

How Black–Palestinian Solidarity Challenges Discourses on Decolonisation and Why This Should Matter in Anti-racism Debates in Austria

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Abstract

Black-Palestinian solidarity has a long history, and its intensity and importance have grown over the past decade. While the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been particularly successful in drawing the world’s attention to the structural racism faced by Black people in the United States and beyond, Palestinians continue to struggle not only against the Israeli occupation but also against widespread ignorance and defamation – even among people who are otherwise engaged in anti-racism and decolonisation work. By focusing on mutual expressions of solidarity, I examine analyses provided by BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) activists, artists and scholars in texts from different genres. Many of these were produced following a visit to Palestine on a solidarity delegation. These expressions of Black–Palestinian solidarity have rarely been acknowledged in scholarly contexts, even when other texts by the very same people have been discussed. It is argued that the overwhelming silence on Palestine is an expression of incomplete decolonisation in academic and activist circles. Solidarity practices are slowly broadening the conversations, however, and thus there is hope that anti-Palestinian racism will eventually be recognised and widely acknowledged by all who position themselves as antiracists.

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Introduction

“Palestinians under occupation and in the diaspora are making calls for “de-exceptionalizing” Palestine and resituating it in the context of antiracist, anticolonial, and anti-imperialist movements worldwide, including the Black struggle.” (Bailey 2015: 1023)

At the racism-critical festival Dear White People... Let's Break the Silence (DWP), which took place for the third time in Freiburg, Germany, in June 2021, the initiative Palestine Speaks Freiburg was to give a lecture on “anti-Palestinian Racism”. The invitation was initially withdrawn due to pressure from the festival’s promoters, who alleged that Palestine Speaks had “made anti-Semitic and inciting statements” (Palestine Speaks Freiburg/European Jews for a Just Peace e.v. 2021). Subsequent protests by Palestine Speaks were joined by some of the other invited groups. Among those who showed solidarity with the initiative was the group European Jews for a Just Peace Germany. In their joint statement with Palestine Speaks, they argued:

„Wir fordern DWP auf, sich gegen das Mundtotmachen auszusprechen und sich für nicht repräsentierte und unterdrückte Minderheiten einzusetzen. Zuzulassen, dass Geldgeber unbegründete Behauptungen in den Raum stellen, um uns zum Schweigen zu bringen, trägt massiv zur Untergrabung der Redefreiheit in unserer Gesellschaft bei.“ (Palestine Speaks Freiburg/ European Jews for a Just Peace e.v. 2021)

The board of trustees of Dear White People, the majority of whom – as pointed out on the website – identify as BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour), was convinced by the arguments put forward. In a self-reflective statement, Palestine Speaks was invited back, and although the organisers of Dear White People acknowledged that the withdrawal of a number of sponsors had created a budget hole that threatened the future existence of the festival, they proposed that it could be filled by means of crowdfunding.¹ This is an encouraging example of solidarity between anti-racist struggles and the explicit naming of anti-Palestinian racism – not least because this solidarity was a new development in German-speaking Europe. Indeed, there is a long list of comparable cases in which Palestine solidarity groups were disinvited or spaces rented for events

¹ See zusammen leben e.V. in Freiburg im Breisgau, Deutschland (2021).

were withdrawn² (see the examples mentioned in “Bundestags 3 für Palästina” 2021) but where no public solidarity among anti-racism initiatives was shown. On the contrary, self-declared anti-racist activists have often been at the forefront of verbally attacking Palestine solidarity actors in public (or simply remain silent when this occurs).

While the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been especially successful in drawing the world’s attention to the structural racism faced by Black people in the United States and beyond, Palestinians continue to struggle not only against the Israeli occupation but also against widespread ignorance and defamation, even among people who are otherwise engaged in anti-racism and decolonisation work, including in Austria.

This article begins by outlining the Austrian context, in which the state and other civil society actors have attempted to silence Palestinian solidarity work due to a highly Eurocentric understanding of history. I argue that a closer look at Black–Palestinian solidarity sheds important light on the long history and ongoing importance of this mutual support. In the second part of the article, I briefly trace the historical background of Black–Palestinian solidarity, before looking in more depth at how this solidarity has developed in the last decade. In the third part, I then turn more specifically to the phenomenon of travel delegations, which I consider a form of “mobile solidarity”. Solidarity delegations have proven to be an important tool for building and sustaining Black–Palestinian solidarity and have an impact beyond the immediate travellers, as many of them have spoken and/or published texts about their experiences in various genres and formats. My analysis is based on a selection of these texts and on additional material about their authors (from websites, interviews, etc.) and from the secondary literature on Black–Palestinian solidarity, which is still relatively sparse (although it has grown in recent years). In my analysis, I draw extensively on the knowledge gleaned by activists – knowledge which I aim to make accessible to a broader readership in the hopes that Palestine will cease being treated as an “exceptional case” in debates on resistance, decolonisation and human rights violations. As I argue, not only would this help to counter the widespread

² To cite just a few examples from Vienna: in 2019, a lecture by the South African anti-apartheid fighter and former minister Ronnie Kasrils, who was invited by BDS Austria, could not take place in the Volkskundemuseum. A lecture by former Knesset member Haneen Zoabi, planned to be held at the Werkstätten- und Kulturhaus (WUK), was also forced to relocate. Kasrils ultimately spoke in a restaurant in the 10th district, and the event with Zoabi was moved to the Aktionsradius (see Englert 2020; Kasrils 2019; BDS 2019). More recently, the Palestinian scholar Dr Walaa Alqaisiya was invited to give a lecture titled “Queering Aesthetics: Unsettling the Zionist Sensual Regime”, scheduled to take place on Monday 30 May 2022 at the mumok kino as part of the 2022 Spring Curatorial Program, organised by Verein K in partnership with the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. The protests against its cancellation were more widespread than in the other cases and are documented in the blog Art Leaks (28.6.2022).

dehumanisation of Palestinians in public debate, but it would be a crucial step in the long process of decolonising our universities.

The Silencing of Palestinian Voices in German-speaking Europe and Beyond

While anti-Palestinian racism is in many cases intertwined with anti-Muslim racism, they are certainly not the same thing. The silencing that Palestinians face when speaking out on the situation in Palestine is (primarily) due not to their being Muslims but to the Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation which they represent. Subsuming their experiences under anti-Muslim racism in fact contributes to keeping the specific colonial context against which Palestinian resistance takes place invisible. Further, clearly, not all Palestinians are Muslims, yet non-Muslim Palestinians share the experience of being silenced. In the Austrian context, alliances between activists fighting against anti-Black racism, anti-Muslim racism and antisemitism are quite strong (see Black Voices et. al. 2022), but they have yet to involve Palestinian resistance groups.³

To give an example: in response to a Facebook announcement of a BLM demonstration that took place in Vienna on 4 June 2020, a user asked how BDS – the abbreviation for the Palestinian-led transnational campaign Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions – could be kept away from the demonstration:

„werden sich die veranstalter_innen vom instrumentalisierungsversuch durch BDS distanzieren und wie wird die veranstaltungsleitung mit der präsenz von BDS umgehen?“ (Kundgebung #blacklivesmatter 4.6.2020)

Someone who was unfamiliar with BDS put a question mark next to the abbreviation, whereupon another user linked to a Wikipedia article in which – unsurprisingly, insofar as it reflects the dominant view – BDS is portrayed as an antisemitic organisation. The topic was then dropped in the thread. BDS activists took part in the demonstration and carried a placard reading “From Minneapolis to Palestine, Police Brutality is a Crime. Justice for George and Iyad and all Victims of Settler Colonial State Violence #BDS” (BDS Austria 5.6.2020). In doing so, the activists positioned BDS in the context of anti-racist movements.

In Austria, the non-violent transnational Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS), founded in response to a call issued in 2005 by 176 Palestinian civil society organisations (Palestinian civil society 2005), remains relatively

³ This text does not contain a systematic analysis of Black–Palestinian solidarity in the Austrian context. I hope to explore this in future work.

unknown in the broader public even 17 years later. This reflects the paucity of public discussion on the issue and the fact that the little that does take place is far from free and open. In the media landscape and in academia, Palestinian positions are at best ignored and at worst defamed as antisemitic. The environment of silencing and defamation has a decades-long history in German speaking countries and has had severe consequences for Palestinian actors, as Sarah El Bulbeisi convincingly shows in her oral history study on Palestinians living in Germany and Switzerland between 1960 and 2015 (El Bulbeisi 2020).

BDS draws its inspiration directly from the anti-apartheid movement, which helped to end institutionalised white supremacy in South Africa. The actions at the heart of the movement – boycotting, divestment and sanctions – are meant to achieve three goals: “1. Ending its [Israel’s] occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall; 2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and 3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194” (Palestinian civil society 2005; see also Sivan/ Laborie 2018; Hever 2017; Maira 2018; Dawson/ Mullen 2015). These goals are in conformity with international law and are based on universal human rights. As the South African sociologist Ran Greenstein (interviewed by Baigrie 2020) points out, questions about how to implement them must not be used as an excuse to continue ignoring the suffering of Palestinians.

Anti-BDS resolutions have been passed in Germany and Austria in recent years – at both the municipal and the federal level (Deutscher Bundestag 2019, Parlament der Republik Österreich 2020) – and have served as key instruments for preventing public discussion of Palestine solidarity positions. Significantly, Palestine is not mentioned at all in these resolutions, and not a word is said about why BDS’s demands are considered illegitimate. The silencing of the issue is supported by the framing of BDS as “anti-Semitic” (Zuckermann 2014, 2018). In addition, the resolutions prohibit giving public funding and renting public spaces to the movement.

In the last two years, an increasing number of human rights organisations have published reports arguing that Israel has established an apartheid system (see B'tseleem 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021; Amnesty International 2022; International Human Rights Clinic – Harvard Law School/ Addameer 2022).⁴

⁴ Although the term apartheid originated in the South African context, “the crime of apartheid” was adopted into international law as early as 1973 in the Anti-Apartheid Convention of the United Nations. In this document, the “inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group over another racial group and of systematically oppressing them” that

These groundbreaking reports (Letwin 2022)⁵ were met with an expected backlash from Israeli advocacy groups, and their influence on the debate in the broader political and media landscape remains to be seen. As an author of the US online platform *Mondoweiss* points out, the Amnesty International report was not mentioned in the *New York Times* for weeks. It was only 52 days after its publication that it was touched upon in a short article (North 2022).

Back in early 2019, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece by renowned civil rights lawyer and legal scholar Michelle Alexander that generated much debate. In this article, Alexander criticises her own previous attitude and addresses the exceptional position that Palestine occupies for many of those who perceive themselves as progressive (Weiss/North 2019). In a similar vein, Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick's 2021 book *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics* focuses on the complicity of the US left in maintaining the occupation of Palestine. They note that the same people who work for freedom and justice in other contexts often fail to live up to their ideals where Palestine is concerned – an analysis that is equally applicable to Europe.

In the German-speaking context, their argument has been underscored by the debate surrounding Cameroonian historian and political philosopher Achille Mbembe, which began in spring 2020. Mbembe was accused of antisemitism because of texts in which he commented on the situation in Palestine.⁶ Ironically, yet not surprisingly, even in the long and intense so-called “Mbembe debate”, Palestinian voices were hardly heard. African positions – including Mbembe's own – also played a minor role, and thus the whole debate remained largely an inner-German one, gradually shifting to a discussion on the relation between memory cultures related to German colonial history and the Shoah (Englert 2022: 227).

The Mbembe debate occupied the German media at around the same time as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which, although founded in 2013 (see Ransby 2018; Khan-Cullors/ Bandle 2019; Garza 2021), became more widely known in May 2020 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by policeman

constitute apartheid are listed in detail (see United Nations 1973). The International Criminal Court has also adopted a similar definition (Human Rights Watch 2021).

⁵ Letwin himself points to some of the criticism directed at the report from within Palestinian resistance and solidarity circles (see Asaad and Muhareb 2022).

⁶ One of the most criticised texts was his foreword (Mbembe 2015) to a collection edited by Soske/ Jacobs (2015). For his own reaction to the accusations, see Mbembe, interviewed by Aguigah (2020); for an introduction to and overview of the debate, see e.g. Brumlik (2021) and the edited collection by Böckmann/ Gockel/ Kössler/ Melber (2022). In my own chapter therein (Englert 2022), I used the so-called “Mbembe-debate” as a starting point for reflection on the complex history of solidarity between African and Palestinian actors, which is closely related to the history of Israeli engagement on the African continent (Polakow-Suransky 2011; Gidron 2020).

Derek Chauvin in Minnesota (Hill 2020). The protests in the wake of the murder spread from the USA to many other countries worldwide. In Austria, on 4 June 2020, some 50,000 people demonstrated against racism, and as in other countries outside the USA, protesters pointed at the specific ways in which racism manifests itself in the national context. Demonstrations also took place in Tel Aviv, where alongside “Black Lives Matter” signs protestors also carried signs saying “Palestinian Lives Matter”. This was in particular to commemorate the murder of Eyad al-Halaq, who was killed by the Israeli Border Patrol in Jerusalem on 30 May 2020 – just a few days after George Floyd’s murder (Mousa 2020). The autistic young man had been on his way to a day centre when he was shot. The Border Patrol Unit stated they thought he was holding a gun; it had been his mobile phone (Patel 2020a, 2020b; Jewish Voice for Peace 2020).

In the German-language media in general, and especially in the Austrian media, Eyad’s murder received no further attention, as is generally the case with state and non-state violence committed against Palestinians. The demonstration in Tel Aviv likewise remained largely unacknowledged.⁷

Nevertheless, the BLM movement has encouraged a younger generation of Palestinians, especially in Germany, to become more visible in the public sphere. In this sense they differ from their parents’ and grandparent’s generation, many of whom struggled with the trauma of loss and the impossibility of returning home (El Bulbeisi 2020).

Speaking about these experiences is still difficult for many, and those who work against the silencing of their stories are confronted with racism and subject to intimidation.⁸ When Sarah El Bulbeisi was asked by an interviewer from a Swiss journal whether, as a Palestinian, she is in a position to work academically on the subject, she rejected this question as the insult it was:

„Niemand würde einer deutschen Wissenschaftlerin, die sich mit wichtigen Themen deutscher Zeitgeschichte – sagen wir mal, mit dem Nationalsozialismus – auseinandersetzt, Unglaubwürdigkeit unterstellen, nur weil sie Deutsche ist. Der Bias liegt also in dieser Unterstellung.“ (El Bulbeisi 2021, interviewed by Ruchti)

⁷ It was briefly mentioned in an article in Der Standard (6.6.2020).

⁸ At the time of writing, scholar of race critical theories Anna-Esther Younes is petitioning against a secret dossier on her that has been circulated to discredit her in the eyes of organisers (see European Legal Support Centre 20.4.2022). In the media landscape, the case of Nemi El-Hassan, who was not allowed to take up her job as a presenter for a science magazine on Westdeutscher Rundfunk after accusations of antisemitism, made headlines (Hauenstein 2021). In 2021, several employees of Arab origin at Deutsche Welle were dismissed as well (Jamal/ Obermaier 2022: n.n.).

It is obvious that such a climate is not conducive to research on the issues at stake – to say the least. Talking to actors is undoubtedly one of the fundamental methods of social science research. However, this does not seem to apply to the discussion on Palestinian resistance. Its prejudiced reputation as antisemitic weighs too heavily. The fear of contact guilt and the associated damage has led many to refrain from engagement completely, especially as events with actors involved in Palestinian solidarity work have increasingly become the target of interventions, including at universities (see Dawson/ Mullen 2015; Salaita 2015; Chávez 2019 for the US context and Pappé 2011 for the Israeli context; El Bulbeisi 2020 also touches on the issue in relation to the German and Swiss context).

My own positioning and focus

In spring 2018, I found myself rather unintentionally engaged in a form of participant observation, which I have continued since then – with a focus on the Austrian context.⁹ I started doing my “homework” by reading as broadly as possible – both scholarly and non-scholarly texts – and speaking to people involved in Palestine solidarity work and following them on various social media channels. My position as a female Austrian scholar working in the field of African Studies and Mobility Studies soon led me to Black–Palestinian solidarity as a phenomenon on which to focus. I do so from a “Palestine solidarity” perspective, which I define as advocating that Palestinians be taken seriously as actors and that their voices not be suppressed in Austria and Germany. As in any other political struggle, Palestinians have different ideas about what goals they are seeking and the means by which they should pursue them. Accordingly, Palestine solidarity positions vary widely and include actors operating from Muslim, Jewish, Christian, anti-imperialist, feminist and anti-racist contexts, among others. Of course, these contexts overlap, as do the identities of those involved, and positions are constantly renegotiated (especially in larger alliances). A position of solidarity with Palestine cannot automatically be

⁹ Controversy arose surrounding the invitation of former member of the Black Panther Party Dhoruba bin-Wahad to the Department of African Studies, the University of Vienna, to speak about his life. His visit had been mainly organised by the Vienna-based association Dar al Janub, which is also involved in Palestine solidarity work, and in part by the Department of African Studies. The debate that broke out over bin-Wahad’s invitation ultimately led to the cancellation of his talk at the University. Instead, bin-Wahad spoke at the Viennese venue Afripoint on 21 June 2018. Another lecture by Dhoruba bin-Wahad, which Dar al Janub had organised together with the Vienna section of the Communist Youth of Austria (KJÖ) on 22 September 2022 and which was to take place in a rented room in a building of the University of Vienna, was also cancelled at the last minute by the university. Instead, it took place at the Hotel Regina in Vienna.

equated with support for the BDS campaign, even if an increasing number of organisations and individuals, including myself, view boycott, divestment and sanctions as effective measures for counteracting the displacement of Palestine in both discursive and physical spaces (Englert 2022).

In an article that appeared in the Austrian newspaper the *Wiener Zeitung* the day after the BLM demonstration in Vienna, Alexia Weiss (2020: nn) described it as “ärgerlich”, “dass es unter #BLM-Aktivisten auch BDS-Anhänger gibt”, arguing that this should not prevent people from standing up against racism. She concluded:

„Nun ist es nicht so, dass Israels Politik sakrosankt ist und nicht diskutiert werden darf. Nur dieses auf eine Ebene heben und vermischen verschiedenster Diskurse passt nicht.“

While it is of course up to Weiss to reject discussing BLM and BDS together, I argue that it is a valuable approach precisely because actors involved in BLM and BDS are displaying solidarity with each other’s struggles. It is therefore not a matter of equating different contexts, but of examining the links to which actors and scholars attach importance. Focusing on the solidarity relations between African and Palestinian actors is one way of escaping the Eurocentric perspective to some extent. In this regard, it is also revealing to consider the South African context, where support for the BDS campaign is especially strong, including at the government level, reflecting the historical experience of apartheid and the role of the international boycott campaign in dismantling it (see the contributions in Soske/ Jacobs 2015, Englert 2022). This strong and longstanding solidarity is little known – and/or acknowledged – in German-speaking Europe and Western countries more generally. More recently, it could be witnessed in many of the obituaries written on the occasion of the death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, an icon of the South African anti-apartheid struggle who passed away on 26 December 2021. Tutu’s pronounced commitment to Palestine was often either omitted altogether or mentioned only in passing. Under the obituary in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, user comments that addressed his role in Palestine solidarity work were deleted. Protests by the British Palestine Solidarity Movement resulted in the restoration of the deleted comments (Palestine Solidarity Campaign 2021; see also North/ Weiss 2021).

A similar tendency to omit the Palestine solidarity work of actors who are otherwise held in high esteem can also be seen in the context of the USA. As I will show in what follows, feminist scholars and writers in particular, such as

Angela Davis, Chandra Mohanty and Alice Walker, have long been at the forefront of articulating solidarity with Palestinians. In many publications on Black feminism, however, authors write about their work without mentioning their commitment to Palestine solidarity, including the BDS movement.¹⁰

Angela Davis, an icon of the Black Power movement, explicitly mentions Palestine in the title of her 2016 collection of essays and speeches, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Davis 2016). In the German translation of the book, *Freiheit ist ein ständiger Kampf*, the second half of the title was omitted. While this may have been done for a number of reasons, the omission of Palestine seems symptomatic of a larger pattern. When Davis came to the University of Vienna to speak on the occasion of the 650th anniversary of the university in October 2015, the Great Festival Hall was packed.¹¹ In her lecture, she spoke in part about the Palestinian-led transnational BDS movement, which was nowhere mentioned in the reporting on her lecture.¹² While for Davis and other Black scholars the Palestinian context is an important one that feeds into their theories, this dimension of their work is often skilfully overlooked by scholars at Western universities who invite them to speak.

Contemporary Black–Palestinian Solidarity in Context

“We don’t need permission to narrate our stories”

(written on a sign shown in the video

“When I see them, I see us”, 2015)

Black–Palestinian solidarity, also known as “Black Palestinian Transnational Solidarity” (BPTS),¹³ can be traced back to the 1930s, with explicit references documented from the 1960s onwards (Erakat/ Hill 2019). According to Maha Nassar (2019), the poet and essayist Mahmoud Darwish was the first Palestinian to highlight the concrete connections between the lived realities of Black people

¹⁰ See e.g. Graneß/ Kopf/ Kraus (2019).

¹¹ Uni:view Redaktion (28.12.2021) – from about minute 60 on, Davis talks about BDS.

¹² See Möller (2015), who wrote a summary for the University’s online journal uni:view, which included photos from the lecture.

¹³ The term “Black–Palestinian Transnational Solidarity” (BPTS), which is widely used in the literature (see Erakat/ Hill 2019), highlights that in this specific context solidarity is two-directional, even though the power balance is not equal. Personally, I favour the term “Black–Palestinian Translocal Solidarity” because the expression of solidarity mostly happens beyond the “national” framework. However, discussion of the different notions conveyed by the concepts “transnational” and “translocal” belongs to a largely academic debate (Englert 2018) that unnecessarily deflects from the issues I want to raise here. Therefore, in this article, I stick to the more general expression ‘Black–Palestinian Solidarity’.

in the USA and Palestinians in Israel. He referred mainly to writings by James Baldwin, in particular *Nobody Knows My Name*. As Nassar points out (2019: 17), in doing so, Darwish built on a “longer history of Palestinian intellectual and discursive engagement with the Black freedom struggle” (see Lubin 2014).

Black Americans held heterogeneous positions towards Israel and Palestine, with the main divide being between the civil rights movement and the more radical Black nationalists. They reacted to each other and partly adapted their positions over time. Thus, the question of who was showing solidarity with whom often became a “touchstone” of solidarity in the anti-racist struggle in the USA (Fischbach 2019: 57).

A generational divide was also at play. The older generation was still very much influenced by the Bible and saw Israel as “the promised land of a subjugated people” (Laurent 2019: nn.; see Webb 2019 and Agnew, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 95)¹⁴. However, younger activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panthers shared the anti-imperialist position of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). The latter saw the occupation and land seizures in Palestine as an expression of colonial oppression and, accordingly, recognised the need to wage a struggle against colonialism, racism and capitalism. At that time, the numerous delegations of Black revolutionary leaders to the Middle East also took place in cooperation with the PLO – unlike the contemporary delegations which are the focus of this article (Abuznaid et al. 2019: 92).

Black–Palestinian links weakened in the 1980s, the 1990s and the 2000s, before intensifying again in the 2010s. Noura Erakat and Marc Lamont Hill emphasise that there was no real interruption of BPTS, although its visibility and intensity undoubtedly decreased in the 1980s. One reason for this was the impact of the FBI’s COINTELPRO¹⁵ programme against the Black Power movement, but another was changes in world politics brought about by the end of the Cold War and the Oslo Agreement between the Israeli government and the PLO leadership in the early 1990s (Erakat/ Hill 2019: 9; see also Laurent 2019: nn.). Further, with the acts of terrorism of 9/11, the subsequent US attack on Iraq (2003), the second Palestinian Intifada (= insurgency, 2000–2005) and the death of PLO-leader Yasser Arafat (2004), other issues dominated in the first half of the 2000s.

¹⁴ Here and on the following pages, the phrase “XY, in Abuznaid et al.” is used to identify the individual speakers of a published group discussion.

¹⁵ The Counter Intelligence Program, which became known by the abbreviation COINTELPRO, was run by the FBI from 1956 to 1971.

In 2005, the foundation of the BDS movement in Palestine gave new impetus to Palestine solidarity initiatives – as has the BLM movement since 2013. Both movements certainly contributed to the re-strengthening of Black–Palestinian solidarity in the last decade.

In the USA, the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 “awakened people to the urgency of building antiracist movements”, as Angela Davis has pointed out (Davis 2016: 85). However, Davis also notes that back then, the focus was disproportionately placed on the individual who killed him. The structures of racist violence “and specifically the links between vigilante violence and state violence” (Davis 2016: 85) became clearer to activists after the killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, on 9 August 2014. Brown’s killing mobilised masses of people to protest in the streets, and although the police resorted to military tactics and technology, the protestors did not leave (see Ransby 2018; Khan-Cullors/ Bandele 2019; Hill 2020). Transnational (or rather translocal) solidarity further encouraged them, as Angela Davis¹⁶ points out: “Palestinian activists, accustomed to police attacks with tear gas, tweeted advice and encouragement to Ferguson protesters” (Davis 2016: 85). As the writer and activist Kristian Davis Bailey notes, this form of solidarity was not something they had expected:

“On the ground in Ferguson, Black protesters were surprised to receive support from a people undergoing a fifty-day Israeli assault in Gaza, as well as a crackdown by Israeli forces across the rest of historic Palestine. Immediately, protesters in Ferguson began sending images and messages back, and waving Palestinian flags at demonstrations.” (Bailey 2015: 1018)

Four weeks before Michael Brown was assassinated in the USA, Operation Protective Edge had begun in Gaza. For 51 days, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) had used advanced weapons technology and had killed 2,202 Palestinians. In many cases, Israeli forces targeted unarmed civilians.¹⁷ According to the Israeli human rights organisation B’tselem:

„1391, or 63%, of the 2,202 Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces in Operation ‘Protective Edge’ did not take part in the hostilities. Of these,

¹⁶ Angela Davis recalls how, when she was in jail in the early 1970s, she too received solidarity messages from Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails (see The People's Forum NYC 2021; see also Bailey 2015: 1017). Abdulhadi (2018) recounts how reading Assata Shakur’s “To My People” (1973) impacted her thinking.

¹⁷ Throughout the operation, it was claimed that it was only a matter of Israel’s right to self-defence, and the dead were blamed on the Palestinian Hamas.

526 – a quarter of all Palestinians killed in the operation – were children under eighteen years of age.”¹⁸

The simultaneity of the events led to an awareness of the similar structures of state violence that underlay them. In August 2015, more than 1,100 Black activists, artists and scholars, as well as supportive organisations, signed a statement condemning Israel’s attacks on Gaza and stranglehold on the West Bank, calling for “solidarity with the Palestinian struggle” and for a boycott of the British security company G4S (which is active worldwide) and other companies that were profiting from the Israeli occupation (Black for Palestine 2015: n.n.; Rickford 2021; Davis 2016). The statement closes as follows:

“We offer this statement first and foremost to Palestinians, whose suffering does not go unnoticed and whose resistance and resilience under racism and colonialism inspires us. It is to Palestinians, as well as the Israeli and US governments, that we declare our commitment to working through cultural, economic, and political means to ensure Palestinian liberation at the same time as we work towards our own. We encourage activists to use this statement to advance solidarity with Palestine and we also pressure our own Black political figures to finally take action on this issue. As we continue these transnational conversations and interactions, we aim to sharpen our practice of joint struggle against capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and the various racisms embedded in and around our societies.” (Black for Palestine 2015: n.n.)

As the new generation of activists educated themselves, they encountered the strong positions on Palestine that had been held in the 1960s and 1970s by Black activists in the Black Panthers, the SNCC and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: “In a way, we felt behind both in terms of the present global context and vis-à-vis the generations that came before us. We really didn’t need to do anything new, as they had already trodden and blazed this trail. We just needed to follow in their footsteps” (Agnew, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 95).

¹⁸ https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20160720_fatalities_in_gaza_conflict_2014 (3.1.2021); for full data, see the statistics provided by B’tselem at <https://statistics.btselem.org/en>. In the hostilities in Gaza that occurred over 11 days in May 2021, “261 Palestinians were killed, including 41 women, 67 children, and three people with disabilities, most in Israeli strikes. At least 130 were civilians. Over 2,200 Palestinians were injured. Ten Israeli citizens and residents were killed by rockets launched by Palestinian armed groups, and 710 others were injured” (Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). In the USA, demonstrations showing Black–Palestinian solidarity also occurred in May 2021 (see Rickford 2021).

As an output of their engagement with the histories and contemporary situation of Black people in the USA and Palestinians in Israel/Palestine, the activists shot a video which was created as a message to the world. It also served to stress their own commitment to solidarity, which they described on the website where the video was first presented as neither a “guarantee” nor a “requirement” but a choice.¹⁹

The video is titled “When I see them, I see us” (2015), a name that takes up an important leitmotif of solidarity between Black Americans and Palestinians, as Mari Morales-Williams, one of the co-authors of the script, put it in the accompanying statement. The three-minute piece, which was produced by the human rights lawyer Noura Erakat²⁰ and distributed mainly via social networks, features a number of well-known personalities, among them academics and activists such as Angela Davis (University of California, Los Angeles), Rashid Khalidi (Columbia University) and Cornel West (then at Harvard University), artists such as singer and actress Lauryn Hill and writer and Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker. In the field of activism and media, Linda Sarsour (a political activist from Brooklyn) and Kristian Davis Bailey (a journalist and activist from Detroit) also participated. Omar Barghouti, Palestinian human rights activist and co-founder of BDS, and Diana Buttu, former legal advisor to the PLO living in Ramallah, were featured as well.²¹

Shot in black and white, the video begins with a rapid succession of protesters’ faces. Images of demonstrations against police violence in Ferguson and against the Israeli occupiers in the Palestinian territories are cut into shots of activists. As Laurent sums it up, “Palestinians chant ‘Black Lives Matter’, African Americans call the oppression of Palestinians racism” (Laurent 2019: nn.; see also Rickford 2021; Solombrino 2017).

In the script²² for the video, the victims of structural violence in both contexts are identified by reference to their full names, age, and family and/or professional background:

¹⁹ The website <https://www.blackpalestiniansolidarity.com/>, which I last accessed on 21 February 2020, no longer existed at the time of writing this paper (summer 2022).

²⁰ Noura Erakat is also an assistant professor at George Mason University, Virginia. The script was written by Mari Morales-Williams, Remi Kanazi and Kristian Davis Bailey. The organisations involved in the production of the video include: Dream Defenders, Black Youth Project 100, DC Palestinian Film and Arts Festival, Arab Studies Institute - Quilting Point Productions and Jewish Voice for Peace. The Institute for Middle East Understanding assisted as well.

²¹ See the video by Erakat et al. (2015). It was uploaded on YouTube by Street Art United States on 7.3.2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5RY4MjdoXM>. On other websites, it is no longer available because it contains copyrighted material: <https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/when-i-see-them-i-see-us-blackpalestinian-solidarity/> (all links last accessed on 18.7.2022).

²² <https://www.blackpalestiniansolidarity.com/script.html> (21.2.2020).

“When I see them, I see us
Every 28 hours a black life is stolen
by police or vigilantes in the U.S.
Every two hours, Israel killed a Palestinian child
in its attack on Gaza last summer
Eric Garner. 43 years old
Father of six. Grandfather. Friend
Hashem Abu Maria. 45 years old
Father of four. Human rights worker
Ghalia al-Ghanam. 7 years old
Killed when an Israeli missile struck her home
Aiyana Jones. 7 years old
Killed in her sleep by Detroit police
When I see them, I see us.”

In this way, the often faceless victims of structural violence become humanised. Importantly, in addition to naming those killed, the video portrays the humiliating experiences that many Black people and Palestinians face daily, such as checkpoint searches and administrative detention.

The title of the video – “When I see them, I see us” – functions as chorus and is repeated in various contexts. The video connects the USA and Palestine/Israel by stressing that people die as the result of forms of state violence in both spaces:

“When I see them, I see us
From Rikers Island to Ofer Prison
from Rafah to Chicago
lives are being stolen
remember them
We are not statistics
we are not collateral damage
we have names and faces
Sakia, Kimani, Renisha
Nadim, Jawaher, Mohammad”

In other parts of the script, the differences between the USA and Palestine/Israel are emphasised in carefully interwoven lines:

“They burned me alive in Jerusalem
they gunned me down in Chicago
they shot our water tanks in Hebron

they cut off our water in Detroit
they demolished our homes in the Naqab
they swallowed our homes in New Orleans
When I see them, I see us.”

The differences between these two struggles are again explicitly stressed in the last lines of the poem, which ends with a vision of a positive future for the next generation:

“We respect the uniqueness of our struggles
and our varied histories
When I see them, I see us
Resilient, steadfast, determined
I see who we are meant to be
Alive, free, liberated
mapping out our destiny
I see hope, strength, love
a place where our children can dream
I see a road, a partner, a family
a world where we can rise and be seen.”

The last two words point again to the theme of invisibility, a crucial element that allows systems of structural violence and racism to be maintained for decades. The BLM movement undoubtedly contributed a great deal to making visible the struggles of Black Americans, and consequently Black people in other countries, whereas Palestinians continue to face widespread silencing on various levels, as discussed in the first part of this article. Therefore, as things stand globally in 2022, BLM activists are in a relatively more powerful position than Palestinian activists. However, this intersects with power relations within the USA, where anti-Black racism in Arab communities has impacted the willingness of some within the BLM movement to engage in solidarity work for Palestine (Agnew, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 95; Bailey 2015: 1018). Activists acknowledge the importance of addressing what Maytha Alhassen (in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 97) calls the “complicity of U.S.-based Palestinians and Arabs in systemic structures of anti-Blackness inside the United States”. This, she argues, is crucial given the material and social risks associated with being engaged in Palestine solidarity work:

“When we ask Black folks to be in solidarity with Palestine, we are asking them to risk being professionally uprooted or aggressively harangued by Zionist groups, to expose themselves to public character assassination,

and to have their organizations defunded and consequently suffer the destabilization of their lives and communities.” (Alhassen, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 97)

Apart from activist contexts, Rickford (2021: nn) also reminds us that “Black people aren’t immune to the American ignorance of foreign conflicts.” Power relations shift even more when Black activists travel to Palestine, where they experience the protection their US-passport provides them. This is an issue taken up in many of the travel accounts written by members of solidarity delegations – a practice which proved crucial to the revival of Black–Palestinian solidarity over the past decade (Tannous, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 100-1).

In the next part of this article, I will analyse texts published by Black activists who have travelled to Palestine and will outline how this mobility impacted their comparative analysis, making the differences in power relations even more clearly visible.

Travel Delegations in the Context of Black–Palestinian Solidarity

“They have been made strangers in their own land, second-class citizens in the home of their forefathers, but they refuse to be a memory. They fight as if their existence depends on it, because it does. And all they ask of us is to tell their story.” (Mensa 2018: nn.)

Unlike the delegations in the decades after World War II, which used to be organised “in collaboration with the official organizations of the Palestinian national movement”, the contemporary delegations are organised “between individuals and/or social justice organizations” (Abuznaid et al. 2019: 92; 96). Delegations in the 1960s and 1970s were mostly dominated by men, although some women played important roles, such as Ethel Minor, who worked with Malcolm X, and the poet June Jordan, who travelled to what Maytha Alhassen calls “Palestinian geographies in Lebanon” (Alhassen, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 96; see Jordan 1989, Hammad 1996, Harb 2019, Feldman 2015, Lubin 2014, Solombrino 2017).

Some of the first delegations of the contemporary period were organised by feminists, such as the delegation in 2009 organised by the feminist organisation CODEPINK,²³ when American activists, writers and scholars travelled to Gaza.

²³ <https://www.codepink.org/> (6.7.2022).

Among them were the African American authors Alice Walker (2010) and Jewel Bush (2014), who both later published about their experiences on that trip.

In 2011, another feminist delegation from the USA consisting of participants who identified as “indigenous and women of colour feminists” travelled to Palestine for ten days. Scholars and activists Angela Davis and Chandra Mohanty were among the participants who conveyed their travel experiences in essays, speeches and scholarly texts (Davis 2016; Mohanty 2013). In addition, the group issued a collective statement titled “Call to Action”, in which they reflected on their travel experiences and what they meant for their activist work (Abdulhadi et al. 2012: 91-92). This included explicitly speaking out in support of the BDS campaign and calling on academics and activists in the US and elsewhere to join BDS and limit US financial support for the Israeli state and occupation (Abdulhadi et al. 2012: 91-92).

Following the revival of Black–Palestinian solidarity that resulted from expressions of solidarity between activists in Ferguson and Gaza, as outlined above, more solidarity delegations followed from the mid-2010s on.²⁴ They were under the leadership of Black activists, and while most participants were also Black, Ahmed Abuznaid (in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 93) notes that they were equally “committed to bringing on Latinx and indigenous individuals from a variety of professions and paths.” Artists were particularly encouraged to join delegations, as their ability to spread the message upon their return was deemed crucial for sustaining engagement. Indeed, sustaining engagement has proven a major difficulty, alongside lack of funding, lack of preparation – including regarding the historical context – and attacks from right-wing and Zionist institutions (Abuznaid, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 93, 97).

²⁴ See Abuznaid et al. (2019: 96-97) for an overview of delegations from a Black American context.

Witnessing with one's own eyes: why did we not know?

“Each and every one of us – including those members of our delegation who grew up in the Jim Crow South, in apartheid South Africa, and on Indian reservations in the United States – was shocked by what we saw.” (Abdulhadi et al. 2012: 90)

A common theme in texts written by members of solidarity delegations is the extent to which their experiences changed their view of Palestine. This applies to those who came to the country with little prior knowledge, such as the journalist and women's rights activist Jewel Bush, who was travelling with CODEPINK. In her text “Related Somehow to Africa”,²⁵ she notes:²⁶

„I have voluntarily entered a war zone and am now plunged into a reality I had previously known very little about, only to realize that the very little that I think I know is all wrong.” (Bush 2014: 116)

Alice Walker, who took part in the same trip as Bush, had been aware of the conflict beforehand, yet the trip had a massive impact on her thinking, as she recounts in her book *Overcoming Speechlessness: A Poet Encounters the Horror in Rwanda, Eastern Congo and Palestine/Israel* (Walker 2010: 18):²⁷

“Driving along the streets we could see right away that many of these were in ruins. I realized I had never understood the true meaning of ‘rubble’. Such and such was ‘reduced to rubble’ is a phrase we hear. It is different seeing what demolished buildings actually look like. Buildings in which people were living. Buildings from which hundreds of broken bodies have been removed. So thorough a job have the Palestinians done

²⁵ In her text, which appeared in the magazine *Transition* (2014), Bush focuses on the small community of Black Palestinians and the sisterhood she felt when visiting them. The topic of Black Palestinians opens up yet another dimension of the issue which I do not explore in this text. In addition to Bush's text, see Bailey (2015: 1024), who uses the terms “African Palestinians” and “Afro-Palestinians”. According to him, connecting with them has been “a focal point of recent Black delegations to Palestine”.

²⁶ <https://www.jewelmariebush.com/post/dc-rally-in-photos> (5.1.2022).

²⁷ Walker also took part in another solidarity delegation, i.e. the Freedom Flotilla II to Gaza in 2011 (Abuznaid et al. 2019: 97). It must be said that the accusation of antisemitism, which all of the authors analysed here have repeatedly encountered, is not as easy to reject in Walker's case as it is in the case of Davis and others. One reason for this is that Walker repeatedly expresses her admiration for David Icke on her homepage, who can only be described as a right-wing esoteric conspiracy theorist who more recently attracted attention for his antisemitic conspiracy theories about the Corona virus. See Körte (2020), whose assessment of Walker's (and Mbembe's) Palestine solidarity positions in his article I otherwise do not share (see also Alice Walker's website at <https://alicewalkersgarden.com/>, 28.6.2022).

in removing the dead from squashed dwellings that no scent of death remains." (Walker 2010: 44-45)

Walker repeatedly stresses the impact of her experiences in Palestine on her reflections and emotions, including conversations with Palestinian women she met during her journey, whose voices are interwoven in the text.

The participants of the feminist delegation of 2011 had not only themselves experienced racial discrimination – in the USA and South Africa – but had all been involved in struggles for social justice prior to their journey. Yet, in their collective statement published after their return, they emphasised the importance of having seen for themselves what they had known from afar (Abdulahdi et al. 2012: 90). In their statement, they describe the experience of crossing checkpoints and the immobility that both these checkpoints and the wall – which they refer to as an "apartheid wall" – mean for Palestinians. They quote a Palestinian colleague as having said that "occupied Palestine is the largest prison in the world" (Abdulahdi et al. 2012: 91).

In her personal recollection of this trip, Angela Davis also addresses the shock that she and her fellow travellers felt when they witnessed the extent of this repression and the fact that the Israeli military made no attempt to cover up the violence it was perpetrating:

"Gun-carrying military men and women – many extremely young – were everywhere. The wall, the concrete, the razor wire everywhere conveyed the impression that we were in prison. Before Palestinians are even arrested, they are already in prison. One misstep and one can be arrested and hauled off to prison; one can be transferred from an open-air prison to a closed prison." (Davis 2016: 59)²⁸

During the trip, the members of the delegation met with academics, students, representatives of civil society organisations and trade unions, and political leaders. There were also meetings with residents of refugee camps and villages that had been attacked by Israeli soldiers and settlers (Abdulahdi et al. 2012: 90).

Meetings with Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions²⁹ and feminist colleagues at the universities of Birzeit, An-Najah, and Mada al-Carmel

²⁸ See Mensa (2018: nn.), who also argues that discrimination in the Israeli context is less hidden than in the USA.

²⁹ In particular, the queer Palestinian movement has shown much solidarity with the BLM movement (Shafie/ Chavéz 2019: 44ff.; see also Schulman/ Chávez 2019).

drew their attention to “the organic linkage of anti-colonial resistance with gender and sexual equality, as well as about the transformative role Palestinian institutions of higher education play in these struggles” (Abdulhadi et al. 2012: 91; see also Ihmoud 2021 for an analysis of what she calls “the racialized politics of the womb”).

While feminists positioned in the Global South have long viewed the struggle for Palestinian liberation as a feminist issue,³⁰ many of their counterparts in the Global North have avoided the issue altogether or have fallen for the “pink-washing” strategy employed by the Israeli state, i.e. giving support to gender and sexual justice initiatives to cover up the Israeli occupation (Abdulhadi et al. 2012: 91). In her scholarly article “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique” (2013), Chandra Mohanty wrote about how her travels to Palestine forced her to confront “the limits and possibilities of feminist critique across borders” and about the discrepancy between her experiences in Palestine and how these were met by academic discourses in the USA:

“Learning about colonial technologies of occupation, about the intricate gendered and racialized exercises of power by the Israeli state, I was more convinced than ever of the need for theory to address fundamental questions of systemic power and inequities and to develop feminist, antiracist analysis of neoliberalism, militarism, and heterosexism as nation-state-building projects. Yet, back in neoliberal “posteverything” US academic and political culture, I confront discursive shifts that mystify the conditions of Palestine. (Mohanty 2013: 968)³¹

On the tenth anniversary of their journey, the members of the delegation met virtually to reflect on the impact it had made on their lives in general and their

³⁰ For example, the Kenyan author and activist Shailja Patel tweeted the following during the attacks on Gaza in May 2021: “Palestine is a feminist issue. Love guides our methodology for liberation. We affirm life and implore feminists everywhere to speak up, organize, and join the struggle for Palestinian liberation. #FreePalestine #SaveSheikhJarrah #Gaza_Under_Attack” (Tweet by @shailjapatel on 14 May 2021).

³¹ Further, in this article, Mohanty writes about how her own work, especially her essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1986) and “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles” (2003), “has travelled in three discrete geopolitical/national spaces”, one of them being Palestine (the others being Sweden and Mexico) (Mohanty 2013: 974). She found that in Palestine her work had especially been used to dismantle hegemonic discourses of international gender equity which had come to replace discourses of resistance in the post-Oslo period of the 1990s (see Mohanty 2013: 984; see also Baroud 2019, who makes a similar point on the effects of the Oslo agreement on a more general level).

solidarity work in particular (The People's Forum NYC 2021).³² Chandra Mohanty described the journey as “completely life transforming”, and Angela Davis again stressed her surprise – “I really thought I knew what I would experience” – and how this experience had not only shaped her own teaching and activism but served as a turning point concerning how solidarity with Palestine was talked about in the Black movement (The People's Forum NYC 2021).

Comparison to the situation in the USA

Another recurrent theme in the travel accounts is the comparison of the situation in Palestine/Israel to that of the USA. In one of her essays/speeches, Davis (2016: 60) describes the segregation of pedestrians on the streets of Hebron as “not entirely dissimilar from the signs associated with the Jim Crow South.” Alice Walker (2010: 55-56) likewise relates her childhood experiences of growing up under “America’s apartheid years, when white people owned and controlled all the resources and the land”, directly to the situation in Israel/Palestine.

While Davis and Walker recall the past, when racial segregation was official policy and practice, Chicago-based rapper Vic Mensa, who was part of a tour organised by the Dream Defenders in 2017, focuses on comparisons to the contemporary USA. In his article “What Palestine Taught Me About American Racism”, published in the weekly magazine *Time*, he recounts the following:

“The parallels between the black American experience and the Palestinian experience are overwhelming. Staring into the worm-infested water tank on top of a dilapidated house in Aida refugee camp, I can’t help but think of Flint, Michigan, and the rust-colored lead-poisoned water that flows through their faucets. As I gaze over the 25-foot ‘separation wall,’ the economic disparity is acutely transparent; the Israeli side of the wall looks like the Capitol in *The Hunger Games*, while the Palestinian side reads like a snapshot from a war photographer.” (Mensa 2018: nn.)

Mensa writes of the emotions that these sights brought up among the members of the delegation – “many people in the group cried on that roof” – and explicitly addresses his own privileged mobility when travelling within Palestine on an American passport and the relief he briefly felt at not being the target for once:

³² Present were Melissa Garcia, Barbara Ransby, Beverly Guy Sheftall, Chandra Mohanty, Premilla Nadesen, Anna Guevarra, Gina Dent, Rabab Abdulhadi, Angela Davis and Waziyatawin.

“For once in my life I didn’t feel like the n****. As I sat comfortably at a coffee shop, gawking at a group of Israeli soldiers harassing a Palestinian teenager, it was clear who was the n****. My American passport, ironically, had awarded me a higher position in the social hierarchy of Jerusalem than it did in my hometown of Chicago. As insensitive as it sounds, it was almost a feeling of relief to be out of oppression’s crosshairs for a moment, albeit a very short one.” (Mensa 2018: nn.)

In a roundtable discussion on solidarity delegations to Palestine, Philipp Agnew also took up the issue of how travelling in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) made the Black members of the delegation attached to the United States as a nation state for the first time as the result of the protection granted by their US passports – a feeling that, like Mensa, Agnew experienced as both comforting and disturbing at once:

“Whether or not we admitted it, we knew (and hoped at the time) that the Israeli state would protect us should something ‘bad’ happen. This was a big departure from our posture in the United States and one that we’re still unpacking.” (Agnew, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 94)

The privileged mobility and status that the US-citizens enjoyed in Palestine also raised questions about the impact this would have on their struggle for solidarity, especially when it came to how the practice of solidarity delegations would be read by Palestinians: “Do the everyday Palestinians that encounter us know of our struggles in the United States and see us as comrades against colonialism and imperialism or just as privileged Americans touring the camps?” (Bailey, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 99).

Sensitive to the potential dangers of this imbalance, Kristian Davis Bailey has been involved in organising visits by Palestinians to the United States, especially to sites of Black struggle. In 2014, Palestinians attended a vigil and rally for VonDerrit Myers Jr., a Black 18-year-old who was killed by police – an experience which, according to Bailey, worked against the Palestinian students’ sense of struggling in isolation (Bailey, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 98, see also Bailey 2015: 1021-23).

Visits by Palestinian solidarity delegations to the USA are not new and have precedents among earlier generations of activists. Nadya Tannous (in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 100) recalls how a Palestinian delegation visiting the Standing Rock

Sioux Reservation in 2016 was welcomed with much joy by some of the Lakota elders who remembered the visits of earlier Palestinian delegations in the 1970s and 1980s. Identifying as a “diasporic Palestinian in North America”, Tannous brings yet another dimension to the discussion when she emphasises her responsibility towards indigenous North Americans fighting for their land in “settler-colonial states such as the United States and Canada.” By making this connection, she embeds Palestinian resistance firmly in debates on settler colonialism and points at the way in which “settler-colonial nations around the world build and depend on one another to occupy and ethnically cleanse indigenous populations” (Tannous, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 100; see also Salaita 2016; Pappé 2007). Thus, for the involved actors, solidarity with Palestinians is built not only on common experiences with institutionalised racism and the resulting structural violence but also on the experience of being thrown off one’s land.³³

Questions of positionality in solidarity delegations

Bailey stresses that for the Black Americans, building relationships with Africans from the continent was deemed crucial. Moreover, the activists also feared that what they called their US-centrism could “mute the struggles of African comrades or inhibit connections between Africa and Palestine” (Bailey, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 99).³⁴ In an attempt to counter this US hegemony in solidarity work, Bailey organised delegations to Lebanon with participants from African countries in 2017. He and African participants from Kenya and Zambia experienced racialised “regimes of mobility” (Glick Schiller/ Salazar 2013) as they were not granted visas by the Lebanese authorities (Bailey, in Abuznaid et al. 2019: 99).

The ways in which experiences of racism, and power relations more generally, shape solidarity delegations is an issue that the South African feminist Leigh-Ann Naidoo (2021) takes up in an essay she wrote on her travels as a member of the delegation on board the Women’s Boat to Gaza (WBG).³⁵ The boat attempted

³³ Recently, solidarity between Palestine and Kashmir was the focus of a special issue of the journal *Identities. Global Studies in Culture and Power* (Osuri/ Zia 2020; Zia 2020).

³⁴ Of course, African actors also show solidarity with Palestine in contexts where such solidarity is not facilitated by Americans. I touch on this issue in another text (Englert 2022) and recommend especially the contributions to Soske/ Jacobs (2015) and Pappé (2015) as further reading. Both volumes focus on the South African context, which, while undoubtedly of great importance due to the country’s own history of apartheid, is not the only one where Palestinian solidarity is strong on the continent (Baroud 2019; Gidron 2020; Walker 2010: 71-72).

³⁵ Naidoo’s participation as a South African in the WBG was organised by the Palestine Solidarity Alliance. She mentions her active participation in the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements and her “history of activism as a queer Olympic beach volleyball player” as factors that led to her being invited to join (Naidoo 2021: 242).

to reach besieged Gaza in 2016 but was captured by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) 35 kilometres off the coast of Gaza; 11 members of the group were imprisoned, and two journalists from Al Jazeera were deported from the country (Naidoo 2021: 249). In prison, the members of the delegation were questioned, and only eight of them were allowed to sit on wooden benches during the process. Naidoo describes those who were allowed to sit on the benches as “white and Northern women”: “In the cage sat three of us, all broadly defined as black, two of us in hijab, two from the African continent. Looking out, I felt the same sense of wariness that I had felt in the conversation on the boat” (Naidoo 2021: 250).

In this last sentence, Naidoo is referring to the way in which the delegate’s diverse backgrounds with regard to race and status had impacted the discussions they’d had on the boat as to what would happen if they reached Gaza. Naidoo recalls her own discomfort when members of the delegation stressed that their mission was to promote peace, as she felt that this was patronising towards the Palestinian women. In her interpretation, they were there to show solidarity “with their experiences and political priorities” (Naidoo 2021: 247, her emphasis). Naidoo points out how the different positions among the women related to their personal experiences of violence and struggle: “[s]ome of us on the boat had lived through historical struggles for freedom that involved the strategic use of violence against brutal regimes and were not convinced that violence against an illegitimate regime was unprincipled.” She recalls that “our capacity to listen to each other’s views was strained and ragged”. Thus, for Naidoo the problem was not the women’s diversity of experience and positions but the fact that some had adopted a rigid stance which “had the effect of silencing others” (Naidoo 2021: 247):

“Rather, the conversation ended with a more privileged woman from the Global North (probably the most powerful in terms of social position and expertise) criticising our lack of ‘team spirit’. She implied that we had embarked on the mission under false pretences and that the insistence on acknowledging and contending with diverse views was not politically productive or necessary, but in fact destructive to the mission. It was made clear that the dominant definition of being a good member of the transnational collective meant conforming to a single view of what protest should entail.” (Naidoo 2021: 248)

Alice Walker recounts a similar experience in her writing – although it did not occur with her fellow travellers but with then US ambassador to Egypt Margaret

Scobey, with whom she spoke before travelling on to Gaza. Drawing comparisons between the American context and that in Israel/Palestine, the ambassador, who Walker describes as “a white woman with a Southern accent”,

“mentioned the success of ‘our’ civil rights movement and asked why couldn’t the Palestinians be more like us. It was a remarkable comment from a perspective of unimaginable safety and privilege; I was moved to tell her of the effort it took, even for someone so inherently nonviolent as me, to contain myself during seven years in Mississippi when it often appeared there were only a handful of white Mississippians who could talk to a person of color without delivering injury or insult.” (Walker 2010: 25-26; see also Abdulhadi 2018: 228)

Conclusion

As I have outlined in this article, Black–Palestinian solidarity, which has seen a revival in the past decade, comes in various forms – among them direct support via social media channels, such as during the Ferguson uprising in 2014, and the joint production of cultural products, such as the video “When I see them, I see us” (2015). Importantly, the mobile practice of solidarity delegations seems key to building and sustaining longer-lasting alliances. It requires time-consuming planning in advance and involves careful reflection and communication upon the delegation’s return. Yet, it brings about highly reflective analyses that are also expressions of solidarity. The different formats range from statements by collectives to literary and scholarly texts by those who took part in the delegations. In the face of media coverage that marginalises Palestinian resistance, these texts are important sources that give insight into realities in Palestine as experienced by activists involved in struggles against racism and for decolonisation in other contexts.

A minimal service that scholars can perform is to acknowledge these texts and engage with them as we do with other texts by writers such as Angela Davis and Chandra Mohanty, to name just two of the more widely known authors. I argue that ignoring their Palestine solidarity work while celebrating them and other aspects of their oeuvre is an act of epistemic violence. Decolonising academia requires acknowledging such practices, even if this leads to uncomfortable confrontations in our own university environments. It is necessary to confront those who pretend to support the concerns of BIPoC activists but who do not take them seriously when they draw different conclusions from their engage-

ment with global historical experiences.³⁶ This also applies to the many Jewish scholars and activists who position themselves in solidarity with Palestinians and who are equally ignored (though not quite to the same extent as the latter).

Anti-racism work in Austria must be able to deal with anti-Palestinian racism without reservation. In the current context, this may be a difficult task and too much to ask of those who are themselves experiencing hardship as the result of racialisation and racism. However, scholars for whom this does not apply, such as myself, have no excuse not to advocate for open debates on these entangled histories as well as contemporary practices of solidarity. This is often arduous and painful, but a necessity if we are serious about decolonisation at universities and in society at large.

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³⁶ Of course, this does not mean that there is such a thing as homogeneous positions on Palestine/Israel among BIPoC, as has been emphasised throughout the text.

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