and violence in Palestine and the United States has been a catalyst for imagining revolution as opposed to plotting coalition.”

Rickford similarly uses a historical approach to explore the legacy of Black transnationalism. In doing so, he unsettles a fixation on Palestine regarding Black transnational solidarity, and places it in the broader context of a Black radical political imaginary. Like Kelley, who insists that the analytic of transnational solidarity exceeds nationalist and identity-based forms of kinship, Rickford forcefully shows how “Black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Third Worldism constructed powerful theories of Afro-Palestinian kinship, using revolutionary motifs to affirm a sense of mutuality with a population whose oppression had been systematically denied. In so doing, they reimagined or transcended bonds of color, positing anti-imperialist struggle, rather than racial affinity, as the precondition of camaraderie.” Both Rickford and Kelley advance an analytic of worldmaking in the Black radical tradition and in Black-Palestinian solidarity, which transcends political sovereignty as the horizon of freedom.

Despite the emphasis on worldmaking, a key shortcoming with regard to studying BPTS is the issue of geographic limitation. As it stands, the current scholarly literature focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of Blacks and Palestinians within the United States, thereby neglecting articulations of this solidarity elsewhere in the world. This U.S.-centric approach is problematic as it creates multiple intellectual blind spots. First, it obscures the longstanding history of Palestinian solidarity from Black communities outside of North America, specifically on the African continent, as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>24</sup> Such an approach also elides and ultimately essentializes the variegated and context-specific experiences, identities, and politics of Blacks and Palestinians throughout the diaspora. For example, the political dynamics and stakes of BPTS in the United States stand in sharp contrast to those in South Africa, where the African National Congress (South Africa’s ruling party since 1990) has had longstanding ideological and diplomatic ties to the Palestinian national movement. Maha Nassar’s article in this issue begins to address this blind spot and makes new strides in the BPTS literature in two ways. First, by examining texts dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, Nassar expands the temporal scope of a historical examination of BPTS. Although seminal texts have explored Afro-Asian solidarities and Black internationalism at the turn of the twentieth century, BPTS, in particular, has been examined mostly as a post-1967 phenomenon. Second, Nassar looks at the work of Palestinian writers, poets, and intellectuals from the vantage point of their literary production, their coverage of events in the United States, and their selection of English-language works for translation into Arabic. In so doing, she is also tapping into a new, Arabic-language archive in the study of BPTS. Nassar’s emphasis on Palestinian intellectual and cultural production in regard to BPTS helps to fill a notable gap in the literature that has predominantly drawn from an English-language archive.

Finally, as Laleh Khalili notes, the U.S.-centered approach to transnational solidarity also reinforces the scholarly tendency to frame the transnational as an engagement between Europe/North America and the Global South, rather than as relationships between multiple nations within the Global South.<sup>25</sup> Such a tendency undermines the development of scholarship examining the particular contours of “South-South” political formations. The roundtable on delegations in this issue charts new practices of solidarity aimed at forging such political formations. Featuring Ahmad Abuznaid, Phillip Agnew, Maytha Alhassen, Kristian Davis Bailey, and Nadya Tannous, the roundtable is meant to help build a new archive based on contemporary events. The contributors are all activists and scholar-activists who have led, organized, and traveled on delegations to Palestine.

Their interventions illuminate the theoretical contributions of activists who are creating new practices for worldmaking, along the lines suggested by Kelley and Rickford, and forging the South-South relations highlighted by Khalili. In several ways, their contributions begin to fill in omissions in the emerging literature.

As an example, Bailey organized the only Palestinian delegation *from* Palestine to the United States in 2014 and is also responsible for a delegation from the African continent to Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Bailey's work disrupts the overemphasis on North America and nurtures a South-South solidarity. Tannous's intervention is also unique. Inspired by the work of Black and Brown delegations, she organized and led a delegation of indigenous youth from North America to Palestine in 2018. Her experiences and reflections help to elaborate and complicate a discussion of anti-Blackness and settler colonialism that has been largely restricted to scholarly production.

## Theorizing Race

The topic of race has also not been a central analytical concern within the BPTS literature, though it has been addressed as an analytic elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Despite an emphasis on solidarity, shared experiences, mutual oppression, and resistance in BPTS literature, notions of race and racism remain undertheorized. The challenges posed by this weakness were evidenced in 2014, when a critique of Palestine as a site of enduring anti-Black racism emerged among self-described Afro-pessimists.<sup>27</sup> This was best captured in an interview with Frank B. Wilderson III, where he explained:

So right now, pro-Palestinian people are saying, "Ferguson is an example of what is happening in Palestine, and y'all are getting what we're getting." That's just bullshit. First, there's no time period in which Black police and slave domination have ever ended. Second, the Arabs and the Jews are as much a part of the Black slave trade—the creation of Blackness as social death—as anyone else. As I told a friend of mine, "[Y]eah we're going to help you get rid of Israel, but the moment that you set up your shit we're going to be right there to jack you up, because anti-Blackness is as important and necessary to the formation of Arab psychic life as it is to the formation of Jewish psychic life."<sup>28</sup>

Wilderson's critique highlights a distinction between political solidarity based on principled opposition to state violence, on the one hand, and a commitment to combat racism in joint struggle, on the other. Moreover, his intervention distinguishes between racism as a civilizational regime that has generally characterized colonial and settler-colonial domination and anti-Black racism, a more particular phenomenon aimed at the universal subjugation of Black bodies. Wilderson's critique and the queries it raises illuminate the enduring need to better theorize race with regard to the question of Palestine. In 2015, this imperative inspired *Jadaliyya* editors to moderate a roundtable discussion between thirteen Black and Palestinian activists, scholars, and scholar-activists to "better understand what a commitment to anti-blackness should look like in the Palestinian solidarity movement and among Black-Palestinian solidarity efforts."<sup>29</sup> A renewed concern with racism as a transnational structure has engendered new intellectual works<sup>30</sup> as well as political campaigns like Jewish Voice for Peace's "Deadly Exchange" that targets the exchange of carceral technologies between the United States and Israel.<sup>31</sup> This trend has also contributed to

a growing body of scholarship concerned with the relationship between settler colonialism and anti-Black racism as ontological frameworks as well as coconstitutive structures.<sup>32</sup> Such activist and scholarly efforts may help us better understand Palestine not merely as a national liberation struggle *featuring* racism, but rather as a struggle *against* racism.

Still, considerably more scholarly work needs to be done to properly situate BPTS within the multiple historical and contemporary structures of racism that coalesce when Black-Palestinian struggles meet. Specifically, we must examine the particular ways that anti-Blackness operates within the Palestinian and broader Arab diasporic contexts. Such an examination demands that we decenter U.S.-based conceptions of racial formation in favor of more complex, historically situated, and region-specific analyses. This also requires that we examine the specific ways that racial identity in the Middle East is shaped through the complex forces of class, caste, religion, labor, and political economy. Within the U.S. context, we must also consider how processes of racialization among Arab immigrants inform historical and contemporary relationships between Blacks and Palestinians.

## Advancing the Conversation

With this special issue of *Journal of Palestine Studies*, we aim to situate, complicate, and ultimately advance the scholarly and activist conversation on BPTS. As scholars, we recognize the need to critically assess the state of BPTS as a political project, as well as interrogate the texts, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks that currently inform analysis of the field. As activists, we believe that a gesture beyond symbolism and mutual recognition is necessary to produce a sustainable and transformative resistance movement. Through this work, we endeavor to expand the realm of intellectual and political possibility for BPTS as a conceptual framework and engaged practice.

Although the contributions in this volume address many of the previously mentioned gaps in an emerging scholarly literature, there also remains much work to be done. For example, despite our critique of geographic parochialism, we ultimately produced an issue in which the United States remains overrepresented. In addition, this volume would have benefited from a wider range of disciplinary orientations and conceptual apparatuses. Although we acknowledge these lingering lacunae, we also recognize that such shortcomings are difficult, if not impossible, to avoid in a still-nascent literature. As such, this volume attempts to make an original, important, and timely intervention in key areas of inquiry which its contributions develop and present.

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