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# Reflections from a Radical Killjoy

## *Palestine, Protesting Genocide and the Reemergence of Political Ethnonationalism*

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### Abstract

This article critically assesses anthropological responses to the Gaza massacre following the October 7, 2023, attacks. I warn against the dangers of a single, reductive narrative and highlight the harmful effects of discourse policing. While terms like “genocide” convey the gravity of the massacre and mobilize support, they also reinforce false binaries, reify distinctions between Palestine and Israel, and disconnect Gaza from the broader Palestinian context—obscuring the realities of military occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid. I argue that the current onslaught should also be recognized as the inevitable lethal outcome of the global reemergence of ethnonationalism. The insistence on a singular narrative, terminology, or form of action does not benefit the struggle for Palestinian freedom and justice. This article poses a sharp critique, but is ultimately a plea for the creation of spaces for resistances—plural—and for anthropologists to play our role in the human rights struggle of our time.

### Keywords

Palestine – resistance – ethnonationalism – Israel – human rights – genocide

It is Thursday, the 16th of May 2024, five o'clock in the afternoon, and we just finished the departmental faculty meeting. It was weeks after our university's

board of directors had ordered the riot police to evacuate the students' encampment on our campus. Not only was this done on the very first evening that the students had set up camp and under the false pretense of "tensions," but the camp was also evacuated in an extremely violent way. The images of bloody faces and students being clubbed while down on the ground had a deep impact on our faculty. This, coupled with months of deafening silence from the university's board regarding the "Israel-Hamas war,"<sup>1</sup> left many of my direct colleagues outraged and proved to be the last straw for those who, up until that point, had not been involved. The head of our department called for this extra departmental meeting to address these emotions. And it was a good one. Through small group discussions, plenary feedback, and some back and forth about the wording, we finally did it. Seven months and nine days after the 7th of October, we finally managed to draft a collective statement:

We, the anthropology department of the University of Amsterdam:

1. Call on the CvB (board of university) to take student demands seriously now and in the future.
2. Support student demands for a) full transparency and accountability in UvA investments; b) divestment from companies, organizations, and regimes that violate international law, participate in acts of genocide, or perpetuate global warming; and c) greater ethical scrutiny of research partnerships, including improved guidelines.
3. Oppose the use of police violence toward peaceful protestors on our campus. This is a violation of basic human rights and Dutch constitutional law.

The departmental meeting was one of collegiality, and the need to support our students and speak out about Palestine was shared by all. The statement fell short of calling for a full boycott of Israeli academic institutions, and the insistence on inserting "peaceful" before protestors rubbed me the wrong way, because it wrongfully curbs a democratic right and misrecognizes the (in my opinion) righteous anger of students as violence, but the shift that many of my colleagues and the department as a whole has made over the past few months

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1 In much the same way as the practice of writing "conflict" in quotation marks, I do the same for "Israel-Hamas war" because rather than being a neutral description, it signals the presence of a particular discourse which, among other things, equates Israel as a sovereign state with the fourth-largest army and Hamas as a political entity without sovereignty and therewith obscures vastly unequal power relations. See de Jong, A. (2018). Zionist Hegemony, the Settler Colonial Conquest of Palestine and the Problem with Conflict: A Critical Genealogy of the Notion of Binary Conflict. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 8(3): 364–383.

is rather extraordinary. Right after the meeting, a newly appointed assistant professor even joyfully exclaimed “The global solidarity movement is here, and we are a part of it!”

Perhaps I should have shared her enthusiasm, but I did not. Instead, I went home depleted and to bed with a heavy heart. The words of my colleague kept repeating in my head, “The global solidarity movement is here, and we are a part of it” But is it? And are we? If so, why did I not join for celebratory drinks, but instead lie in bed desperately resisting the impulse to hand in my resignation *stante pede*? And why have I since been on the verge of quitting academia altogether?

What follows is an analysis and reflection disguised as an accusation, because I think we are collectively failing as a discipline. But bear with me, because this writing comes from a place of responsibility many will recognize. And besides an accusation, it is also an anthropological love letter and ultimately a call for action, because I know we can and must do better.

### Protesting Genocide

My hesitation and unease were not new and not limited to collective statements. During my maternity leave (September–November 2023) I was interviewed by dozens of Dutch journalists and was deeply disappointed by the level of news coverage. On October 7th, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte immediately declared full support for Israel’s right to self-defense, and proclaimed “that there is no context to terrorism.” This set the tone of the public debate for months to come where even mentioning the occupation or the blockade of Gaza was deemed as glorification of terrorism. Social media and international press also did not give me much more solace. My Facebook, for example, was flooded with horrific images and clear statements for Palestinian liberation, but in-depth discussion or in fact any space for nuance or analysis was hard to find. Upon my return to work, I was thus craving substantive debate and to be around people who do know and understand the reality on the ground in Palestine.

Initially, I was not disappointed. The campus buzzed with condemnations of Israel’s ongoing slaughter and faculty and students from existing and newly created “UvA for Palestine” groups warmly welcomed me back. Highly regarded colleagues of the University of Amsterdam had formulated a well-written, urgent, and eloquent letter demanding a public statement of condemnation from our university’s leadership and asked me to co-sign as an initiator. As an outspoken supporter of the Palestinian cause, and known for my participation

in radical actions such as the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, this should be a no-brainer. And yet, I hesitated. Why?

Sure, I have reservations about using the word genocide. Because how can one ever envision a joint future once genocide is on the table? And does ethnic cleansing not describe what is going on much better, while it also includes the ongoing process in the West Bank? And sure, I wondered how effective yet another university statement would be for the facts on the ground in Palestine. But these are practical rather than fundamental concerns. There was something deeper that kept me from signing. It was not so much what the letter said or what my colleagues did that left me confused and estranged, it was what it omitted and what we as anthropologists failed to do.

When I joined the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in 2010, it was not primarily activist reasons that drove my decision to sail. At that time, I had conducted fieldwork research among joint Palestinian–Israeli co-resistance groups<sup>2</sup> for years. I had just about finished my PhD and when my interlocutors asked me to actually join them on the boats, I did not take the decision lightly. Of course, I knew that some colleagues back home (London then, Amsterdam now) would see this as activism, rather than academia, and that it would potentially jeopardize my upcoming search for a concurrent academic position. But I also deemed the division between academia on the one hand and activism on the other as completely fictional to begin with and wanted the world to know what had happened to my fieldwork site, and how my interlocutors were barely “getting by”<sup>3</sup> under the yoke of structural and everyday violence of first the occupation and now the blockade. Besides, not joining or not “taking a side” was also very much a political stance. One that would betray my political morality as well as intellectual obligation and one that would even, as I have argued, contribute to the erasure of Gaza even more.<sup>4</sup> The near to complete blockade of Gaza

2 For further explanation about how I use the distinction between coexistence and co-resistance see de Jong, A. (2020). Violence in Nonviolent Action: Power Relations in Joint Activism in Israel and Palestine. *Journal of Resistance Studies*, 6(2): 112–144. For further reading about Israeli decolonial solidarity see Barghouti, O. (2014). Opting for Justice: The Critical Role of Anti-colonial Israelis in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 4(4): 407–412; Todorova, T. (2021). *Decolonial Solidarity in Palestine-Israel: Settler Colonialism and Resistance from Within*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

3 For an anthropological analysis of the spatiotemporal, embodied, and symbolic aspects of the experience of violence in Palestine see Allen, L. (2008). Getting by the Occupation: How Violence Became Normal During the Second Palestinian Intifada. *Cultural Anthropology*, 23(3): 453–487.

4 For further reading on my participation in- and ethical considerations regarding the Gaza Freedom Flotilla see de Jong, A. (2016). The Gaza Freedom Flotilla: Human Rights, Activism and Academic Neutrality. In: K. Gillan and J. Pickerill. eds. (2016). *Research Ethics and Social Movements*. Routledge, pp. 57–73.

had been enforced for three years by then and the living situation in Gaza had already turned dire because of it. This was not, as it was portrayed in mainstream media, a retreat by Israel or a step towards self-governance or even a gesture. This was a near complete blockade, a medieval siege or, as some have termed it since, an open-air prison.<sup>5</sup> The Gaza Freedom Flotilla set sail to break the siege but also to break the silence about the fate of the Gaza Strip. In other words, the Gaza Freedom Flotilla challenged the narrative and therewith, to repeat the words of late Edward Said, spoke truth to power.<sup>6</sup>

I do not doubt that my much-appreciated colleagues had similar intentions and used the word genocide to consciously counter the prevalent discourse of the Israel-Hamas “war.” By evoking genocide they surely intended to counter Israel’s military attack on Gaza as mere “self-defense.” In other words, the letter of my colleagues was, like the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, meant to speak truth to power. But counter-narratives are not linear and can have unforeseen consequences. And in the case of genocide, it can unintentionally even strengthen the very thing it set out to oppose.

I am not against using the word genocide to describe Israel’s massive, indiscriminate, and deadly military attack on Gaza. At the time of finalizing this article, more than 52,000 Palestinians have been killed, many more lie still unrecovered under the debris of their bombed houses, and yet even more are under threat of starvation due to an Israeli-made famine. Raz Segal, associate professor of Holocaust and Genocide studies and professor in the study of modern genocide, was but the first academic to analyze the situation as one of genocide.<sup>7</sup> And the words of public Israelis like Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu<sup>8</sup> leave little room to doubt the definition when it comes to “[intent] to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic or religious group.”<sup>9</sup>

5 Feldman, I. (2015). Gaza as an Open-air Prison. *Middle East Report*, 45(275): 12; Tawil-Souri, H. and Matar, D. (2016). *Gaza as Metaphor*. Hurst and Co.; Fields, G. (2020). Lockdown: Gaza through a Camera Lens and Historical Mirror. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 49(3): 41–69.

6 Edward Said wrote and spoke about the intellectual’s moral obligation to speak truth to power on many occasions and in many places. For his own perspective, I recommend Edward Said’s contribution to the Reith Lectures *Representations of the Intellectual*. For further reading and scholarly analysis of Edward Said’s work legacy with regards to speaking truth to power, see Bové, P.A. ed. (2000). *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*. Duke University Press.

7 Segal, R. (2023). A Textbook Case of Genocide. *The Jewish Current*, October 23. Further discussed in the *Times* article by Burga, S. (2023). Is What’s Happening in Gaza a Genocide? Experts Weigh. *Times*, November 14.

8 See *Law for Palestine* Database of Israeli Incitement to Genocide.

9 The United Nations definition of genocide was ratified in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

But centering the counter-narrative around the concept of genocide also does something else.

First, genocide puts all eyes on the current attack on Gaza. While this rightfully underscores the exceptional violence and urgency of today's attacks, it obscures the broader long-term situation of the blockade of Gaza,<sup>10</sup> of military occupation on the West Bank,<sup>11</sup> of ethnonationalist discrimination<sup>12</sup> in Israel, of "proper" and de facto apartheid<sup>13</sup> in the entire territory that we currently depict as Israel and the Palestinian territories. In other words, the emphasis on the exceptionality of current political violence obscures the structural violence<sup>14</sup> underlying it. Not only does this render diverse oppressed Palestinian experiences and crucial scholarship about those experiences "beyond the scope of this genocide," it also runs the risk that once a ceasefire is eventually reached, the Palestinian cause will fall off the political agenda again. That the protests and public outcry will die down without the root causes of oppression addressed. Sure, there will be calls for accountability and world leaders will come together to rebuild Gaza, but an end to the current round of murdering of Palestinians will not truly change anything for Palestinians if we cannot draw adequate attention to the root causes that enable the killing.

Second, the emphasis on genocide counters the fraudulently simplistic interpretation of the "Israel-Hamas war" and Israel's enraging claim of mere self-defense, but it leaves the crude distinction Israel versus Palestine firmly intact. Actually, one could even say that it reinforces it and that is a problem.

The war and self-defense rhetoric is inadequate because it equates a state with the fourth strongest army and the unconditional support of world power, with a people deprived of self-governance or even the basic human right

10 Joudeh, S. (2021). Defying Exception: Gaza after the "Unity Uprising." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 50(4): 73–77; Farhat, T., Ibrahim, S., Abdul-Sater, Z. and Abu-Sittah, G. (2023). Responding to the Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza: Damned if You Do ... Damned if You Don't! *Annals of Global Health*, 89(1): 53–60.

11 Aruri, N.H. ed. (1984). *Occupation: Israel over Palestine*. Association Arab-American University Graduates; Gordon, N. (2008). *Israel's Occupation*. University of California Press.

12 Lentin, R. ed. (2008). *Thinking Palestine*. Zed Books; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2012). The Grammar of Rights in Colonial Contexts: The Case of Palestinian Women in Israel. *Middle East Law and Governance*, 4(1): 106–151.

13 Bishara, A. (2001). *Palestine/Israel: Peace or Apartheid*. Zed Books; Bakan, A.B. and Abu-Laban, Y. (2010). Israel/Palestine, South Africa and the "One-State Solution": The Case for an Apartheid Analysis. *South African Journal of Political Studies*, 37(2–3): 331–351; B'tselem (2022). *Not a Vibrant Democracy: This Is Apartheid*. B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

14 Farmer, P. (2009). On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below. *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, 3(1): 11–28; Scheper-Hughes, N. and Bourgois, P.I. eds. (2004). *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*. Blackwell Publishing.

of freedom of movement. The emphasis on genocide does not break this equation; it strengthens it. It may sway sympathies but it does not expose this crude binary distinction for what it is: war-mongering fiction. There is no Israel on one side and Palestine on the other. Not in geography, not in demography, and not in ideology.<sup>15</sup>

We speak about the Israel-Palestine “conflict”<sup>16</sup> so regularly that one would almost forget that there are no two neighboring countries to begin with. There aren’t any clear boundaries either on paper or on the ground. On paper there is only one sovereign state with self-governance—Israel—which never set its outer boundaries. There are some paper boundaries such as the Armistice green line and the 1967 border but these hold no legal status and are not physically present on the ground. If one travels to any destination in Israel or the Palestinian Territory, one cannot do so without having to cross an official Israeli border crossing. Even if one wants to travel, for example, from Amman in Jordan to Jericho on the West Bank without even coming close to Israel “proper” one can only do so via the Israeli Allenby Bridge border crossing.

What is there is a military occupied West Bank divided into the infamous areas A, B, and C that prohibits any freedom of movement, let alone Palestinian self-governance.<sup>17</sup> What is there is an annexed Jerusalem, which is not officially recognized by the international community, yet the United States Embassy to Israel is located there. On the ground there is no border or even a single sign to demarcate the difference between West and East Jerusalem. The only borders there are drawn on paper and expressed through identity cards,<sup>18</sup> which classify Jewish Israelis as full citizens with all accompanying rights, and leaves Palestinian Jerusalemites with an “other” status such as present absentee,<sup>19</sup> which excludes them from full citizenship and which affects most aspects of everyday life. What is there is Israel “proper” which can only be geographically

15 The problem with simplified binary distinctions in regard to Israel and Palestine has been well argued. See Taraki, L. (2006). Even-handedness and the Palestinian-Israeli/Israeli-Palestinian “Conflict.” *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, 35(5): 449–553.

16 de Jong, A. (2018). Zionist Hegemony, the Settler Colonial Conquest of Palestine and the Problem with Conflict.

17 Hajjar, L. (2005). *Courting Conflict: The Israeli Military Court System in the West Bank and Gaza*. University of California Press; Halper, J. (2002). Bantustans and Bypass Roads: The Rebirth of Apartheid? *Global Dialogue*, 4(3): 35–44.

18 Tawil-Souri, H. (2012). Uneven Borders, Coloured (Im)mobilities: ID Cards in Palestine/Israel. *Geopolitics*, 17(1): 153–176.

19 Minkin, S.A. (2022). An Invitation to Belong: Challenging the Systemic Exclusion of Palestinians as Present Absentees. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 51(1): 62–67; Stein, Y. (1997). *The Quiet Deportation: Revocation of Residency of East Jerusalem Palestinians*. HaMoked; Felner, E. (1995). *A Policy of Discrimination: Land Expropriation, Planning and Building in East Jerusalem*. Bt’selem

delineated if one willfully ignores the many Israeli settlements on the West Bank and the Israeli-only roads that lead there.<sup>20</sup> And finally, what is there is the Gaza Strip. It comprises 177 square kilometers of land with no official status on paper but with very visible, until recently, impenetrable borders on all sides.

Even if one leaves real or imagined geographical borders out of the equation, one cannot speak about the Palestinian people on one side and the Israeli on the other. More than half a million Israeli settlers reside on the West Bank, and more than two million Israeli are so-called Arab Israeli also known as Palestinian Israelis or “48 Palestinians.”<sup>21</sup>

Third, the centrality of genocide in the current counter-narrative, intentionally or not, reproduces the reification of Palestine and Israel. The truth is that there is no demarcated Israeli or Palestinian state nor one homogenous Palestinian or Israeli people. This reification matters now more than ever because it is the red herring that distracts from the real division. There is no division between Israel and Palestine or between Palestinians and Israelis. The conflict is not between Palestine-Israel, Jews-Muslims or even “the West versus the Rest.” The real division is between those devoted to human rights and rights based on citizenship, and those who adhere to national rights based on ethnicity. In sum, to those for or against political ethnonationalism.

### The Canary in the Coal Mine: The Re-emergence of Political Ethnonationalism

Ethnonationalism ascribes full or partial national rights and duties based not on birthright or citizenship, but on the ethnic background of groups or individuals.<sup>22</sup> Political ethnonationalist practice concurrently divides citizens

20 Bishara, A. (2015). Driving while Palestinian in Israel and the West Bank: The politics of Disorientation and the Routes of a Subaltern Knowledge. *American Ethnologist*, 42(1): 33–54; Selwyn, T. (2020). Landscapes of Separation: Reflections on the Symbolism of By-pass Roads in Palestine. In: B. Bender and M. Winer, eds. *Contested Landscapes*. Routledge, pp. 225–240.

21 Tatour, L. (2021). The “Unity Intifada” and ‘48 Palestinians: Between the Liberal and the Decolonial. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 50(4): 84–89; Veracini, L. (2013). The Other Shift: Settler Colonialism, Israel, and the Occupation. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 42(2): 26–42.

22 Muller, J. Z. (2008). Us and Them: The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism. *Foreign Affairs*, 78(2): 18–35; Connor, W. (1973). The Politics of Ethnonationalism. *Journal of International Affairs*, 27(1): 1–21; Makhoul, T. (2019). Ethnonationalism in the US, Lebanon, and Israel: A Transnational Analysis. *Jam It! Journal of American Studies in Italy*, 1: 98–119; Pappé, I. (2006). *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*. 2nd edition. Cambridge University Press. For further reading on the racialization of Palestinians see Goldberg, D.T. (2008). Racial Palestinianization. In: L. Lentin, ed. *Thinking Palestine*, Zed Books, pp. 25–45.

of a nation-state into different categories based on ethnonational identity, thereby creating groups of “real” or full citizens and those categorized as “other.” In Israel, such ethno-nationalist exclusionary practices were clear from the onset of the creation of the state in 1948 and formalized into law through the 2018 Nation-State Bill.<sup>23</sup>

But this phenomenon is neither new nor unique to Israel. One could even argue that the emergence of all modern nation-states relied in one degree or another on the notion of a sovereign state with demarcated borders to encapsulate “a nation”: a people with a shared national identity. But as basically every first-year bachelor’s degree anthropology student can already read in Benedict Anderson’s foundational book,<sup>24</sup> nations are first and foremost imagined communities. Put more simply, the nation is not a natural category but rather a human-made social construct. There has never been one single country constituting one single nation, not along racial, ethnic, religious, or even cultural lines. And the wish to forge such a singular nation within one state despite inevitable diversity has brought us some of the most infamous struggles of history: segregation in the United States and apartheid in South Africa to name but two.

In this sense, current political ethnonationalism in Israel is the continuation of an old ideology executed in new practices. Because, even by the wildest stretch of the imagination, Israel is not the singular nation state for the Jewish people. Even if one, for argument’s sake, discards the West Bank and Gaza, there are still two million “non-Jewish/other” Israeli citizens. Furthermore, Israel is home to approximately 7.2 million Jews of all 15.7 million Jewish people worldwide,<sup>25</sup> and the vocal presence of Jewish anti-war protesters worldwide clearly disproves the idea that Israel represents them all. In sum, the fact that Israel has to now again violently suppress “the others” among them already shows the myth of the possibility of a singular nation state based on one shared ethnicity. At least, if one wants it to be peaceful and democratic.

So let me be clear. I do not object to describing the current situation as a genocide. I do not mind sharp words nor do I think that researchers should refrain from protesting. By all means, post the reality of dead children on Facebook and call out people on X. Go and join students on the barricades and object by any means necessary. But as scholars, that is not enough. As scholars

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23 Jabareen, H. and Bishara, S. (2019). The Jewish Nation-state Law. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 48(2): 43–57; Bt’Selem (2021). *A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea*.

24 Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.

25 Dashefsky, A. and Sheskin, I.M. eds. (2024). *American Jewish Yearbook 2023*. Springer.

we need to call out the current situation in Palestine-Israel for what it truly is: the inevitable outcome of the reemergence of political ethnonationalism.

And then a singular analysis of genocide is not sufficient because it leaves the context of continuous settler colonialism, of decades-long military occupation and apartheid undiscussed. Let us champion Palestinian liberation not because Palestine is a mythical heroic nation but simply because Palestinians have the right not to be killed for being Palestinian. Nor should anyone's right to live or be killed depend on either ethnicity or nationality, or in this case, on the combination of both. If we do not expand this struggle beyond Palestine alone, and if we fail to challenge the myth of binary conflict in the process, we run the risk of making political ethnonationalism worldwide *salonfähig* again. We, as scholars, make it acceptable, something that can be discussed, something that one can be for or against.

Thus, our struggle must be against the ideology itself, rejecting the legitimacy of political ethnonationalism wherever it arises. Only then can we hope to build a world where diversity is embraced and the rights of all individuals are upheld, irrespective of their ethnic or national background.

Or so I opine based on my research. But I did not dare to say that out loud.

### Speaking Truth to Power: Anthropology's Litmus Test

When I think back to the departmental meeting, I envy the joy of my junior colleague. I too want to be part of the global human rights movement of our time. I too want to be optimistic, but during the darkest hours of the night, I cannot shake much darker thoughts. At those times I fear that in a post-truth world, in which even our own university deans reduce academic knowledge to a mere activist stance, the academy has lost all its ability to speak truth to power.

So let me be a radical killjoy in the true sense of Sara Ahmed's concept.<sup>26</sup> Not to refute the idea that "there is a global human rights movement and we are part of it" but to actually rise to that ambition. Because yes, the International Court of Justice's case, the student encampments and the outburst of protests worldwide give cause to optimism, but by themselves they are not enough. Just like the Gaza Freedom Flotilla back then was not enough. Yes, it successfully countered false narratives, caused uproar and put Gaza in the spotlight for a while, but ultimately it did not change anything for Palestinians on the ground. I lie awake worrying that today's efforts will suffer the same fate.

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26 Ahmad, S. (2019). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press; Ahmed, S. (2023). *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. Random House.

But then the morning lights peek through the curtains, and I remember the human rights struggles from the past. The abolition of slavery was no less of a task. Apartheid in South Africa was as normalized and embedded in world politics. The dehumanization of black people went as unquestioned, and opposition was also perceived as polarizing, violent, and radical. The outcomes of these human rights movements were also deemed impossible. Until it was done.<sup>27</sup>

And if there is but one lesson to learn from those human rights struggles from the past, it is that it was not one word, one event, one tactic or one strategy that made the system tumble. It was never only armed struggle or only mass nonviolent mobilization, or only political pressure, or only economic boycott or only academic analysis. The true strength and transformative power always lay in all these different forms of resistances—plural—coming together.

It took me seven months and nine days to put my finger on it, but that is perhaps what is the root cause of my own disarray. I am not frustrated by what my colleagues do or the words they choose, it is the forced singularity of it.

Because insisting one must use the term genocide is but one example. If one wants to be perceived as taking a stance for Palestine, one must also wear a keffiyeh and flood social media with horrific images that show the truth. And accompany those messages with words of anger and despair. One must support our students, nay *join* them, unconditionally. Without critique. Or if one will not, be deemed mainstream or worse, be accused of being silent in the face of oppression.

It is this discourse policing, this narrowing down of possible courses of action, and this lack of diverse debate that I deeply fear, it prevents anthropology as a discipline, or academia more broadly, from truly speaking truth to power. Because Edward Said's famous phrase was never meant to be reduced to merely "show what is really going on." It was always accompanied by the intellectual obligation to the breadth and depth of knowledge. To scholarly rigor. To debate.

This current discourse policing amongst ourselves, and insistence on one way of speaking out and one way of acting, runs the risk of reducing our efforts to virtue, renouncing the very essence and power of our discipline.

If we as anthropologists want to make a difference and play our role in the global human rights struggle of our time, we need to step up. Not by tone

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27 Acknowledging, of course, that overthrowing an official repressive regime or set of laws such as apartheid or US segregation, is only the beginning. And it is not actually "done" then.

policing or silencing and therewith shrinking the space for debate and possible actions, but by insisting, as a discipline, on the complexity and ambiguity of everyday experiences and by safeguarding the multiplicity that inherently comes with that.

Anthropologists prioritize the complexity of everyday life and celebrate its inevitable multiplicity. We are the discipline that prides itself for “making the familiar strange and the strange familiar.” And to me, in this moment and based on my research, this means stressing that this is indeed the re-emergence of political ethnonationalism. And that ethnonationalism is not a return to nature and not inevitable. It is a socio-political construct that has proven blatantly wrong in the past and proves to be extremely lethal again in the present. And it will not be limited to Gaza if we do not stop it.

But my call is not to replace one counter-narrative with another. It is to remember the strengths of our craft and utilize them to create space again for the ambiguity and multiplicity inherent in everyday life. And for scholarly debate, and for truly speaking truth to power.

So let us do our jobs. Protest, write statements, join encampments, construct counter-narratives, unionize, vote, promote BDS, speak out in every way possible. But do so out of the core strength of our discipline and leave space, nay *create* space, for the diversity of everyday experiences, for complex debates, and for being part of the global human rights struggle for Palestine in a multiplicity of ways. Then, anthropologists do have a role to play. In time, it may even prove to have been our litmus test.

### Epilogue: Resisting Ethnonationalism

The above was written in the midst of the mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza. Now, nearly a year later, we are still in the midst of it, albeit in a different way. Benjamin Netanyahu found a partner in international crime in the re-elected president of the United States of America, Donald Trump. And the forced displacement of two million Palestinians from Gaza—ethnic cleansing—is no longer a mere fantasy of the far-right but an actually proposed “peace plan” which lies on the table as an “out of the box solution.”

These developments continue to demand action.

The first few months of 2025 also saw the blatant de-democratization of US institutions, the curtailing of higher education, the normalization of the Nazi-salute, the acceleration of trade wars, and the nesting of previously pariah-like extreme-right parties in the heart of European countries’ state power.

These developments also demand action.

One could argue that we urgently need a plan. That we need to organize and that we should not start from scratch. We need a blueprint for action. A counter-authoritarian playbook, if one wills. I must admit my academic quest has always been motivated by understanding global human rights struggles in order to do exactly that: find out what works. But if decades of Palestine studies and resistance scholarship teach us anything, it is that such an overarching manual for success does not exist, and cannot exist. I would even say that we should not even want it.

Because power and resistance are completely intertwined, and protests or other direct actions cannot be disconnected from what they aim to oppose.<sup>28</sup> Absolutely, there are amazing activist resources,<sup>29</sup> and I definitely recommend everybody read up on the fundamentals of direct action theory.<sup>30</sup> But effective resistance consists of political jiu-jitsu,<sup>31</sup> where resistance uses the strength of its opponents to undermine its power and to strengthen or build alternatives. What we need is not solely a step-by-step guide for protests and demonstrations, but rather an urgent, collective effort to recognize and analyze and therewith undermine the power mechanisms underlying the oppressive practices of today. And if we manage to do so, each in our own way, based on our particular research expertise areas and stemming from our unique experiences, we collectively as scholars may actually be part of a multitude of resistances that can counter not only the current killing of Palestinians, but also the underlying ethnonationalist thoughts and practices. In Israel-Palestine and beyond.

So, while I initially left the ending of this article open to emphasize my call for a multitude of actions and resistances, I now want to conclude by offering my own contribution to this collective effort. I will do so by examining the

28 Lilja, M. and Vinthagen, S. (2014). Sovereign Power, Disciplinary Power and Biopower: Resisting What Power With What Resistance? *Journal of Political Power*, 7(1): 107–126.

29 A free archive of academic and activist resources is available through Nonviolence International. The Albert Einstein Institute offers activist toolkits based on scholarly knowledge.

30 Vinthagen, S. (2015). *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*. Bloomsbury Publishing; Chenoweth, E. and Stephan, M.J. (2011). *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia University Press; Sharp, G. (2011). *Sharp's Dictionary of Power and Struggle: Language of Civil Resistance in Conflicts*. Oxford University Press; Helvey, R.L. (2004). *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals*. Albert Einstein Institute; Schock, K. ed. (2015). *Civil Resistance: Comparative Perspectives on Nonviolent Struggle* (Vol. 43). University of Minnesota Press.

31 Sutton, J., Butcher, C.R. and Svensson, I. (2014). Explaining Political Jiu-jitsu: Institution-building and the Outcomes of Regime Violence Against Unarmed Protests. *Journal of Peace Research*, 51(5): 559–573; Rivetti, P. (2023). Thinking About Social Movements and Obstacles to Protesting Globally: Lessons from Palestine. *European Political Science*, 22(3): 363–367.

lessons we can draw from Palestinian and Israeli co-resistance and, like it often happens, it all started in the classroom.

### *Teaching Political Fantasy*

One of my favorite moments in the academic year is when the figurative ball drops, and my students fully grasp the depth of Ghassan Hage's *White Nation*.<sup>32</sup> In this book, Hage critically examines racial issues and nationalism in multicultural Australia, using the metaphor of soup-making—who makes the soup and who decides what goes into it—to illustrate white nationalist governmentality. Through this, he exposes the power structures behind “tolerance” and reveals how both overt evil-nationalists and well-meaning multiculturalists, albeit differently, position themselves as managers of the nation. And thus, unintentionally or not, reproduce the power distinction between those who can tolerate and those who are tolerated, or not tolerated.

For Dutch students, raised in a country that prides itself on its culture of tolerance,<sup>33</sup> this is already an eye-opening experience. But the truly pivotal moment comes when they realize that the *white nation* is, first and foremost, entirely a fantasy. It does not exist. While politicians debate how to “deal with” immigrants, the undocumented, Muslims, trans people, and other marginalized groups, the reality is that there has never been a homogenous nation with a homogenous population. Not when it comes to racial and ethnic dimensions but also not when it comes to gender, sexual orientation, religion or even national culture. People, and therefore populations, are inherently and by nature diverse, and thus what does exist, Hage eloquently argues, is the opposite of a white nation: we all live in a multicultural *real*. And, I would add by extension, in a multi-everything real.

These insights change how students look at the immediate world around them and their position within it. This year was no exception, and students wrote excellent essays connecting these scholarly insights to their own “national” experiences in the everyday. After the final lecture of the course, however, a small group of students hung back. They praised the book and the broader course, but in a roundabout way started asking questions. “But what about our protests for Palestine, aren’t they also about helping ‘the other’?”

32 Hage, G. (2012). *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. Routledge.

33 de Jong, A. (2019). Gaza, Black Face and Islamophobia: Intersectionality of Race and Gender in (Counter-) Discourse in the Netherlands. In: P. Essed, K. Farquharson, K. Pillay, and E.J. White, eds. *Relating Worlds of Racism: Dehumanisation, Belonging, and the Normativity of European Whiteness*. Springer, pp. 271–298; Wekker, G. (2016). *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Duke University Press.

“And is this not a kind of navel gazing? It is more so about our realization than about those who experience exclusion.” “And, in the end, the thing is ... this is pretty abstract. How can this change anything for those who actually bear the brunt of oppression every day? Can it even do that?”

I remember being proud of them for asking these questions. It was a teaching moment. I answered with something to the like of “welcome to academic research. There aren’t any simple answers but these are exactly the questions we should ask ourselves.” Perhaps it was good enough for that day, but I was unsatisfied with my answer in the long run.

So here is my beginning of a better answer to my students. Based on the white nation fantasy but grounded in the everyday experiences of Palestinian and Israeli co-resistance.<sup>34</sup>

### *Make Identity Plural Again*

First, there is a fundamental difference between peace activism and co-resistance. While peace activism encompasses any abstract effort to end the so-called “binary conflict” in pursuit of a negotiated peace between “two sides,” co-resistance rejects this simplistic binary from the outset. This does not mean that co-resistance activists deny the existence of Palestinian, Jewish, or Israeli identities. On the contrary—Palestinian and Jewish Israeli activists engaged in co-resistance are acutely aware of national and religious identities, often using them deliberately in their direct actions. However, they refuse to let themselves or “the other” be reduced to these categories, and they reject the

34 These observations stem from my fieldwork-based research in Palestine and Israel over the past two decades. In addition to so-called popular committees in the Palestinian villages of Nabi Saleh, Budrus, Jayyous, and towns such as Raffah and Khan Younis, over the years I worked with the following co-resistance groups: Combatants for Peace, Anarchists Against the Wall, Parent Circle: Bereaved Family Forum, Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICHD), Anarchists Against the Wall, Machsom Watch, and *Ta’ayush*. For further reading, I suggest Todorova, T. (2015). Reframing Bi-nationalism in Palestine-Israel as a Process of Settler Decolonisation. *Antipode*, 47(5): 1367–1387; Svirsky, M. and Ben-Arie, R. (2017). *From Shared Life to Co-resistance in Historic Palestine*. Rowman & Littlefield; Weizman, E. (2024). The Anticolonial Settler: Reflections on Citizenship, Violence and Decolonisation. *Citizenship Studies*, 28(3): 263–281; Al-Bazz, A. and Polakow, S. (2021). When Colonised and “Colonisers” Cooperate to Decolonise: Activestills Collective of Palestine/Israel. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 9(2): 307–309; Amoroso, F., Pappé, I. and Richter-Devroe, S. (2019). Introduction: Knowledge, Power, and the “Settler Colonial Turn” in Palestine Studies. *Interventions*, 21(4): 451–463; Richter-Devroe, S. (2009). Here, It’s Not About Conflict Resolution—We Can Only Resist: Palestinian Women’s Activism in Conflict Resolution and Non-violent Resistance. In: I. Sair, R. Isotalo, S. Mojab, S. Peterson, S. Richter-Devroe and M. Kamp, eds. *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives*. Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 158–190.

division of political rights—let alone human rights—based on singular ethnic or nationalist identity.

In other words, the Palestinians and Israelis involved in co-resistance acknowledge identities but refuse to be confined by them. They recognize that individuals and groups cannot be reduced to a singular, fixed identity. And while categories such as Palestinian, Israeli, Muslim, or Jewish may have particular significance in these territories, this principle is essential for resisting ethnonationalist politics everywhere. Because identity is always plural. One is never only one's nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. Ethnonationalist politics—like many forms of oppression—relies on the fiction of singular, fixed, or dominant identity to determine who belongs and who is excluded from the imagined national community. To resist being made only or primarily Israeli—and thus granted specific rights and duties—or to resist being reduced to only Palestinian—and thus denied the most basic human rights, including the right to live freely—becomes central to any form of resistance. Likewise, recognizing, prioritizing, and insisting on the inherent plurality of identity is central to resisting ethnonationalist political oppression in all its forms.

### *Solidarity: Facts on the Ground*

Second, and following from the above, Palestinians and Israelis involved in co-resistance are not engaged in charity, humanitarian aid, or “helping the other.” And yet, internal working days—such as assisting with the olive harvest in the seam zone<sup>35</sup>—often take up more time than the more visible, well-known direct actions like demonstrations. This stems from a deep understanding that mechanisms of oppression do not affect everyone equally. It is not enough to collectively oppose oppressive power; one must also recognize the unequal distribution of power and its consequences and act accordingly to alleviate those disparities wherever possible to weaken the foundations of an oppressive regime.

Collective olive picking on land from which Palestinians are banned, then, should not primarily be seen as an act of kindness but as an acknowledgment of the vastly different everyday realities Palestinians face under occupation and continued dispossession. In this context, picking olives is not simply about agriculture or helping out—it is an act of resistance. It prevents land confiscation under the “present absentee” law and, crucially, therewith is an

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35 Seam Zone refers to Palestinian West Bank land East of the Green line and West of the Separation Wall. Saleh, R. (2012). In the Seam Zone: Walaja's Fate Between Jerusalem and Nowhere. *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 49(1): 54–67.

act of solidarity. It strategically leverages the privilege of Israeli citizenship to undermine the occupation's system of granting and denying rights based on singular ethnonationalist identity.

Similarly, members of the Parent Circle—Bereaved Families Forum frequently visit Israeli high schools and community centers in a structured format where one Palestinian and one Israeli share their experiences of bereavement. These emotionally charged meetings can be critiqued—Palestinians should not have to expose their grief or share their personal pain to be recognized as human by Israelis. And yet, these “working days” actively dismantle the dominant, militarized portrayal of Palestinians as irrational, Jew-hating aggressors. In doing so, they counter one of the most insidious, yet not nearly enough acknowledged,<sup>36</sup> pillars of Israeli state violence: dehumanization.

Excavating from these few, limited examples in Palestine-Israel, I propose that solidarity among those resisting ethnonationalism should not center on charity or humanitarian aid but that we need to acknowledge that ethnonationalist politics affect different people in different ways. And that we need to accurately recognize how these divisions are enforced and alleviate their impact where possible. And that we should actively counter the mechanisms of ethnonationalist division by defending and building alternative “facts on the ground” that do reflect the intrinsically and unstoppable diverse *real*.

This is my belated answer to my students. And to myself and all who want to resist what we see enfolding around us. It is incomplete and insufficient. It is not the anthropology I am used to doing, but I think it is the anthropology that I should be doing today.

To conclude, and in direct response to my enthusiastic colleague, even though she was not asking: Yes, I do think there is a righteous, complex, ambiguous, flawed global human rights movement building. And yes, I do think anthropologists have many, multiple, different roles to play.

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36 The dehumanization of Palestinians among Israeli soldiers and in Israeli society more broadly is well documented yet often labeled as critical or decolonial scholarship, and therewith as knowledge that can be easily ignored, or dismissed. For further reading, I suggest Peled-Elhanan, N. (2013). *Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology and Propaganda in Education*. Bloomsbury Publishing; Weiner, M.F. (2022). Palestinian Erasure and Dehumanization in Introductory Sociology Texts. *Critical Sociology*, 49(6): 991–1008; Abu-Laban, Y. and Bakan, A.B. (2022). Anti-Palestinian Racism and Racial Gaslighting. *The Political Quarterly*, 93(3): 508–516; Bakan, A.B. and Abu-Laban, Y. (2009). Palestinian Resistance and International Solidarity: The BDS Campaign. *Race and Class*, 51(1): 29–54; Ayyash, M.M. (2022). The Toxic Other: The Palestinian Critique and Debates About Race and Racism. *Critical Sociology*, 49(6): 953–966.