

Anti-Zionism is not Antisemitism

The Centrality of Palestinian Liberation in the Struggle for Anti-Oppressive Education

L. J. Jaffee

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Anti-Zionism is not Antisemitism The Centrality of Palestinian Liberation in the Struggle for Anti-Oppressive Education

L. J. Jaffee
Colgate University

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Abstract

In recent years, a distorted definition of antisemitism that conflates anti-Jewish prejudice with criticism of Israel has increasingly been adopted in U.S. state and federal legislation. The intended effect of such legislation is to silence activists, students, teachers, and workers who speak out against Israeli apartheid and for Palestinian freedom. This article takes a historical approach to disentangle actual antisemitism from legitimate critiques of a nation-state both by analyzing actual antisemitism as intimately linked to ableism and white supremacy and through examining the long history of Jewish resistance to Zionism. Understanding that legislation conflating antisemitism with criticism of Israel is part of an effort to silence teaching about Palestine is illustrative for making sense of broader attacks on decolonial, anti-racist, and gender and sexuality-affirming education. Refusing the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism is critical to promoting anti-oppressive education and resisting the present attack on the policing of permissible knowledge in schools.



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Introduction

On December 11, 2019, then-president Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13899 (“Combating Anti-Semitism”), in name an order against antisemitism on college campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). On the surface, an order to combat antisemitism in education would seem a positive step in challenging prejudice against Jews. The order, however, is less concerned with protecting the wellbeing of American Jews than it is with securing the U.S.’s geopolitical interests. The order requires that federal agencies—including the Department of Education— consider the working definition of antisemitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2016.¹ Among the “contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life” listed in the IHRA definition of antisemitism (and now stated on the website of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights) is “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by *claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor*” and “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis” (p. 5, emphasis added).² How has critique of a nation-state— in the minds of many Americans and now, in law— become synonymous with anti-Jewish discrimination, and with what effects on Jews and other marginalized communities? What’s at stake in the legislative redefining of antisemitism for teachers and students in U.S. schools?

The impact on school students, teachers, and staff of earlier state legislation that likewise conflates antisemitism with criticism of Israel (or criminalizes boycotts of Israel) portends the repression and social control enabled in schools across the U.S. by Executive Order 13899 and similar legislative actions. In Texas in 2018, a Palestinian-American elementary school speech pathologist, Bahia Amawi, was fired after she refused to sign a pledge certifying that she would not boycott Israel or take any action “intended to penalize, inflict economic harm on, or limit commercial relations with Israel” for the term of her contract (Greenwald, 2018).³ The oath was introduced to her contract because of a law signed by Texas Governor Greg Abbott in 2017 barring state contractors from boycotting Israel. A more recent Texas law, effective as of September 2021, mimics the language of the Executive Order by adopting the distorted IHRA definition of antisemitism. Following in the footsteps of South Carolina, which passed a law instructing public schools and state colleges to adopt the IHRA antisemitism definition in 2018, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a law adopting the IHRA definition in 2019. Shortly thereafter, in 2020, Florida state politicians waged a smear campaign against 20-year-old Ahmad Daraldik, the first Palestinian-Muslim student senate president at Florida State University (FSU), over Instagram posts he made opposing Israeli occupation (Palestine Legal, 2020b). Although on the surface disconnected from attacks on teaching and activism for Palestine, a Florida teacher, Jenna Barbee, was investigated for showing a Disney movie with a gay character in her fifth-grade classroom in May 2023 (Hernandez, 2023). After a parent lodged a complaint with the school, the district sent

¹ Attesting to the global stakes of moves to redefine antisemitism to restrict organizing for Palestinian freedom, the IHRA definition has been adopted by over 30 countries (Asher, 2021).

² Executive Order 13899 has not been revoked by the Biden administration and so remains in effect.

³ Beyond generating a generally McCarthyite milieu in education, the enforcement of this legislation disproportionately threatens the livelihood of teachers and school staff of color. These actual and potential firings, in turn, hurt students of color— and particularly Palestinian students— who lose access to the valuable resources, knowledge, and support of school workers of color.

a note to parents saying the film would not be shown in the future. The district justified the investigation of Barbee on the basis that the film might be in violation of Florida’s “Parental Rights in Education” law— colloquially known as “Don’t Say Gay.” The law, signed by DeSantis in 2022, prohibits teaching about sexuality or gender identity in kindergarten through third-grade, and in 2023 was expanded to extend the prohibition through twelfth-grade. This article argues that these ostensibly disconnected incidents are ideologically in sync insofar as they aim to preserve the existing settler-colonial, white supremacist, and heteropatriarchal power structure by limiting what teachers can teach, what students can learn, and who can count on a secure livelihood as a school worker. While the perpetuation of dominant ideology through schooling in the U.S. is not new, this article analyzes the distortion of Jewish identity to repress education and activism for a free Palestine as transpiring in lockstep with the attacks on anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-transphobic education.

The warped definition of antisemitism increasingly being adopted in state and federal legislation aims to silence activists, students, teachers, writers, and cultural workers who speak out against Israeli state policies and for Palestinian freedom. The political contention around the topic of Palestine in U.S. schools is fueled in no small part by this strategically distorted definition— advanced by the well-funded lobbying efforts of pro-Israel American groups financially backed by the State of Israel (Pink, 2020). Considering how widely criticism of Israel is conflated with antisemitism today, this article takes as one aim disentangling actual antisemitism (simply put, prejudice against Jews) from legitimate critiques of a nation-state. Instead of collapsing criticism of Israel with antisemitism, this article analyzes antisemitism as intimately linked with white supremacy and ableism (the systemic oppression of disabled people). Understood in this vein, it’s generative to think of the legislative conflation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism as linked to— and perhaps setting the stage for—the recent spate of attacks on curricula that offer critical analyses of race, gender, and sexuality, most obviously through the demonization of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Asher, 2021).

What’s at Stake

For clarity, I want to define some terms as I understand and use them throughout the article. Zionism is a political movement that started in the late 19th century to establish a Jewish nation-state. Anti-Zionism refers to the rejection of Jewish separatism and nationalism— specifically through the colonial creation of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine— as a solution to the problem of antisemitism. The analysis that follows suggests that understanding the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism is critical to promoting anti-oppressive education in U.S. schools today by: 1. Refusing the co-optation of Jewish identity to support the U.S.-backed⁴ racist and colonial occupation of Palestine (that many Jewish students and educators themselves oppose), 2. Establishing a theoretical foundation for building solidarity between Jewish and non-Jewish BIPOC through anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-imperialist curricula, and 3. Resisting the onslaught of attacks on teaching history through the policing of permissible knowledge in schools presently unfolding at the cultural and legislative level. Efforts to silence teaching about Palestine in U.S. K-16 education are not divorced from but intimately tied to the legislative attacks on queer

⁴ In September of 2016, the U.S. signed an agreement guaranteeing Israel \$38 billion in U.S. military aid over the next decade, making it the largest military aid package to any country in U.S. history (Spetalnick, 2016).

and gender-affirming curricula and CRT (or distorted caricatures of CRT) in schools.⁵ Understanding the conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism is also an educational jumping-off point for combatting the political repression of students engaged in pro-Palestine work, for teaching about antisemitism in ways that don't undermine the freedom and humanity of Palestinians and Palestinian-American students and teachers, and for fostering decolonial analyses (of the U.S. and of Israel) among students. State-sponsored efforts to package Jewish identity as monolithic in its support for Israel, moreover, can alienate Jewish students who oppose Israeli settler-colonialism, cutting them off from their cultural identity by erasing the diversity of beliefs, analyses, and visions of freedom among Jews, both historically and today. At the private liberal arts university where I work, I've taught several educational studies courses that engage questions surrounding the U.S.-backed occupation of Palestine and student organizing for Palestinian liberation. For reasons undoubtedly having to do with the repression of such knowledge, few of my students are familiar with these topics upon entering my courses, even those otherwise well-versed in social justice issues. Contrary to a dominant discourse claiming such curricula compromises the safety of Jewish students,⁶ Jewish students have been especially eager to have conversations surrounding the occupation of Palestine and the Palestinian freedom movement that many haven't had the space to critically engage in elsewhere. Beyond supporting students engaged in the movement for justice in Palestine, then, challenging the conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism in the classroom and teaching anti-Zionist Jewish histories is a reminder to Jewish youth that Jewish culture is and always has been heterogenous.

Palestinian scholars (including Rabab Abdulhadi, Noura Erakat, Edward Said, Muna Saleh, and Hanadi Shatara, among many others) are and have been at the forefront of challenging Israeli settler-colonialism and uplifting the Palestinian freedom struggle within educational contexts. Their work is indispensable in demystifying Zionist ideology and uplifting Palestinian voices, culture, and history in relation to education. Because I come to this work as an Ashkenazi American Jew, this article specifically tackles the widespread legislative and ideological moves within the U.S. to appropriate Jewish identity, culture, and history for the purpose of maintaining Israel's occupation of Palestine. As a queer and disabled teacher and community organizer, I am especially interested in how efforts to redefine antisemitism in subservience to Zionist objectives obscure analyses of antisemitism as co-constitutive with other systems of domination and, in so doing, seek to undermine Jewish solidarity with all oppressed peoples.

In the contemporary political milieu, Israel and Judaism have been so proactively enmeshed in the American social imaginary that untethering is warranted. The subsequent section thus offers a brief synopsis of current legislative efforts that use "combatting antisemitism" as a pretense for suppressing activism on behalf of Palestinian rights. Because much of this legislation

⁵ Given the intentional distortion of CRT by the right, it's worth clarifying what CRT actually is. CRT is a theoretical framework that "analyzes race-based discrimination in U.S. history, law, and society. Throughout U.S. history, those in power frequently have utilized law and policy to offer disproportionate opportunity to people deemed "White" — with vast cumulative economic and social consequences for the nation. CRT scholars analyze how opportunity has been distributed unjustly along racial lines, often through institutions with the support of federal, state, and local laws" (Pollock et al., 2022, p. 3).

⁶ For example, after the San Francisco teachers' unions' endorsed BDS, a headline in the *San Francisco Chronicle* read, "After S.F. teachers union vote to support Israel boycott, Jewish families question if students will feel safe" (Tucker & Talley, 2021). The imagined fragility of Jewish students this discourse assumes is arguably premised on notions of Jewish students (often assumed to be white, in a U.S. context) as fragile white students.

takes aim at and has specific implications for K-16 schools, grasping both the legal and discursive landscape surrounding antisemitism and Palestine is constructive for teachers working to support Jewish and Palestinian students, to oppose settler-colonialism in the U.S. and Israel, and to reject broader attacks on the teaching of history (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Abu El-Haj, 2007; Schwartz, 2023). After disentangling the now commonplace conflation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism— or naming what antisemitism is *not*— the next section briefly discusses what antisemitism *is*. This section looks at how antisemitism has been forged historically in relation to white supremacy and ableism, primarily by looking at the role of eugenics. I argue that reverberations of eugenics logic today help explain the contemporary rise of right-wing extremism, white nationalism, and ableism in tandem with antisemitism. Understanding the inextricability of ableism, white supremacy, and antisemitism— without denying the very real differences between these systems (in both their ideological components and material implications)— lays groundwork for the creation of meaningful (if not uncomplicated) coalition-building and solidarity to fight rising right-wing extremism. Rather than isolating or exceptionalizing antisemitism as transhistorical or wholly distinct in its operations, understanding the enmeshment of antisemitism with other systems of oppression supports pedagogical work toward abolishing all forms of domination that constrain our collective imagination and actualization of freedom. Building off this idea, the final section discusses the stakes for teachers vis-à-vis the policing of permissible knowledge in U.S. K-12 and higher education.

Recent U.S. Legislative Efforts to Redefine Antisemitism (Or, What Antisemitism is Not)

In the context of an international solidarity movement to end Israel’s occupation of Palestine, legislative efforts at the state and federal level in the U.S. have tried to target, criminalize, and silence organizers—many of them students and teachers— who support Palestinian freedom. As the U.S.-based organization Palestine Legal⁷ has carefully chronicled, 227 bills that target advocacy for Palestinian rights have been introduced at the state and federal level since 2014. Of these, 52 have passed, such that legislation is in effect in over half of U.S. states that seeks to restrict advocacy for Palestinian rights. While most of this legislation can be characterized as anti-boycott,⁸ there is a more recent lobbying and legislative trend toward adopting a distorted definition of antisemitism so advocates of Palestinian rights can be targeted through civil rights and hate crime laws. As Palestine Legal notes, the definition of antisemitism pushed through in this type of legislation “could be interpreted as encompassing virtually all criticism of Israel” (Antisemitism Redefinition, para. 1).

Given widespread legislative efforts to redefine antisemitism by fusing it with criticism of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land and people, some context for understanding American Jews’ relation to Israel is illuminating. While over 200 bills aiming to curb support for Palestinian rights in the U.S. have been introduced at the state and federal level, support for and attachment to Israel

⁷ Palestine Legal is an independent legal organization that formed in 2012 to protect the civil and constitutional rights of people in the U.S. who speak out on behalf of Palestinian freedom.

⁸ Anti-boycott legislation falls under a few sub-classifications: prohibitions on state contracts with entities that support boycotts for Palestinian rights; prohibitions on state investments in entities that support boycotts for Palestinian rights; and defunding or financial penalties against universities or academic organizations that support boycotts of Israel.

among younger Jewish Americans is waning. According to a Pew Research Center study on American Jews' values in 2020, older American Jews (50 and above) are far more likely to report that caring about Israel is an essential part of their Jewish identity (roughly half) than American Jews under the age of 30 (35%, with 27% under age 30 reporting that Israel is “not important” to what being Jewish means to them). The survey also found that 13% of American Jews ages 18-30 support the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement (Pew Research Center, 2021). The Palestinian-led movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) of Israel is a response to an international call to support Palestinian freedom by ending Israeli state policies and practices that amount to apartheid, according to Amnesty International, among others (Amnesty International, 2022; Kingsley, 2022).⁹ The growth of support for the BDS movement among (especially younger) Jews challenges the narrative—increasingly codified in state and federal legislation—that any criticism of Israel, including boycotting products from companies complicit in the occupation, is antisemitic. When it comes to U.S. Jews' attitudes toward Israel, data consistently suggests that younger generations of American Jews are less attached to and more critical of Israel, and more likely to support an end to the occupation of Palestine.

Despite this shift, U.S. policy increasingly trends toward conflating support for Israel with Jewishness and, on the other end, criticism of Israel with antisemitism. As Jewish activists Nevel and Tseng-Putterman (2019) note, “it is now commonplace for slanderous accusations of anti-Semitism to be leveled against Palestinians and supporters of Palestine, especially against black leaders and other activists of color” (para. 2). This article grows out of a shared concern “that a lack of clarity about what anti-Semitism is— and isn’t— allows false equivalencies and elisions to be weaponized against movements for social justice” (para. 2). One aspect of this weaponization is slanderous accusations of antisemitism leveled against students, teachers, and other educational workers organizing for justice in Palestine. As Nevel and Tseng-Putterman point out, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC)— including Jews of Color— and Muslim student activists organizing to support Palestinian rights have been most surveilled, policed, and criminalized. Education has thus emerged as a major site of struggle against efforts to silence and intimidate supporters of the international movement to end Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land and people.

As many writers, scholars, and activists have noted, the criminalization of Palestine solidarity work is best understood as backlash against the efficacy of the international movement for justice in Palestine, and in particular the forms of solidarity that have been forged through BDS organizing. In a letter in her capacity as a board member for Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), Judith Butler (2021) writes that “self-affirming Jews have struggled against Zionism since its inception. The ongoing attempts on the part of governments and institutions to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism are clearly false. Such efforts seek to delegitimize Palestinian voices, to break apart our networks of solidarity, and to cast Jewish anti-Zionists as exceptions to the mainstream Jewish

⁹ An explanation of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and people and the diverse coalition of activists supporting the international Palestinian-led movement to end the occupation is beyond the scope of this article. Readers are encouraged to learn more through resources from organizations like the Palestinian BDS National Committee, the U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, and Visualizing Palestine, and from Jewish organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace, the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network, and If Not Now.

consensus” (para. 7).¹⁰ False equivalencies between anti-Zionism and antisemitism not only attempt to thwart solidarity between Jews and other marginalized peoples; the claim that critique of a nation-state is discriminatory toward a religiously/culturally marginalized group is arguably itself antisemitic. This assertion implies that all Jews have a monolithic set of beliefs or worldview and erases Jewish resistance to Zionism that, as Butler notes, has existed for as long as Zionism. Moreover, as a separatist movement, Zionism historically emerged from a sect of Jews who largely ascribed to the (historically inaccurate) idea that Jews are so wholly separate from non-Jewish peoples that they have never—in any society at any point in history—been meaningfully integrated or lived peaceably alongside *goyim* (or that they could in the future).

Nevel (2019), describing contemporary antisemitism and the pervasion of false accusations of antisemitism as a means of silencing Black, Brown, and Muslim supporters of Palestinian freedom, writes:

We should listen to Jews who say they are the victims of anti-Semitism, just as we would listen to those impacted by other injustices. But we also need to look more deeply at this particular call and its consequences, given how routinely false accusations of anti-Semitism are hurled at Palestinians and those who support Palestinian rights, at Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim, and at others—most often people of color—involved in antiracist movements (para. 5).

As Nevel suggests, Jewish solidarity with Muslims, Arabs, and other BIPOC in the fight against interlocking oppressions necessitates turning a critical eye toward accusations of antisemitism used to silence and criminalize supporters of Palestinian freedom, including student activists, K-12 teachers, and university professors. As the authors suggest, nothing about criticizing the policies, history, and practices of Israel as a nation-state is inherently or necessarily prejudicial against Jews.

Demonstrating the real-world effects of legislation that collapses anti-Zionism with antisemitism, just one month after Trump signed the “Executive Order on Combatting Antisemitism,” the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights launched investigations into two complaints of alleged antisemitism at UCLA. The allegations claimed two events created a hostile environment for Jewish students: a speaking event with Rabab Abdulhadi, a Palestinian feminist scholar of Palestinian activism who has repeatedly been attacked for her work; and a national conference held by the UCLA chapter of the student organization Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) (Richardson, 2020). Such allegations ignore that many Jewish students participate in SJP chapters (though this fact should not be necessary to distinguish between critique of a nation-state, on the one hand, and religious prejudice, on the other). Instead of accepting at face value the claim that legislation criminalizing activism for Palestinian freedom combats antisemitism, such legislative assaults are better understood as part of a broader right-wing attack on anti-oppressive education and activism. In a political milieu where antisemitism is routinely invoked to silence criticism of Israel, thinking critically about such claims—asking whether or not a statement actually disparages Jews or if it simply criticizes the structure, policies, and/or practices of a nation-state—is both a matter of enacting anti-racist, anti-Islamophobic politics, and of not letting false accusations of antisemitism muddle the meaning of the word, especially when very real forms of antisemitism persist.

¹⁰ The choice of the word “self-affirming” counters the antisemitic trope—often lobbed at anti-Zionist Jews—of the “self-loathing” Jew.

The Sickly Jew (or, What Antisemitism Is): The Eugenic Web of Antisemitism, Ableism, and White Supremacy

Justifications for the legislative efforts detailed above often invoke an insidious narrative of pervasive antisemitism among the left that can only be stamped out through legal means (e.g., Weiss, 2019).¹¹ Given the weight of this narrative in legitimizing a slew of legislative changes that criminalize many educators and student activists, it is worth examining the structural roots of antisemitism, particularly as it intersects with white supremacy and ableism. Ableism refers to the systemic oppression of disabled people. Disabled people, for the purposes of this article, encompasses anyone with intellectual, psychiatric, or physical differences (including chronic illnesses) that are labeled abnormal or undesirable under a dominant, medical approach to disability that seeks to “fix” or “remediate” non-dominant bodily, intellectual, or psychiatric differences. Challenging a dominant, *medical model of disability*, critical theories of disability understand disability as produced by ableism. In this view, disability is socially created by architectural, economic, ideological (e.g., settler logics), and political barriers that render bodily/mental differences disabling (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Ableism pathologizes or stigmatizes bodily differences and influences dominant conceptions of, for example, smartness and beauty (both tied to whiteness), with its attendant associations of goodness and morality (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Schalk & Kim, 2020). One clear example of the entanglement of ableism, anti-Arab racism, and antisemitism is caricatures of rich and powerful people with huge noses. A longstanding ableist idea is the association of disability (or non-dominant bodily differences) with evil and immorality (think, for example, about how many villains in novels or films have some form of disability: scars, facial disfigurement, skin conditions, prosthetic limbs, mental illness, etc.). In antisemitic caricatures of controlling Jews, a non-dominant bodily difference (a prominent nose, often drawn to a cartoonish extreme) is used to signify both Jewishness and an evil, conspiratorial nature (an antisemitic trope). Villains in television shows and movies are frequently made to have large, crooked noses (this is especially true in the case of witches, an allegation historically lobbed at working-class women and femmes who didn’t conform to heteropatriarchal norms). Notably, large or hooked-noses are frequently used to vilify Arabs in the media, too (Shaheen, 2003). This overlap in anti-Jewish and anti-Arab representations again suggests that rather than taking at face value a dominant narrative that pits Jews and non-Jewish Arabs against each other, Jews and Arabs (and Jewish Arabs) have overlapping interests in dismantling mutually constitutive ideologies that marginalize both (albeit quite differently both qualitatively and quantitatively, especially in a U.S. context).

In the U.S. today, antisemitism is often narrated as a transhistorical phenomenon, as the most persistent and severe type of scapegoating, and as an exceptional form of oppression seemingly circulating independent of place, space, or time (Feldman, 2015). This narrative of antisemitism as a timeless, ineradicable “disease” (language premised on ableism and disdain for sickness/disability) disregards both that antisemitism is shaped by historical and economic contexts and that antisemitism works in conjunction with white and able-bodied supremacy (or

¹¹ I use “the left” to refer to an ideologically diverse (communists, socialists, anarchists, and other radicals and progressives) group that shares a broad commitment to economic and social justice through anti-capitalism, and a disaffection from both the Republican and Democratic parties.

ableism) under U.S. racial capitalism.^{12 13} Challenging the myth of antisemitism as a constant and persistent reality through eighteen centuries, Rose (2004) argues that the international economic role of Jews in medieval society meant that Jews experienced “long periods of stability and a degree of political and legal independence” (p. 45). Noting that “when things went wrong—disease, plague, crop failure, [...]—Jews could become scapegoats,” Rose does not ignore the recurrent reality of antisemitism, but insists that “this was not a permanent condition, even if it was an ever-present possibility” (p. 45). The use of Jews as scapegoats in periods of economic or political instability is a feature of antisemitism (Jews for Racial & Economic Justice, 2017).

Reuter (2006) examines how in the period from 1881 to just prior to the start of WWII, a dominant discourse around Tay-Sachs Disease as fundamentally Jewish helped construct Jews as spreaders of disease, justifying xenophobic and ableist fears that undergirded support for restricting Jewish immigration to the U.S. during a period where Eastern European Jews were migrating in large numbers. Ableist ideology that devalues people who are chronically ill, non-able-bodied, or perceived as such (and so under capitalism, presumed to be less useful or productive workers) worked in tandem with mainstream eugenic notions of genetic inferiority and Christian supremacy to construct Jews as weak, unproductive, and psychiatrically inferior. As Reuter (2006) notes, “doctors oscillated between describing [Jews] as *sickly*, *weak*, and too *neurotic* to cope with urban life” (p. 308, emphasis added).

Eugenic science worked to frame Jews, BIPOC, disabled, queer, poor, and trans folks—and all those at the intersections— as genetically undesirable contaminants of the national body. Eugenic practices (liked forced sterilization and institutionalization) aim/ed to control the national body so as to reduce “undesirable” populations and increase populations deemed “fit” or “desirable” (white, Christian, non-disabled, cisgender, straight, etc.).¹⁴ As an ideology and set of practices that aims to control sexual reproduction based on the supposed “fitness” or “unfitness” of child-bearers to produce “desirable” citizens, eugenics is inherently patriarchal in both its logic and implementation historically. Describing the period preceding the Russian revolution, Kelkar (2017) notes that “people with ‘poor physiques,’ which was often said of Jewish immigrants, were ‘illy adapted’ and would procreate ‘defectives,’” as “a letter from a commissioner had warned the [United States] immigration and labor departments [in 1906]” (para. 2). Ableist constructions of Jews as genetically inferior stoked fears around the contamination of the national gene pool, in turn justifying policies like the Immigration Act of 1924, which sharply curtailed Eastern European Jewish immigration to the U.S. during an era of intense antisemitic persecution. Ableism, then, provides ideological infrastructure onto which antisemitism is mapped. As the disability justice-based performance artist group Sins Invalid (2019) writes, “One cannot look at the history of US slavery, the stealing of Indigenous lands, and US imperialism without seeing the way that white

¹² The metaphorical use of disability/disease to describe anything undesirable (here, antisemitism) is rooted in ableism in that disability is reified as something inherently and necessarily bad/undesirable.

¹³ Racial capitalism is a framework for analyzing how capitalism and anti-Black racism developed together historically such that neither could exist as it does today without the other. Theorists of racial capitalism point to the ways racist ideology and practices legitimize the divisions and accumulation of capital necessary for capitalist development (Burden-Stelly, 2020).

¹⁴ The forced sterilization of between 25-50% of Indigenous women in the U.S. by the Indian Health Service in the 1970s is one egregious example of eugenic logic in practice (Lawrence, 2000).

supremacy uses ableism to create a lesser/“other” group of people that is deemed less worthy/abled/smart/capable” (p. 18).

Rather than combat systems of white supremacy and ableism that have historically served to bolster antisemitism, Zionism sought/seek to refute antisemitism through the European-descendant, hyper-masculine, hyper-able-bodied trope of the Sabra, or “New Jew” of Israel (Zerubavel, 2002). Sufian (2007) describes how the Zionist movement aimed to change antisemitic tropes of Jews as weak, sickly, and effeminate through re-branding Jews as strong, physically capable, and masculine workers of the land as they settled in Palestine in growing numbers through the twentieth century. Sufian explains that “since productive work on the land (i.e. farming) was considered the ideal way to devote oneself to the Zionist movement, and people ages 15-30 were considered the most desirable workers, inability to do such labor was considered a serious problem” (Statistics as a Guide to Legitimacy, para. 6). The logic animating modern political Zionism is laid bare by the words of its founder, Theodor Herzl, who described that “If it is God’s will that we return to our historic fatherland, we should like to do so as *representatives of Western civilization* and bring *cleanliness, order* and the well-established customs of the Occident to this plague-ridden, blighted corner of the Orient” (1960, p. 343, emphasis added). Since the official creation of the state in 1948, Israeli immigration policy has reflected Zionism’s preference for nondisabled Jews. Describing Israel, disability legal scholar Sagit Mor (2007) notes that “already in 1948, screening applicants based on health, economic status, and other reasons began” (The Ethos of Return, para. 4). Mor describes how “Zionism’s ideology was founded as a reaction to disability-related stereotypes that were directed at Jews in Europe. [...] The Zionist movement’s effort to transform the Jew’s image from pale, sick, and feminine into healthy, beautiful, masculine, and strong was, in fact, a reaction to those stereotypes” (Screening of the Fittest, para. 12).

These ideological facets of Zionism shaped Israeli immigration policy from the beginning. Israel’s concern with limiting the immigration of disabled Jews was used to restrict or prevent the migration of Jews from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa, especially evident in the denial of entry to many Moroccan Jews (Mor, 2007). The project of Israeli settler-colonialism has largely served to reinforce white, able-bodied supremacy and colonial domination through land theft hinged on and legitimized (to its imperialist sponsors) by a carefully crafted image of Israel as an enlightened outpost of Western civilization in the Arab world (el-Messiri, 2009/1969). That many known antisemites *supported* the Zionist project of establishing Israel in Palestine historically (for purposes surely having to do not with protecting Jewish freedom but expanding colonial power, fracturing Jewish socialist resistance outside of Palestine, and antisemitic desires to rid other nation-states of Jews) should raise skepticism about contemporary invocations of antisemitism to condemn criticism of Israel. As with any problem, opposing antisemitism requires accurately understanding it. Antisemitism is best understood not as a transhistorical oppression wholly disconnected from all other oppressions, but as intimately tied to white supremacy and ableism, and shaped by political and economic factors in a particular place at a given moment in history.

Implications for Educators

Two Jews, Three Opinions: Historicizing Jewish Opposition to Zionism

Rather than exceptionalizing antisemitism as transhistorical, teaching left and anti-Zionist Jewish histories can foster Jewish solidarity with other marginalized groups in working toward a

more just world, here and now. As part of their anti-Zionist politics, the Jewish socialist Bundist movement—based in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia in the early twentieth century—referred to this notion with the Yiddish word *doykeit* (“hereness;” דױקײַט). For the Bund, *doykeit* encompassed their collective belief that “the solution to the Jews’ problems must be found in the places where they already lived and would not be solved through mass emigration” (Gechtman, 2011, p. 12). In a detailed historical account of the Bund at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Gechtman (2011) explains that “in their attempt to arrive at a social-democratic national program suitable to the needs of not only the Eastern European Jews but also all national minorities living in multinational states, Bundists determinedly rejected nationalism. They did not see the Zionist dream of a Jewish state as a viable solution for the millions of Eastern European Jews” (p. 44-45). The long history of Jews rejecting settler-colonialism as a strategy for Jewish liberation is also echoed by Chaim Zhitlovsky (a leader of the Russian Social-Revolutionary Party) who, prior to the 1917 revolution, responded to Theodor Herzl (the founder of political Zionism) in a letter, writing: “We Jewish revolutionaries, even the most national among us, are not Zionists and do not believe Zionism is able to resolve our problem” (Becker, 2009, p. 29). Jewish opponents of Zionism often point to the colonial and class origins of Jews who promoted Zionism in criticizing modern Zionism (Halbrook, 1972; Shohat, 1988).

What do these historical snapshots have to do with fostering anti-oppressive education in schools a century later? Reviving largely erased or hidden histories of leftist and revolutionary Jewish opposition to Zionism debunks efforts to script Jews as having a single history and belies monolithic constructions of Jewish identity that conflate support for an apartheid nation-state with “authentic Jewishness.” Describing the harms of Zionism “from the standpoint of its Jewish victims,” Ella Shohat (1988) traces Israel’s history of discrimination against Jews from Arab and Muslim countries:

Zionism has been primarily a liberation movement for European Jews (and that, as we know, problematically) and more precisely for that tiny minority of European Jews actually settled in Israel. Although Zionism claims to provide a homeland for all Jews, that homeland was not offered to all with the same largess. Sephardi Jews were first brought to Israel for specific European-Zionist reasons, and once there they were systematically discriminated against by a Zionism which deployed its energies and material resources differentially, to the consistent advantage of European Jews and to the consistent detriment of Oriental Jews (p. 1).

Social justice educators often point out that oppressors write dominant histories. Among Jews, too, it is the dominant, Jewish members of the ruling-class who write mainstream Jewish history.¹⁵ Referencing the Jewish anarchist Bernard Lazare, Brossat and Klingberg (1983) write that he “was correct in writing that only the Jewish bourgeoisie had been studied, and that Jewish historians had only written the history of the Jewish bourgeoisie for a readership of the bourgeois Jews of their day” (p. 1). Narrow representations of Jewish history that omit Jews’ heterogeneity and erase internal struggle over conflicting visions of freedom—as with any group constructed as having one reality, one history, one worldview—themselves perpetuate antisemitism.

¹⁵ This might be thought of as a form of “elite capture” by Zionist Jews regarding what counts as Jewish history and what it means to be Jewish. For more on the concept of elite capture, see Olúfhemi O. Táíwò’s book, *Elite Capture: How The Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*.

The New Jewish Agenda—a now defunct leftist Jewish group active from 1980-1992—exemplified a politics of Jewish solidarity. Their 1982 platform condemned anti-Black racism as the basis of U.S. capitalism, rejected discrimination against disabled and other marginalized peoples, and committed to “building [...] alliances [to] seek to end Jewish isolation and foster mutual respect for the goals of all people” (p. 121). Remembering and teaching largely erased leftist and revolutionary Jewish histories serves as a reminder that Jewish oppression is not wholly apart from or independent of other systems of oppression. For example, the Yiddish revolutionary song “Daloy Politzei” (“down with the police”; “דאלױ פּאָלײַצײַ”) was sung when the antisemitic Tsar was overthrown during the Russian Revolution. The song attests to the role of police in repressing marginalized groups throughout history, recalling Jewish memory that might stoke Jewish solidarity with the Black-led movement to abolish police in the U.S. today, with the migrant-led movement to abolish Border Patrol, with Indigenous peoples in the U.S. working to protect the land from a militarized settler occupation, or with Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and Black and Palestinian citizens of Israel fighting violence from Israeli police (Rogovoy, 2020). Teaching Jewish youth their histories of resistance, of collective struggle against all oppressions and not solely antisemitism, better serves the struggle against antisemitism than does a separatist strategy that reifies a narrow construction of Jewishness as necessarily Zionist or nationalist, hyper-masculine, and hyper-able-bodied.

Critically, Jewish youth have played a significant role in resisting the appropriation of antisemitism to condemn and criminalize Israel’s critics. For example, when Palestinian-American professor Steven Salaita’s tenured job offer in the American Indian Studies program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) was rescinded due to pressure from the Zionist lobby, Jewish students at UIUC, along with many others, spoke out in support of Salaita. Jewish students directly challenged false accusations of antisemitism leveled at Salaita and demanded that he be reinstated (Abuminah, 2014). In a public letter to UIUC Chancellor Phyllis Wise and the Board of Trustees, they asserted that the “decision to fire Professor Salaita is in fact what threatens us as Jews. By pointing to anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in an attempt to obscure politically and financially-motivated University actions, you minimize the Jewish voices of those who have resisted real and violent anti-Semitism,” (Jewish Community Letter, 2014, para. 2). The student statement names the political-economic investment in Zionism that drove the university’s sanctioning of Salaita. The statement goes on to note that

By conflating pointed and justified critique of the Israeli state with anti-Semitism, your administration is effectively disregarding a large and growing number of Jewish perspectives that oppose Israeli military occupation, settler expansion, and the assault on Palestine. We did not survive ethnic cleansing and carry on the legacy of our people to have our existence used to justify the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, or their unethical treatment when they speak out against the murder, violence, and displacement of their own people (Jewish Community Letter, 2014, para. 2).

Through this statement, U.S.-based students at UIUC rejected the wielding of Jewish identity to justify Israeli occupation and settler expansion. Highlighting the role of the U.S. in enabling and supporting racist Israeli state violence—particularly at U.S. campuses—the statement continues that “while you pontificated over whether or not some comments made on social media were anti-Semitic, the U.S. sponsored Israeli military systematically murdered thousands of Palestinians. Now our campus has been denied an invaluable scholarly voice to help lead this community in a

conversation about why as well as how to stop this from ever happening again” (para. 4). Here, Jewish students are pointing to the value of curricula that invite critical conversations about Israel and its enmeshment with U.S. settler-colonialism. While the U.S. state and its Zionist collaborators have constructed a narrative of Jewish students as fragile, as inherently threatened, harmed, or made unsafe by any critical discussion of Israel/Palestine, Jews, and especially Jewish students, are themselves refusing this narration (Meyerson-Knox, 2018). Jewish students, moreover, are pointing to the necessity of anti-oppressive education that challenges settler-colonialism in the U.S. and in Israel as a *precondition* for Jewish (and all marginalized and exploited peoples’) freedom.

The Repression of Teaching Palestine is Tied to Attacks on Anti-Racist and Queer and Gender-Affirming Education

The recent spate of attacks on teaching about systemic racism in the U.S., gender and sexuality-affirming education, and histories of collective resistance to racist, heterosexist, and transphobic systems of harm have, rightfully, made headlines and been condemned by progressive educators. As of this writing, forty-four states have introduced legislation restricting teaching about race, sexuality, or gender since the beginning of 2021 (Schwartz, 2023). Eighteen states have successfully imposed bans or restrictions. According to a report from Pollock et al. (2022) through UCLA’s Center for Democracy, Education, and Access, “at least 894 school districts, enrolling 17,743,850 students, or 35% of all K–12 students in the United States, have been impacted by local anti ‘CRT’ efforts” (vi). The attacks on anti-racist education should be contextualized as a reaction to teachers’ increased interest in teaching about and against white supremacy, a commitment propelled by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that speaks to the cultural impact of BLM organizing.

In the years preceding the recent deluge of legislative attacks on sexuality and gender-affirming curricula and CRT, a coordinated attack on teaching about Palestine in U.S. schools and universities was already under way (Asher, 2021). In 2019, a Chicago-area school district became a target of protest for the international pro-Israel group StandWithUs for promoting a course titled “Teaching Palestine.” The course, which the district conceded to retract from its promotional list of course offerings for teachers, was offered by the Chicago-based Teachers for Social Justice (Rose, 2019). In Florida in 2019, a bill passed that amended the Florida Educational Equity Act to ban antisemitism in public schools using the IHRA definition of antisemitism encompassing criticism of Israel (Florida House of Representatives, 2019). In 2020, California Governor Newsom vetoed a bill that would have made an Ethnic Studies course a graduation requirement for California high schoolers. The veto was in response to backlash from pro-Israel organizations that rejected the anti-Zionism of the proposed Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum. Exemplifying the narrative (increasingly codified in law) that criticism of Israel threatens Jews, pro-Israel groups wrote in the letter requesting the veto:

Jewish families throughout the state are deeply concerned that the anti-Zionist bias of Critical Ethnic Studies and the widespread anti-Zionist advocacy and activism — particularly the promotion of the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement — of its scholars and teachers in their classrooms and other professional spaces, will incite further hatred of Jews and harm to Jewish students (80 Groups to Gov. Newsom, 2020, p. 3).

Palestine Legal, an organization that protects the rights of pro-Palestine advocates and organizers in the U.S., “responded to 214 incidents of suppression of U.S.-based Palestine advocacy in 2022. Seventy percent of these incidents targeted students and scholars at 80 colleges, universities, schools, and school districts across the country” (Palestine Legal, Executive Summary, para. 3). From 2014 through 2020, Palestine Legal responded to 1,707 incidents, with the majority of attacks focused on educational settings. Attacks on students and scholars made up eighty percent of incidents and spanned across 68 campuses in 2020 (Palestine Legal, 2020 Year-in-Review, para. 4-5).

Zionist organizations have also sought to influence U.S. education through developing (or pushing for alterations to existing) curricula. For example, a non-profit organization called the Institute for Curriculum Services (ICS) has a stated mission of “improving the accuracy of K-12 instruction and instructional materials on Jews, Judaism, Jewish history and Israel in the United States” (ICS, n.d., para. 1). In a 2018 YouTube webcast, the director of ICS stated that the organization had made 11,500 changes to textbooks used in U.S. schools in all 50 states, including those by publishers like McGraw-Hill, National Geographic, and Pearson (ICS Formally Requests, N.D.). A guiding question of the webcast was “How can we ensure unbiased Israel education in our public schools today?” While framing its work as ensuring “neutral” education about Israel, the organization’s curricular materials and proposed textbook revisions demonstrate that ICS is primarily concerned with normalizing and legitimizing Israel, delegitimizing Palestinians’ culture and land claims, and erasing any reference to Israel’s settler-colonial structure, policies, and practices. In the webcast, for example, the ICS director describes “fixing” a textbook that stated that war broke out after Israel was formed to instead state that when the Jewish state formed, “the surrounding Arab states attacked Israel,” a narration that effaces the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians that precipitated the formation of Israel. On the organization’s website, maps intended for use by teachers describe Gaza as “administered by the Palestinians since Israel’s withdrawal in 2005” (ICS website). This descriptor ignores that every aspect of life for Palestinians in Gaza (often described as an open-air prison) is shaped by Israel’s occupation and blockade, which prevent Palestinians living in Gaza from moving freely, accessing clean water and adequate food or medical supplies, having basic infrastructure like electricity and healthcare, and leaving Palestinians in Gaza largely defenseless against Israeli airstrikes. In Virginia in 2018, the Virginia Coalition for Human Rights successfully stopped the adoption of changes to textbooks proposed by ICS. Freedom of Information Act requests reveal that common themes in the changes proposed by ICS to the Virginia Department of Education included replacing historically-accurate terms like “settlers,” “land theft,” and “occupation,” with “disputed,” “captured areas,” and “controlled” (ICS Formally Requests, N.D.). ICS also pushes for replacing textbook references to the “wall” with “security fence,” and on the “Curriculum” page of its website under “Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” a video describes the apartheid wall as a “security barrier” that has had the effect of “saving many lives” (ICS website). The incorporation of such revisionist history in textbooks constitutes curriculum violence against Palestinian-American students (Jones, 2020). ICS also hosts teacher trainings, which have occurred at roughly 90 locations in the U.S. (Al Mayadeen English, 2022).

The repression of teaching about Palestine laid groundwork for right-wing legislative attacks on teaching about race, gender, and sexuality in U.S. K-12 and higher education. The whitewashing of history curricula by Zionist organizations like ICS parallels current state laws (and proposed bills) that restrict teaching about systemic racism and transphobia in the U.S. As Asher (2021) notes, “the logic behind both the bans on Israel speech and critical race theory

functions in similar ways: equating critiques of nation-states with criticism of individual students in classrooms” (The Tip of the Spear, para. 1). While the organizations writing and spreading anti-Palestine and anti-CRT legislation are not one and the same, the financiers and lobbyists backing both are connected and largely ideologically aligned. For example, the right-wing Heritage Foundation drafted model legislation restricting teaching that acknowledges the existence of systemic racism within the U.S.¹⁶ The Heritage Foundation has spoken to lawmakers in New Hampshire, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah, and in 2022, Mississippi signed a bill adopting the think tank’s proposed language (Schwartz, 2021). In December of 2020, the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) hosted a virtual workshop featuring several Heritage Foundation representatives under the heading, “Against Critical Theory’s Onslaught: Reclaiming Education and the American Dream.” The workshop attendees included state legislators, corporate lobbyists, and staff from right-wing think-tanks and private foundations (Wiener & Kotch, 2021). Although ALEC doesn’t have its own model legislation criminalizing teaching about race, gender, and sexuality, the organization was central to the enactment of state legislation restricting teaching and activism for Palestinian rights immediately prior to the more recent wave of attacks restricting discussions of race, gender, and sexuality in classrooms. In August of 2019, ALEC hosted a conference in Austin, Texas during which several Republican state lawmakers joined pro-Israeli lobbyists in a private meeting led by Randy Fine, a Florida Republican, to “discuss disseminating new restrictions on speech relating to Israel on campuses across the heartlands” (Pilkington, 2019, para. 6). Fine was instrumental in the passage of the 2019 Florida bill restricting pro-Palestine education in Florida’s K-12 public education system. At the annual ALEC summit in December 2015, two anti-BDS measures were introduced as model anti-BDS legislation, and in many of the 27 states that have introduced anti-BDS measures, the bills’ sponsors have had close ties with ALEC (ALEC Attacks, 2019).

That restrictions on teaching about Palestine served as something of a testing ground¹⁷ for future attacks on anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-transphobic curricula suggests the urgency of addressing the repression of teaching Palestine. As outlined above, the repression of education about Palestine has been achieved in no small part through the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism. The importance of challenging both this conflation and the broader repression of teaching Palestine lies not only in the fact that teaching about Palestine has been something of a canary in the context of repressive restrictions on teaching, but also because issues of border control, colonial land theft, racist and Islamophobic policing, and disability injustice in Israel are financially and politically-backed by the U.S. (Spetalnick, 2016). Such harmful practices in Israel are intimately linked to racist, ableist, colonial, and xenophobic domestic policies and practices in the U.S. through the close economic, political, and military ties between the two nation-states (Zunes, 2002).

¹⁶ The Heritage Foundation’s model legislation states that “America and its institutions are not systemically racist and confutes the notion that these should be at the center of public elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions” (Heritage Foundation, para. 3).

¹⁷ This point was made by Lara Kiswani, executive director of the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (Asher, 2021).

Teaching Palestine: Collective Resistance and Teaching Resources

Palestinian American educator Dr. Hanadi Shatara has highlighted the limitations and harm of present (mis)representations of Palestine in social studies education scholarship. Speaking to the erasure of power dynamics within peace education scholarship, for example, Shatara (2022) notes that “the call for peace in a context of extreme imbalance of power, where one group has the resources (natural, economic, military) and allyship of the most powerful countries in the world and continues to kill, occupy, appropriate land, and break international law, is a call for the status quo, a call that invites complicity” (p. 68). She goes on to critique the imbalance within U.S. state education standards, many of which require some degree of teaching about the creation of the State of Israel, while none mention Palestine or Palestinians. Shatara (2022) offers excellent suggestions for how teacher educators can better address Palestine and Palestinians within social studies education. As one example, Shatara recommends explicitly referring to Palestinians, including Palestinians in exile, rather than using language like “the Arab-Israeli conflict” that renders all Arabs a homogenous group and erases Palestinian identity, culture, and experience.

Organizations like Visualizing Palestine, Teach Palestine, Decolonize Palestine, the Palestinian BDS National Committee, NDN Collective, and the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights also offer excellent resources for educators seeking to combat Zionist and settler-colonial logics in their classrooms. The resources offered by these and similar organizations can supplement lesson plans and curricular tools many teachers are already using to teach about white supremacy, settler-colonialism, and imperialism in their classrooms. I would add that lessons exploring Jewish opposition to Zionism—described above—might be particularly generative in history and social studies courses. Studying oppressed groups’ histories of internal struggle over divergent ideas about how to get free resists historical erasures that write the demands of a movement, organization, or group as foregone conclusions. In an anxious political milieu where it’s often assumed that one ought to show up having already formulated a cohesive, progressive political analysis (e.g., cancel culture), learning these histories serves as a valuable reminder to students that study and struggle (including internal struggle and debate with comrades or co-conspirators) are part of the necessary educational work of anti-oppressive learning, and requisite for deep engagement in political movements and the enactment of social change (Kelley, 2016; Patel, 2021). While studying Jewish opposition to Zionism should never take precedent over or preclude teaching about Palestinians’ leadership in the struggle against Israeli settler-colonialism, teaching anti-Zionist Jewish histories can complement these lessons. This might be especially constructive and necessary in the context of the widespread legislative efforts detailed here to co-opt Jewish identity and erase anti-Zionist Jewish histories—part of the broader colonial effort to erase Palestinian people, identity, and culture and curtail Palestinian freedom.

Beyond individual classrooms, teachers’ unions in the U.S. are beginning to take action to resist Zionist repression and support Palestinian freedom (Scher, 2021). For example, in May 2021, the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF) passed a resolution calling for an end to U.S. aid to Israel, the bombardment of Gaza, and the displacement at Sheikh Jarrah (Tucker & Talley, 2021). The vote made UESF the first public school teachers’ union to endorse the BDS movement. Shortly thereafter, in June 2021, the Seattle teachers’ union, Seattle Education Association (SEA), passed a resolution expressing solidarity with Palestinians under occupation and endorsing the BDS movement (Palestinian BDS National Committee, 2021). The Unified Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA)—which represents teachers in the second-largest school district in the U.S.—also passed motions supporting Palestine at regional meetings and took steps toward endorsing BDS in 2021

(Scher, 2021). In this case, though, using the tried-and-true tactic of declaring the endorsement and the teachers backing it antisemitic, “Israel advocates applied the tactics they have long deployed on campuses to stamp out UTLA’s pro-Palestine activity” and shut down the union’s motion to endorse BDS (Scher, 2021, para. 8). Zionist organizations’ effective silencing of the collective voice of L.A. teachers drives home the threat to teachers’ autonomy and collective power posed by Zionists’ efforts to conflate antisemitism with criticism of Israel in both legislative and cultural arenas. Nevertheless, these actions by major teachers’ unions indicate the substantive strides made in the struggle for Palestinian freedom in recent years and attest to a growing sense of outrage and urgency by U.S.-based educators to reject the U.S.’s financial, political, and ideological backing of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Conclusion

This article has traced attempts to redefine antisemitism and appropriate Jewish identity for the geopolitical purposes of suppressing organizing for Palestinian freedom, specifically highlighting the stakes of this phenomenon for teachers fostering anti-oppressive education in U.S. schools. In opposition to efforts to redefine antisemitism to encompass criticism of Israel, antisemitism is best understood as enmeshed with white supremacy, ableism, and heterosexism under U.S. racial capitalism. When antisemitism is recognized as co-constitutive with— rather than at odds with— other systems of power, the attacks on teaching about race, gender, and sexuality represent far more of a threat to Jewish students, teachers, and staff— especially queer, trans, and Jews of Color— than teaching and school events that uplift Palestinian voices and discuss Israeli settler-colonialism. Rather than accepting uncritical claims that growing criticism of Israel is indicative of rising antisemitism, understanding the rise in antisemitism as linked to the broader surge of white nationalism (including anti-Blackness, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Asian racism) fosters solidarity among peoples marginalized by interconnected ideologies based on a lucid understanding of what antisemitism is— and what it is not.

In the contemporary context of widespread surveillance and criminalization of Palestinians, Muslims, BIPOC, and Jewish organizers (many of them students and teachers) fighting for Palestinian rights, refuting the false conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism is a necessary part of any educational work against oppression. Teaching what antisemitism is *not* disallows Israel’s commitment of apartheid crimes in the name of Jewish freedom. Many Jewish students today reject the narrow and stunted notion of freedom Israel professes, choosing instead an expansive vision and practice of freedom rooted in solidarity with BIPOC, disabled, queer, and trans folks fighting for a world beyond oppression and exploitation. Teaching that renounces the conflation of antisemitism with anti-Zionism is part of the broader struggle against the attacks on anti-oppressive curricula and the policing of permissible knowledge in U.S. schools (a struggle that in many ways is not new, e.g., Kaepernick, Kelley, & Taylor, 2023). Just as the legal attacks on CRT and queer- and gender-affirming curricula are a reactionary response to the ideological influence of queer, trans, and Black liberation movements in recent years, the attacks on teaching about Palestine were catalyzed by the power built by the Palestinian-led BDS movement and the threat it poses to Israeli occupation. Contextualized as such, the slew of attacks on teaching might also serve to remind us of the liberatory potential of education and re-commit educators to teaching that threatens oppression everywhere.

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Author

L. J. Jaffee's scholarship focuses on critical disability studies, the political economy of higher education, and social movements in educational settings. She completed her PhD in Cultural Foundations of Education in 2020 at Syracuse University, where she also completed Certificates of Advanced Study in Women's and Gender Studies and Disability Studies. She taught a wide range of courses at Colgate University from 2019-2023 as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Educational Studies. While retaining a Research Affiliation with Colgate, Jaffee is working as a labor organizer within higher education during the 2023-2024 academic year.

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