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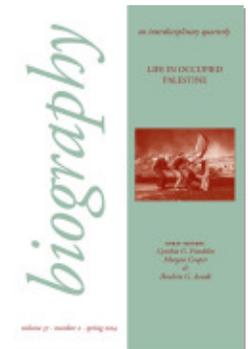
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**THE “I” IN BDS: INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY
AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CONTEXT
OF COLLECTIVE PRAXIS—
AN INTERVIEW WITH
OMAR BARGHOUTI AND FALASTINE DWIKAT**

IBRAHIM G. AOUDE, MORGAN COOPER, AND CYNTHIA G. FRANKLIN

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This interview resulted from a combination of meetings between Morgan Cooper and Falastine Dwikat in Ramallah, and written exchanges between all three editors and Omar Barghouti and Falastine Dwikat.

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EDITORS: *A number of contributors throughout this special issue have made reference to the BDS movement, indicating its importance as an arena of struggle. Can you describe how the movement began and what inspired it?*

OMAR and FALASTINE: BDS, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, was inspired by the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the civil rights movement in the United States. Launched by Palestinian civil

society in 2005, it is rooted in a decades-old tradition of Palestinian popular and civic resistance to settler colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and occupation (*BDS Movement*). Today it is a global network that is proving to be singularly effective in the struggle for comprehensive Palestinian rights.

EDITORS: *How do individuals figure into this movement, which is collective and international but also focused on the workings of the state of Israel?*

OMAR and FALASTINE: While the BDS movement, in its pursuit of freedom, justice, and equality, adopts a strategy of collective, internal, and international struggle to expose and isolate Israel's regime of occupation, colonialism, and apartheid, its operational principles empower individual citizens of the world to act creatively, conscientiously, and morally to end international complicity in Israel's violations of human rights and international law.¹

The BDS call itself comprises two parts: the rights and the tactics of struggle to achieve them. While Palestinian rights under international law form the common grounds for the entire movement, the tactics adopted in each setting are quite diverse and depend on local initiative and circumstances. Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid struggle, the BDS National Committee (BNC), the Palestinian source for and leader of the global BDS movement and the largest coalition in Palestinian society, sets the general guidelines for the movement and ensures that comprehensive Palestinian rights are respected. But the BNC adopts the operational principle of context-sensitivity, and so it defers to activists in any particular setting to choose their own BDS targets, develop their own strategies, and build their alliances. This puts the onus on individual activists and their collectives to analyze, critique, plan, and evaluate. In such processes, the individuals do not surrender to a hierarchical leadership. The individual contributes to the group's decision making and is empowered by the group to act as creatively and responsibly as possible. Individuals have ownership over their work and use their creativity to shape the agenda.

Some activists are not used to this type of movement. After a BDS workshop that took place in a women's collective in a village near Ramallah, for instance, one participant was convinced but asked, "Can you send me exactly what is needed of me and I'll volunteer with your movement?" The BDS activist replied, "We rely on *you* to take the initiative; research what you can do, gather people around your campaign and we can support you. We are not an NGO or a political party. We are all volunteers, and we do not have anyone up there telling any of us what to do." Once she understood this, she started organizing in her community to promote a boycott of Israeli products for which there are reasonable alternatives.

EDITORS: *Can you provide some examples of how individuals have shaped the movement in different locations, and how in doing so they might draw on South Africa's use of boycott to struggle against apartheid in South Africa?*

OMAR and FALASTINE: A few years ago, Adri Nieuwhof, a seasoned Dutch activist who had a prominent record of campaigning against apartheid in South Africa, initiated a divestment campaign urging a Dutch bank to stop its involvement in Israeli projects that violate international law in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT). Months later, after an impressive group of activists and lawyers presented rock-solid evidence about wrongdoing and voiced the concerns of several organizations about keeping their money in a bank that was involved in human rights violations, the bank acted in a socially responsible manner and withdrew its harmful investment (Nieuwhof).

Another impressive example of individual creativity is the Canadian queer filmmaker and activist John Greyson, who boycotted the Tel Aviv International LGBT Film Festival to show his respect for the International Cultural Boycott guidelines adopted by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). Subsequently, John started his own YouTube channel, uploading onto it videos he has produced, and urging different artists around the world to cancel their shows in Israel, as was done against apartheid South Africa.²

We believe that the strength of the BDS movement is that it allows for anything from small boycott initiatives to large divestment campaigns—that it gives a way for individuals to act within their own capacity and context to offset their tax dollars' role in bankrolling Israel's regime of oppression, or to uphold Martin Luther King, Jr.'s principle about the responsibility to fight injustice anywhere, and Israel today is what South Africa was yesterday, or worse, as many see it.

We believe, in fact, that maintaining a golden balance between individual responsibility and creativity on the one hand and collective decision making and action on the other is one of the most important factors contributing to the success of the fast-spreading BDS movement. Developing the international boycott guidelines of the BDS movement is a case in point. These cultural and academic boycott guidelines were proposed, debated—sometimes fiercely—and modified over a long period of time through community meetings, consultations with intellectuals, academics, activists, and cultural figures, as well as through debates and email-based dialogues with unions, NGOs, and associations that are directly connected to the cultural and academic fields. Having collectively formulated and approved guidelines is crucial for the unity and consistency of the movement. Without them, the implementation of the boycott becomes inconsistent and subject to manipulation

or misinterpretation based on personal interests. These guidelines provide a clear frame of reference and points of unity even as individuals can implement them in ways that are creative and specific to their own locations.³

While the BDS guidelines provide an objective, coherent, and consistent set of principles to guide activists everywhere, they are not “sacred” by any means, nor are they engraved in stone. As the political climate and organizational circumstances develop, the guidelines evolve and are amended to reflect these developments and to remain as nuanced, current, and relevant as possible. When field experiences as well as input from committed individual activists reach a critical mass, they trigger internal discussions in the movement about possible modifications in the boycott guidelines.

EDITORS: *Do you sometimes run up against individuals who, while claiming to support BDS, act in ways that are motivated more by personal interest or ego rather than by the collective spirit and accumulated experience of the movement?*

OMAR AND FALASTINE: Some artists and academics argue that since they are committed to the Palestinian cause, they should not be held accountable to the collectively adopted guidelines. A Palestinian filmmaker based in Europe, for instance, once insisted years ago on showing his film at the Haifa International Film Festival, in clear violation of the boycott guidelines, arguing that his film defends Palestinian rights, and through screening it in Haifa he can “convert” hundreds of Israelis. PACBI’s response at the time was, regardless of how worthy the film may be, it will always be used by the festival and Israel’s powerful propaganda machine to undermine the global BDS movement; the damage in this case far outweighs any potential benefits. Indeed, as soon as the Palestinian film was announced on the festival program, Israeli officials attacked the famous British filmmaker Ken Loach, who refused to show his film at the festival out of respect for the BDS guidelines, as “trying to be more Palestinian than the Palestinians.” Only years later did the Palestinian filmmaker recognize how his film was indeed employed to fight BDS.

EDITORS: *Can you comment on how you see people, including John Greyson and Ken Loach, but also actors, intellectuals, artists, academics, and scientists using their international recognition and sometimes their celebrity status to popularize the movement, and to educate those who might not otherwise pay attention to the reasons for the movement and its organizational principles?*

OMAR and FALASTINE: In addition to Ken Loach and John Greyson, BDS today is heeded and sometimes publicly supported by distinguished

intellectuals, artists, academics, and scientists from all over the world. The support of influential figures who are willing to use their “celebrity” status and reputation to promote BDS has been crucial to the movement. The public support by individuals including Desmond Tutu, Stephen Hawking, Danny Glover, Roger Waters, John Berger, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Judith Butler, Mira Nair, Arundhati Roy, Ahmed Kathrada, Elvis Costello, Miriam Margolyes, Naomi Klein, and many others, has been instrumental in promoting the movement among millions not easily reached by the regular—modest—channels of communication at the movement’s disposal.

Among his many contributions to the movement, Roger Waters recently appealed to the Rolling Stones to cancel their gig in Israel (Abunimah, “Pink Floyd Members”), and criticized Scarlett Johansson for her support of SodaStream (Abunimah, “Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters”). Waters and Alice Walker also appealed to Alicia Keys to cancel her concert in Israel in Tel Aviv earlier in 2013 (Barrows-Friedman, “BDS Roundup”). Given her iconic stature as an activist, Angela Davis’s full and public support of the BDS movement on several occasions has been very important (Barrows-Friedman, “Angela Davis”). Philosopher and writer Judith Butler, who has often been attacked by Israel lobby groups since she came out in support of the BDS movement, continues to speak publicly on Palestinian rights and the key role of the BDS movement on an international level. Similarly, a number of committed academics, well-known and respected for their work as public intellectuals, were the main force behind the historic decisions by the Association of Asian American Studies and the American Studies Association (“Council Resolution”), among others, to endorse an academic boycott of Israel. Having recognized public figures lend their names, faces, and voices to the movement not only contributes to mainstreaming the movement and reaching out to different audiences, it also builds momentum and brings the South Africa Moment closer every day.

EDITORS: *As in the case of Keys and Johansson, we also see instances of celebrities who do not observe the BDS call, either banking on their celebrity status to “transcend” “both sides” of a conflict they view as equal, or to actively support, as with Johansson, the Israeli Occupation of Palestine. Can you discuss cases such as these?*

OMAR and FALASTINE: Yes, we do see some high profile artists, academics, and other personalities insist on crossing the BDS picket line, so to speak, under the rubric of art or science being “above politics” or the need to speak to all people regardless of what governments are doing, missing the point that art and science are often used by oppressive regimes, like Israel’s

today and South Africa's yesterday, to cover up injustice and human rights violations. And yes, there are also artists who make active choices to take the side of the oppressor, like Scarlett Johansson (Abunimah, "Scarlett Johansson"), who agreed to be the PR figure for SodaStream ("Tag Archives: SodaStream"), an Israeli company based in an illegal settlement in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Not only did Johansson ignore all the appeals from BDS activists around the world, she also quit her position as Oxfam Global Ambassador after the charity advised her to rescind her contract with SodaStream (Abunimah, "Oxfam"), making a blatant statement in support of Israeli apartheid.

In another incident, the Red Hot Chili Peppers went on with their show in Tel Aviv ("On Music"), despite numerous appeals from BDS groups around the world and a petition that gathered over 7,900 signatures urging them to cancel ("Cancel"). Although this campaign did not end with a victory, it is not possible to say that it failed either. It not only amplified the voices of activists around the world, it also gained wide coverage in the mainstream media, as was also case with Scarlett Johansson, where BDS statements were cited in major media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *The Economist*, *Bloomberg*, *CNN*, *BBC*, *Reuters*, *AP*, *The Guardian*, and *Buzzfeed*, to mention but a few, reaching a much wider audience than that usually reached by the BDS movement. Social media activists, with their boundless creativity and relentless attention to detail, deserve a lot of credit for the media success of both of these BDS campaigns.

EDITORS: *The case of Johansson in particular is an especially interesting one in this regard. Her celebrity status was one SodaStream banked on (literally investing millions in it, featuring her, for example in their Super Bowl ad), and yet it seems that ultimately her celebrity backing of the company backfired—that her notoriety brought only bad press to her for her complicity in Israel's human rights violations while also contributing to the company's plummeting sales. As you note, this owes much to the amazing work of social media activists (and we think here of the memes of Stephanie Westbrook for example), and artists, such as the hip-hop group DAM. Could you say a bit about these examples or similar ones that creatively counter complicity by celebrities or well-established cultural groups?*

OMAR and FALASTINE: The exceptionally creative work of artist-activists like Stephanie Westbrook in Italy, John Greyson in Canada, Carlos Latuff in Brazil, as well as Remi Kanzai and Invincible in the US, among others, has been the BDS movement's "secret weapon," so to speak, in reaching the mainstream.

There are some less publicized cases of artistic creativity in promoting BDS and boycotting complicit Israeli orchestras that are worth mentioning. A new vocal ensemble, Beethovians for Boycotting Israel (“Press Release”), gave its debut “performance” at a Prom concert in 2011 at the Royal Albert Hall featuring the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO). Their first piece was intricately interwoven with Webern’s *Passacaglia*, played by the IPO. The lyrics of the BBI’s “Ode to Boycott” had an unmistakably Beethovenian ring:

Israel, end your occupation:
There’s no peace on stolen land.
We’ll sing out for liberation
'till you hear and understand.

Ethnic cleansing and apartheid
Should belong to history.
Human rights cannot be silenced:
Palestine will soon be free.

“We thought we’d liven up the Webern a bit,” said soprano Deborah Fink: “The performance of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony at the previous night’s Prom was so exciting that we decided to treat the audience to our own version of the Ode to Joy.”

Adalah-NY, a pioneering BDS group in the US, has developed its own musical BDS interventions, gaining publicity in the *New York Times* (La Rocco) and *Vogue* (Milligan), among other mainstream media outlets. And Nigel Parry’s mock programs distributed at US performances of Batsheva dance company and the Israel Ballet became iconic among BDS activists everywhere.

EDITORS: *These examples are ones wherein BDS activists expose celebrities who support structures of oppression (such as Westbrook), or use art to denounce human rights abuses, and yet BDS is often charged with threatening or blackmailing individuals, and is associated with support for violence and also with anti-Semitism. Can you respond to such charges?*

OMAR and FALASTINE: Many boycott bashers shamelessly parrot talking points fed to them by Israel’s propaganda machine and lobby groups that are actively fighting BDS, such as the claim that BDS suppresses freedom of speech, encourages censorship, and attacks individuals who disagree. These accusations are but mere projections of the Israeli lobby lies and hypocrisy, as these are exactly the tactics spokespersons and apologists for Israel’s regime of

occupation, colonialism, and apartheid use in fighting the BDS movement. Israel and its lobby groups have persistently resorted to smears, bullying, intimidation, and direct attacks on the careers and characters of artists, academics, union leaders, students, professionals, and LGBT activists, among others, who have heeded the BDS call. Many attempts are on record where Israel and its apologists tried to suppress and cancel events that shed light on Israeli violations and the BDS movement. Even a towering moral leader like Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu was subjected to a fierce vilification campaign, including accusations of anti-Semitism, by Zionist lobby groups in the US when he was chosen as keynote speaker by the University of Michigan for its commencement ceremony in 2009 (“Archbishop”).

The BDS movement does not target individuals and does not condone censorship, “black-listing,” and personal threats of any sort. These tactics, often used by Israel’s lobby, contradict our values as a movement anchored in human rights principles. Even when an artist ignores our appeals and violates the boycott guidelines, we try to convince him or her to respect our boycott and refrain from undermining it in the future. BDS targets the state of Israel, as a regime of multitiered oppression, its complicit institutions and companies, as well as international institutions and companies that profit from and enable its regime of oppression to continue.

But of all the propaganda points and fabrications used by those who intentionally violate the BDS guidelines, the one that stands out is the claim that an artist, say, received a death threat from “boycott activists.” These lies, that turn a critique of structural violence into a threat of violence issued against individuals, fail to convince anyone outside the Israel lobby circles of influence, as most ordinary people immediately recognize that a nonviolent movement that is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international law cannot possibly issue violent threats against anyone. Principles aside, it would be patently self-defeating to do so. While eschewing and consistently condemning any form of violent threat and any expression of racism, including anti-Semitism, the BDS movement, in its pursuit of Palestinian rights, applies *moral* pressure on artists and academics who lend their voices to covering up or whitewashing Israel’s denial of those rights. The movement deals with such propaganda with reasoned, rational arguments and facts, exposing the double standard involved in supporting the cultural boycott of South Africa, say, and then opposing it when it targets Israel.

EDITORS: *Do you have any concluding words about the movement’s aims and how the movement seeks to work in concert with other contemporary struggles?*

OMAR and FALASTINE: Although the main objective of the BDS movement is to enable the Palestinian people as a whole to exercise its inalienable right to self determination, the movement is also committed on every level to struggles against all forms of racism and discrimination anywhere in the world. When thinking of a boycott target, for example, BDS activists take into consideration the intersectionality of people's struggles, and prioritize companies that are complicit in human rights violations in many parts of the world. An example of such a target that can mobilize a broad-tent alliance is the BDS campaign targeting G4S, a private security company implicated in illegal incarceration in different parts of the world in addition to providing services to Israel's prison system, colonial settlements, and the wall ("Stop G4S"). G4S is also involved in securing parts of the US-Mexico border where immigrant rights are violated.

This individual and collective responsibility and commitment to human rights in general makes the BDS movement part of international struggles against war, racism, environmental destruction, gender and sexual discrimination, anti-indigenous legislation and policies, poverty, and corporate takeover of the public sector.

South African jurist John Dugard once said,

The West cannot expect the ROW [rest of the world] to take issues it regards as important seriously if it persists in its present attitude to the OPT [Israeli occupation]. For the ROW the issue of Palestine has become *the litmus test for human rights*. If the West fails to show concern for human rights in the OPT the ROW will conclude that human rights is a tool employed by the West against regimes it dislikes and not an objective and universal instrument for the measurement of the treatment of people throughout the world. (8; emphasis added)

If BDS has been a key factor in projecting the question of Palestine on the world stage as "the litmus test for human rights," as Dugard eloquently puts it, the movement's ability to blend organically and dialectically individual initiative and a sense of dignity with truly democratic decision making and collective praxis must be partially credited for this effectiveness.

NOTES

1. For Israel's regime and resistance to it, see "Apartheid" and "United."
2. For Greyson's boycott, see "Canadian Filmmaker," and for his YouTube channel, see "John Greyson"; for the International Cultural Boycott, see "PACBI Guidelines for the International Cultural Boycott"; for general information on the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, see "Palestinian Campaign."
3. For the guidelines, see "PACBI Guidelines for the International Academic Boycott of Israel" and "PACBI Guidelines for the International Cultural Boycott of Israel."

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