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Author(s): RUSSELL RICKFORD

Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Summer 2019, Vol. 48, No. 4 (192), SPECIAL ISSUE: Black-Palestinian Transnational Solidarity (Summer 2019), pp. 52-68

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26873235>

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# “To Build a New World”: Black American Internationalism and Palestine Solidarity

RUSSELL RICKFORD

This essay traces the arc of Black American solidarity with Palestine, placing the phenomenon in the context of twentieth-century African American internationalism. It sketches the evolution of the political imaginary that enabled Black activists to depict African Americans and Palestinians as compatriots within global communities of dissent. For more than half a century, Black internationalists identified with Zionism, believing that the Jewish bid for a national homeland paralleled the African American freedom struggle. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, colonial aggression in the Middle East led many African American progressives to rethink the analogy. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, African American dissidents operating within the nexus of Black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Third Worldism constructed powerful theories of Afro-Palestinian kinship. In so doing, they reimagined or transcended bonds of color, positing anti-imperialist struggle, rather than racial affinity, as the precondition of camaraderie.

Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people.  
—Edward Said

RADICAL INTERNATIONALISM did not suddenly infect Black America in the 1960s as bitter militants, frustrated with the pace and scope of racial reform, embraced the revolutionary politics of the Third World. Nor did the rise of African American solidarity with Palestine during that era stem mainly from Black nationalist resentment of the presence of Jewish shopkeepers in African American neighborhoods, or the influence of Jews within the Black freedom movement.<sup>1</sup> Such narrow explanations for transnational consciousness reflect a belief that “normal” Black politics are essentially parochial. Under this premise, any African American dissent from the canons of U.S. foreign policy, or deviation from the quest for greater absorption into the culture of Western liberal capitalism, appears to be a symptom of psychosocial alienation.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, Black American political aspirations have always exceeded the boundaries of domestic legal reform. As many scholars have demonstrated,<sup>3</sup> African Americans have pursued not just

*Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. XLVIII, No. 4 (Summer 2019), p. 52, ISSN: 0377-919X; electronic ISSN: 1533-8614. © 2019 by the Institute for Palestine Studies. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2019.48.4.52>.

citizenship rights within the existing structures of U.S. society, but much broader visions of dignity and justice, as well. Black Americans have long cast their struggle in global terms. They recognized racial capitalism as an international system of expropriation and conquest that could not be combatted within domestic frameworks alone. They defined themselves not as an isolated minority but as part of the surging multitudes that W. E. B. Du Bois called "worlds of color."<sup>4</sup>

Attributing African American camaraderie with the revolutionary Third World, in general—and Palestine, in particular—to the demagoguery of extremists elides the global imagination of Black struggle. The evolution of modern Black subjectivity during the long twentieth century necessitated the expansion of internationalist outlooks. In the period between World Wars I and II, a growing segment of African Americans came to see their own battles with white supremacy as manifestations of a larger crusade against empire. In the era after World War II, the confluence of decolonization and desegregation revitalized Black internationalist commitments. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the postwar apotheosis of African American efforts to redraw the horizons of freedom and envision a global order that eradicated hierarchies of race and class, returning all subjugated people to the stage of history.<sup>5</sup>

But transnational awareness traveled circuitous paths. Forging political bonds across national and geopolitical borders meant continuously rearticulating concepts of shared fate. At times, this process of reinvention produced dramatic political shifts. The history of African American perspectives on Israel and Palestine highlights the deeply contingent nature of transnational thought. For more than half a century, Black internationalists identified strongly with Zionism, believing that the Jewish bid for a national homeland paralleled the African American drive for redemption and autonomy. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, colonial aggression in the Middle East led many African American progressives to rethink the analogy. As Black liberationists came to see Israel as an imperialist outpost, they increasingly viewed Palestinians as ideological peers—subjects of state violence and occupation whose resistance offered a valuable model for African Americans.<sup>6</sup>

This essay traces the arc of Black American solidarity with Palestine, placing the phenomenon in the context of twentieth-century African American internationalism. Emphasizing the 1960s and 1970s, it sketches the evolution of the political imaginary that enabled Black activists to depict African Americans and Palestinians as compatriots within global communities of dissent. Here, I stress discursive strategies rather than concrete coalitions, drawing on primary sources as well as a burgeoning secondary literature.<sup>7</sup>

I argue that contemporary African American dissidents, operating within the nexus of 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. Black-Palestinian solidarity was not inevitable; it was fashioned in the crucible of radical resistance. Today, amid renewed attempts by supporters of Israel to smother any acknowledgement of Palestinian humanity,<sup>8</sup> recalling such traditions of transgressive opposition is more crucial than ever.

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Before 1900, African American internationalism resided in the promise of Haiti, the dream of Liberia, and the transatlantic activism of figures such as Ida B. Wells. It was World War I, however, that generated a truly global Black imaginary. African Americans transmuted the war's democratic rhetoric into a vision of a genuinely egalitarian international order. They gathered inspiration from the clash of colonial empires and the Bolshevik victory in Russia, believing they were witnessing the crumbling of white supremacy. Radicalized activists in the African Blood Brotherhood for African Liberation and Redemption, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and other Black American groups denounced Western imperialism, repudiating European rule in Africa and hailing Irish and Indian campaigns against the British.<sup>9</sup>

Marcus Garvey's call for transnational Black solidarity electrified the African American working classes, raising hopes for the formation of a global counterforce to the daily humiliations of white power. The elite Pan-Africanism practiced by Du Bois in the postwar years gave way to a popular upsurge of Black diasporic sentiment after fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930s. The Depression era saw the emergence of a grassroots Black militancy rooted in fierce opposition to fascism and colonialism. African Americans entered the orbit of the Communist Party, and vice versa, as the Communist International's popular front campaign heralded a global crusade against racial hatred and exploitation. Meanwhile the International Committee of African Affairs (later renamed the Council on African Affairs) and other independent groups strengthened Black America's ties to African, Asian, and Caribbean struggles.<sup>10</sup>

By the wartime years of the 1940s, a pronounced anti-imperialism had reshaped African American political culture. A broad internationalist consciousness animated an array of organizations, from the National Negro Congress to the National Council of Negro Women. Before 1947 and the crystallization of Cold War conservatism, Black Americans explicitly linked their quest for freedom to that of the nonwhite world.<sup>11</sup> World War II had battered colonial regimes, fueling independence movements throughout the Global South. As African Americans launched their own efforts to construct the new society, many continued to look overseas, believing mobilizations against colonialism and racial capitalism could help engender the postwar world they desired.

Though elements of Black transnationalism lingered in the Cold War era,<sup>12</sup> Palestine remained a notable lacuna for most African Americans. Indeed, Palestinians did not appear on the psychic landscape of Black liberation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many prominent African Americans of that epoch embraced the search for a Jewish homeland. Early Black nationalists Martin Delany and Edward Wilmot Blyden enthusiastically supported Jewish resettlement. "These thinkers," historian Melani McAlister notes, "saw in the still nascent Zionist movement a harbinger of, and model for, their own aspirations."<sup>13</sup> Garvey regarded Zionism as a promising analogue to Black visions of racial regeneration in Africa. His affection for the Zionist project reflected the contemporary equation of race with national destiny, as well as the Garveyite faith in territorial sovereignty as a means of empowering dislocated subject peoples.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the most principled left-wing internationalists of the first half of the twentieth century, from Du Bois to Paul Robeson, also backed the quest for Jewish nationhood. To them, the movement seemed consistent with progressive global commitments. A large swath of African Americans recognized Jews as a dispossessed and persecuted people—a racialized group who, like so many

members of the planet’s darker masses, were engaged in a righteous struggle for self-determination. Black folks intimately understood the historical experience of exile and dispersal, as well as the collective longing for refuge. In the years before and immediately after Israel’s 1948 founding, African American political actors generally associated Jewish territorial ambitions with the rising demand for national liberation on the part of the disinherited people of the world.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, that outlook contained a number of contradictions. Interpreting the creation of the Zionist state as a blow against tyranny ignored the fact that Israel itself was a product of Western imperialism, having sprung from the British Mandate for Palestine. Seeing Israel as a liberatory enterprise meant accepting the erasure of displaced Palestinians while reifying settler-colonial myths about the cultivation of a modern civilization on a barren frontier.<sup>16</sup> Yet in the aftermath of the Holocaust, few Western observers heeded or even grasped these realities. To many Black Americans, Israel appeared to be a progressive, anti-racist state rooted in socialist ideals and aligned with the emancipatory forces that anti-colonialists hoped would define the postwar order.<sup>17</sup> It would take several years, and many more bouts of colonial violence, to significantly reshape this view.

Nevertheless, Black sympathy for Israel began to wane as early as the 1950s. There were, of course, those globally conscious African Americans who had never read the founding of Israel as a rebuke to empire and white supremacy. Black members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, for example, saw the emergence of the Jewish state as a usurpation of Islamic holy land.<sup>18</sup> A more explicitly political critique materialized as Israel’s putative ties to decolonization unraveled. The 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, India—an event Robeson praised as “an historic turning point in all world affairs”—championed the rights of Palestinians and demanded a just settlement of the Palestine question.<sup>19</sup> The Suez War of 1956, in which Israeli, British, and French forces attacked Egypt following President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal, further reoriented African American allegiance. As Keith P. Feldman argues, the war “clarified the pressing demands for Afro-Arab solidarity” and fractured “the persistent Afro-Zionism” of some Black leftists.<sup>20</sup>

The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed further expressions of Black-Arab affinity. *Muhammad Speaks*, the Nation of Islam organ that served as a major source of internationalist awareness for many African Americans, regularly featured anti-Zionist perspectives.<sup>21</sup> Malcolm X deepened such convictions amid the peripatetic, year-long rendezvous with the revolutionary world that followed his departure from the Nation of Islam. The African American leader met with Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) officials in Gaza in the fall of 1964 and later penned “Zionist Logic,” an essay that cast Israel as a bastion of global capitalism and an aggressive foe of the Third World.<sup>22</sup>

For the generation of Black liberationists who styled themselves as Malcolm’s ideological offspring, the watershed moment in African American-Palestinian relations was 1967. During the 1967 war, Israel handily defeated the neighboring Arab nations of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, occupying the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, and the West Bank, as well as the Golan Heights. The victory underscored Israel’s status as a militarized, expansionist power deeply enmeshed with Western imperialism. No longer would progressive African Americans regard the Jewish state as a spunky survivor encircled by menacing rivals. No longer would the Palestine question be seen

solely as an ethnic-religious dispute born of ancient antagonisms.<sup>23</sup> Israel, it was now clear, was a venture rooted in colonial violence. It was this revelation, combined with a larger ideological metamorphosis, that precipitated what one scholar later dubbed "Black Power's Palestine."<sup>24</sup>

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Radical internationalism reawakened in the 1960s. The corrosive force of anti-Communism and the pieties of postwar liberalism had curtailed but never crushed the global dreams of Black dissidents. Those visions intensified as African Americans strained the boundaries of domestic reform and as the drive for decolonization reinvigorated the worldly traditions of Black resistance. If Cold War repression had sidelined leftists such as Du Bois, Robeson, and Claudia Jones, isolating them from the reemergence of African American mass revolt, other figures—from Robert F. Williams to Mae Mallory and Lorraine Hansberry—helped sustain insurgent outlooks through the ascendant years of the desegregation struggle.<sup>25</sup>

Signs of an internationalist resurgence appeared during that early period. A 1960 visit to revolutionary Cuba radicalized the young bohemian LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and other African American militants.<sup>26</sup> In 1961, artists such as Maya Angelou and Abbey Lincoln joined the Black American throngs that disrupted the proceedings of the United Nations in New York City, decrying the murder of the Congo's Patrice Lumumba by agents of Western imperialism.<sup>27</sup> Lumumba's slaying, one African American newspaper proclaimed, symbolized "the international lynching of a Black man on the altar of white supremacy."<sup>28</sup>

Malcolm stood at the junction of all these rising currents. Groups like the Revolutionary Action Movement also contested the integrationist agenda of the Black establishment. Yet only Malcolm captured the imagination of the African American grass roots. While serving as the interlocutor of the Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist revival, he exemplified a broader internationalism, urging a transition from civil rights to human rights; mingling with Cuba's Fidel Castro, Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella, and Tanzania's Abdul Rahman Mohammed Babu; and otherwise forging meaningful links between Black America's working classes and the restive Third World. Even the group appellation he favored—"Afro-American"—suggested the salience of bonds that stretched beyond U.S. borders.<sup>29</sup>

Assassins ended Malcolm's direct engagement with the cultural renaissance of the 1960s, but his influence only expanded after his 1965 death. Malcolm's spiritual children, the young rebels of the African American movement, had already begun severing the shackles of Cold War thought. In the second half of the decade, they grappled more urgently with the meaning of the Vietnam War and with the relationship between their own struggle and those of oppressed people around the globe. Confronting a Western liberal creed whose universal claims masked a heritage of profound violence, many youthful dissidents concluded that the whole planet was a battlefield.<sup>30</sup> Their task was not to redeem a decadent U.S. society, but to join the "wretched of the Earth" in a crusade for self-rule.<sup>31</sup>

This ideological and tactical shift finally thrust Palestine onto the terrain of Black consciousness. Previously, domestic logics of racial reform had framed inclusion in the U.S. sociopolitical apparatus as the horizon of Black aspiration, thus rendering Palestinians largely invisible to African Americans. Now, however, Zionism's colonial subjects became potential comrades within the global circuits of

liberation.<sup>32</sup> Palestine never proved as central to Black Power discourse as did China, Cuba, Vietnam, or the embattled territories of southern Africa. Yet images of Palestinian resistance circulated widely amid the geopolitical tropes of contemporary African American radicalism.<sup>33</sup>

One such motif concerned land and space. Since the early 1960s, Black militants had described African American communities as colonial possessions of the U.S. state. According to this formulation, Black folks were not simply marginalized; they were underdeveloped in ways that paralleled the condition of the colonized.<sup>34</sup> The awkward but ingenious premise opened avenues of kinship with other subaltern groups. In theory, dispossessed African Americans, increasingly concentrated in deteriorating urban districts, faced circumstances akin to those of captive Palestinians. Both populations constituted internal or “domestic” colonies—superexploited, sequestered, and subject to foreign authority.<sup>35</sup> “We are a kind of dispossessed people in exile,” the Black historian John Henrik Clarke asserted in 1973, “so we have sympathy for the Arabs who were dispossessed of their land.”<sup>36</sup>

The liberation of both groups, moreover, required revolutionary violence. The question of armed struggle further elevated Palestine in the schemas of Black Power. Enamored of Frantz Fanon, *The Battle of Algiers*, and the notion of a lumpenproletariat militia, Black radicals read the Detroit, Michigan and Newark, New Jersey uprisings of 1967 as rehearsals for a more comprehensive rebellion. To them, the insurrections signaled the coming of guerrilla warfare, a necessary phase in the escalation of resistance.<sup>37</sup> The fact that the urban conflagrations roughly coincided with the 1967 war seemed to link the ghetto to global processes of revolution. “While the U.S. rocked with the rebellions of 1967,” the activist James Forman later wrote, “the Arab-Israeli war in the Middle East was making the summer even hotter.”<sup>38</sup>

Of course, not all Black Power advocates embraced Palestine as a revolutionary paradigm. Some young African American militants continued to see Israel as a tiny, beleaguered nation fighting “by any means necessary” to survive.<sup>39</sup> Other Black figures admired certain aspects of the Zionist project, including the communal traditions of the kibbutz, the Jewish agricultural settlements that served as models for some African American cooperatives.<sup>40</sup> Yet pro-Israel sentiment grew increasingly marginal within the vanguard of Black struggle. The radical political themes of the day—Third World fellowship, the colonial thesis, and the imaginary of guerrilla warfare—evoked lines of affinity with Palestine.

By 1967, Black popular resistance was intensifying. Many militants believed the African American masses were primed to wage a “people’s war” against their oppressors, thus complementing protracted insurgencies raging overseas.<sup>41</sup> Anti-imperialism galvanized Black grassroots politics, suggesting that African Americans could play a role in producing the “two, three, many Vietnams” that Che Guevara deemed necessary to engulf Western powers. “We are ready to destroy from the inside,” former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chair Stokely Carmichael told an audience of Latin American leaders in Havana that summer. “We hope you are ready to destroy from the outside.”<sup>42</sup>

It was, by some reckonings, “the eve of revolution.”<sup>43</sup> Political action promised to overtake rhetoric. The old Ray Charles song “Danger Zone” again became relevant. (“*The world is in an uproar / the danger zone is everywhere.*”) In all quarters, it seemed, people of color strove to unite

theory and practice, to struggle on a higher level.<sup>44</sup> The stage was set for the articulation of new solidarities. A Black Power Palestine was ready to emerge.

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Fittingly, it was SNCC, originator of so many strands of 1960s radicalism, that initiated the discussion. The organization used a summer 1967 issue of its newsletter to offer a searing indictment of the violence of Zionist conquest.<sup>45</sup> The statement reflected SNCC's increasingly anti-imperialist sensibilities. In 1966 the group had publicly denounced the Vietnam War. SNCC workers such as Diane Nash had traveled to North Vietnam and other lands to witness imperialism's crimes against poor, underdeveloped peoples.<sup>46</sup> By the time the Palestine newsletter appeared, SNCC was fully committed to defending "the revolutionary aspirations of the Third World."<sup>47</sup>

The disapproval of ostensibly anti-racist, erstwhile allies in the United States only strengthened that outlook. The Palestine statement drew widespread condemnation and accusations of anti-Semitism.<sup>48</sup> Yet SNCC maintained its support for "the Arab cause," viewing white liberal criticism of its internationalism as evidence of hypocrisy. "You who denounce Black violence for liberation and support Israeli violence for conquest are in a trap," one SNCC staffer declared.<sup>49</sup>

Awareness of the Palestine question remained uneven within SNCC. In truth, the 1967 newsletter had featured both principled assertions of anti-colonial solidarity and a smattering of crudely essentialist or anti-Semitic themes, including the notion that Jews represented an international financial cabal.<sup>50</sup> However, the treatise also signaled a growing political maturation. By indicting Israeli expansionism and colonial aggression, SNCC had combatted the Cold War premise that foreign policy was the province of white elites. The group had articulated a modern dialectic of Afro-Arab solidarity, transcending media shibboleths about the horrors of Arab terrorism.

After 1967, Palestine occupied a new position of prestige within the Black counterpublic sphere. The Middle East was emerging as a recognized front, alongside Southeast Asia or southern Africa, in the global confrontation with imperialism. Over the next several years, leaders such as Carmichael and Huey P. Newton, and organizations such as the Black Panthers, the Congress of African People, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party (AAPRP), labored to construct an avowedly anti-Zionist Black Left.<sup>51</sup>

Their efforts appeared fruitful. African American militants communed with representatives of Fatah—the revolutionary Palestinian formation—at the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria and lobbied for the inclusion of pro-Palestine resolutions at a series of Black Power and New Left summits. Like the delegates at the 1974 Pan-African Congress in Tanzania, a gathering attended by scores of African Americans, they saw the Palestinian cause as an integral part of the worldwide struggle.<sup>52</sup>

Israel's relationship with oppressive forces on the African continent reinforced that perspective. The firm economic and political links between the Zionist state, South African apartheid, and Portuguese colonialism vindicated Afro-Palestinian solidarity, strengthening the belief that Israel served as imperialism's bridgehead to both the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>53</sup> During the 1970s, Black internationalists noted that many African and Caribbean countries had severed diplomatic ties with Israel, and that the freedom fighters of Mozambique and other liberation movements regarded Palestinians as comrades.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, in the United States, activists organized



conferences and boycotts to expose “the intimate bonds” between Zionism and apartheid. During the 1972 African Liberation Day rally in Washington, signs reading “Israel and South Africa are Partners” appeared alongside those proclaiming “Lumumba Lives” and “Malcolm, Here We Are!”<sup>55</sup>

In a sense, the rising chorus of Black identification with Palestine was misleading. Many members of the African American political establishment, including some genuine progressives, remained sympathetic to the Zionist project. Some of these figures attempted to embody an enduring Black-Israel alliance. Yet as they did so, radical critics harnessed discourses of worldwide resistance to contest their claims and to depict them as hopelessly out of step with “the true feelings of the masses of Black People.”<sup>56</sup>

This is what happened in 1970 when civil rights veteran Bayard Rustin and a collection of other prominent Black Americans, most of them political moderates, published an ad in the *New York Times* calling for increased U.S. political and military support for Israel. A variety of Black nationalists and leftists derided the petition. They argued, in multiple forums, that the ad’s sponsors had colluded in the “exploitation of a Third World people,” that doing so placed them on the wrong side of global battle lines, and that Afro-Zionism constituted both an act of treason and a symptom of false consciousness.<sup>57</sup>

One Black New York factory worker insisted that, in light of the severity of the offense, African governments should refuse to grant the signatories guest visas, thus barring them from the mother continent until they recanted.<sup>58</sup> Another African American opponent of the ad, Charles Hightower of the American Committee on Africa, explained the urgent political implications of Black perspectives on Palestine. As he told one interviewer, “We’re either going to be a serious part of the worldwide struggle or we can forget it.”<sup>59</sup>

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By the early 1970s, support for the Palestinian cause was becoming an article of faith among a growing segment of Black insurgents. The issue even united the fractious leadership of the African Liberation Support Committee, the most influential Black internationalist body of the day.<sup>60</sup> But the apparent accord on Palestine shrouded more complex questions of identity and consciousness: Did solidarity rest primarily on ideology or on racial affinity? Did African American progressives relate to Palestinians because they viewed them as Black or “colored” folks, or did they relate to them simply because Palestinians were a subject people resisting empire?

Many Black thinkers embraced both propositions. In the age of decolonization, radical African American internationalists believed they were engaged in a global campaign against white supremacy and imperialism alongside other racialized victims of those interwoven systems. Bonds of color enabled the postwar reconstruction of an imagined, transnational community predicated on anti-racism and anti-capitalism.<sup>61</sup> An expansive politics of “Blackness” allowed African Americans to forge affective kinships beyond conventional racial taxonomies. Thus the 1970 death of Nasser of Egypt, an icon of the Non-Aligned Movement, led the Black American staff of *Liberator* magazine to lament that “Another Brother Has Fallen in Battle.”<sup>62</sup>

Rearticulations of Blackness in the name of political camaraderie coexisted with claims that Palestinians were “Black” in a more orthodox sense. Another 1970 *Liberator* article noted that Palestinian liberation fronts included hundreds of fighters who were phenotypically Black.

The piece profiled one of these "Palestinian-born Blacks" and featured an accompanying photo of an armed, dark-skinned man.<sup>63</sup> Redrawing the geography of Africa to encompass the Middle East furnished another means of asserting the Blackness of Palestinians. In a 1972 letter to an African Liberation Day organizer, for example, Carmichael characterized Israelis as "European settlers on the north of our continent."<sup>64</sup>

Reconceptualizing Blackness to expand the boundaries of belonging represented a venerable political strategy.<sup>65</sup> Yet framing the Black-Palestinian relationship *primarily* in racial terms produced its own contradictions. Part of the brilliance of Black Power transnationalism was its insistence on the colonial nature of the Israel-Palestine encounter. By recognizing Zionism as a form of European settler violence, radicals transcended Western narratives of the inexorable clash of Middle Eastern civilizations.<sup>66</sup> African American vacillation between racial and anti-colonial paradigms of solidarity, however, suggested that transnational bonds were biological or genetic as well as ethical. That ambiguity fueled the narrower logics of Black nationalism.

Black nationalism had never fully abandoned its admiration for Israel as a model of state-formation for refugee populations; in the 1960s and 1970s, a host of Black figures echoed the old argument that African Americans ought to "take a cue from the militant Jews" in their campaigns for self-determination.<sup>67</sup> Eldridge Cleaver helped make the case. The Black Panther theorist urged African Americans to emulate aspects of the historical crusade for Jewish sovereignty, even as he sided with Palestinians in the struggle against Zionism. "When Theodor Herzl founded the National Jewish Congress, he virtually founded a government in exile for a people in exile," Cleaver wrote in 1968. "They would build their organization, their government, and then later on they would get some land and set the government and the people down on the land, like placing one's hat on top of one's head."<sup>68</sup>

Other African American contemporaries also embraced the Israeli paradigm. The separatist Republic of New Africa (RNA), which regarded itself as Black America's embryonic government-in-exile and demanded cash and land reparations from the U.S. state, viewed Israel, in some respects, as a precedent for its own crusade. After all, Zionists had successfully procured territory and other damages as partial compensation for historical crimes, something RNA officials were attempting to do. "The State of Israel, founded in 1948, did not even exist when the Nazis abused the Jews!" RNA leaders observed in a 1971 statement. "Yet no one saw any problem in the State of Israel's receiving the reparations due the Jewish people."<sup>69</sup>

Grudging respect for Israel among some Black militants reflected a vision of Zionism as a robust form of ethnic self-assertion and expatriate identification with the "home country." Many Pan-Africanists understood their own quest in similar terms. Veteran activist Queen Mother Moore (born Audley Moore) of the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, for example, stressed Black racial consolidation, reclamation, and reunion—themes that closely paralleled the Zionist rhetoric of return. "We, the Africans living in the United States, are disinherited from our motherland, and are striving for restoration," Moore told an east African audience in 1972.<sup>70</sup>

Other groups forged more direct links to the Zionist project. Members of the Hebrew Israelite congregation, heirs to a long, heterodox tradition of African Americans who defined themselves as descendants of biblical Hebrews, actually resettled in Israel during the early 1970s—a moment

when many Black liberationists were condemning the Zionist state. Hebrew Israelites saw their desert colony of Dimona, Israel as the fulfillment of prophecy, as an international base, and as the advance party of what they hoped would be a larger exodus from African American slums. Yet their gospel of spiritual rejuvenation through territorial repossession mirrored Zionist mythologies.<sup>71</sup> Once again, the ideological convergence of Black nationalism and Zionism bolstered settler colonialism's image as a tenacious effort to build the new community—a feat to be emulated rather than condemned.

Of course, some African American dissidents continued to regard Israel solely as an instrument of aggression. Their ranks included a Third Worldist tendency that attempted to reconstruct African American peoplehood not by sentimentalizing a land mass in Africa or the Middle East, but through revolutionary camaraderie with oppressed people of all colors. Groups such as the Pan-African Students Organization in the Americas (PASOA) emphasized politics rather than pigment as the grounds for transnationalism. "PASOA's solidarity with the Palestinian struggle is not based on race but on principle," the organization declared in 1971. "Those are our friends who fight against our common enemies. And if they are revolutionaries we welcome them with extended arms."<sup>72</sup>

Third worldism transcended kinship with the African diaspora, orienting African Americans toward all the "Bandung peoples" of the Global South.<sup>73</sup> It centered a class analysis, defining its adversary as the entire apparatus of international domination. According to this outlook, Israel was a node in the global circulation of finance capital, a mechanism for exploiting human and mineral resources in the Middle East.<sup>74</sup> However, the object of antipathy was the Zionist state, not the Jewish people. The most promising varieties of anti-imperialism rejected the demonization of specific populations. Thus, even as he lambasted the colonialist policies of the Israeli government in 1971, Black Panther leader Newton acknowledged the possibilities for radical transformation that exist within all societies. As he stated, "We are asking the progressive forces, the revolutionary forces inside of Israel, to transform that society so that all the people of the [Muslim] religion, the people of the Jewish religion, the people who live in the Middle East, will be able to come together as one man and truly build a new world."<sup>75</sup>

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Black Power visions of Palestine were hardly devoid of contradictions. The ideological constructs of the late 1960s and 1970s did not always inspire political clarity. Black radical appropriations of Third World themes often gave rise to rigid or reductionist formulations. At times, the colonial thesis and the mystique of revolutionary warfare replaced rigorous analysis of domestic conditions, obscuring Black America's practical social realities.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, romantic images of guerrilla warriors concealed the full diversity, humanity, and suffering of Palestinian civil society.

Occasionally, Black anti-Zionists reproduced anti-Semitic tropes. African Americans were no less susceptible to white supremacist constructs than were any other group. The AAPRP decried the degradation of Palestinians, even as some of its literature propagated troubling depictions of Zionism as an ancient, international conspiracy exerting an economic "stranglehold" on Western societies.<sup>77</sup> Many Black Americans reified equally problematic notions of Jews as a global archetype of ethnic cohesion and political unanimity.<sup>78</sup> Such outlooks combined vilification with mystification, replicating the racialism at the heart of empire and shrouding the fact that imperialism and colonialism—not any particular ethnic or religious group—are humanity's true enemies.<sup>79</sup>

Despite such weaknesses, Black Power readings of Palestine were neither superficial nor gratuitous. Contemporary Third Worldism helped African Americans reopen crucial geopolitical vistas. The idea that zones of struggle were indivisible enabled radically subversive remappings of Blackness, fostering meaningful ties to subject peoples within and beyond the United States.<sup>80</sup> Most African American progressives who embraced Palestine did so not because they regarded Palestinians as distant racial cousins. Rather, their aim was to repudiate settler colonialism and to reject depictions of Israel as an oasis of liberal democracy amid a backward Arab wilderness.

At their best, articulations of Black-Palestinian affinity were humanizing and galvanizing. They were also bilateral, encouraging both Palestinian and African American resistance.<sup>81</sup> Black internationalists constituted a key anti-colonial bloc in the United States at a time when it was "difficult to hear strong voices of support for the justness of the Arab struggles to regain stolen land and rid themselves of imperialist domination."<sup>82</sup> Expressions of solidarity emanated from Palestine as well, offering further evidence that Black people were not alone in the world.<sup>83</sup>

Such connections proved resilient. Black-Palestinian solidarity did not vanish once the revolutionary moment had passed. The late 1960s and 1970s marked an extraordinary period of mobilization; in later years, domestic crises and the conservative drift of U.S. culture significantly curtailed anti-imperialist tendencies within and beyond Black America.<sup>84</sup> Yet for every African American organization that abandoned such outlooks, there were others that deepened them.<sup>85</sup> The AAPRP sponsored joint African Liberation and Palestine Day commemorations through the 1980s.<sup>86</sup> The National Black United Front blended Third Worldist views of Palestine with more conventional Black nationalist prescriptions.<sup>87</sup> In the late 1990s, the emergence of the Black Radical Congress recentered Palestine as an essential component of internationalist praxis.<sup>88</sup>

Today we are witnessing a reinvigoration of Black-Palestinian bonds, as delegations of young African Americans visit the occupied territories and more established activists "break silence" about Israeli atrocities.<sup>89</sup> We should heed the lessons of history as these efforts unfold. The transformation of Black perspectives on Israel-Palestine during the twentieth century suggests that counterhegemony is never static. Pan-Africanism is not "intrinsically anti-imperialist," as some have argued.<sup>90</sup> No single "Afro-American view of the Palestine question" exists.<sup>91</sup>

Some of the most conscientious Black Americans of the last century failed to grasp the larger political meaning of the Israel-Palestine crisis, in part because both Jews and Palestinians have endured profound historical dislocation and suffering. The trajectory of African American solidarity was never predetermined. In many respects, the American Indian experience of invasion offers a closer analogue to the history of Palestine than does the Black American past.<sup>92</sup> African Americans and Palestinians have not always recognized a shared fate. They have not always overcome the isolation that their circumstances may breed.

Still, a sense of fairness that transcends high theory, and to which much of the Black rank and file can relate, remains a major source of Black-Palestinian affinity. As one African American leftist formation of the 1970s put it, "If someone were to take over your house and put you out, and then later tell you if you were cool they might let you sleep on the front steps[,] what would you do?"<sup>93</sup> Future activists may well draw on such vernacular wisdom, tapping the moral and intellectual reservoirs of the masses in Black America and Palestine. For who understands more

acutely than do those laboring people that the essential instruments of liberation are the resilience and dignity of the oppressed?

### About the Author

Russell Rickford is an associate professor of history at Cornell University. He specializes in the Black radical tradition and transnational movements after World War II.

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