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Dismantling the Master's House: Toward Epistemologies of Resistance and Freedom Dreaming

Abstract

What does it mean to reimagine inquiry in psychology as the academy, nation state regimes, and markets discipline the terms of what it means to be human? Drawing upon the wisdom of Black, Indigenous, Palestinian, and other feminists of color, I explore what it means to bear faithful witness to (settler) colonial violence and genocide. Situated in the context of Israeli settler colonial occupation and the persecution of Palestinian knowledge traditions and knowledge keepers, this article strives to chart a defiant methodology that resists analytic closure. Reflecting on scenes from occupied Palestine and weaving together insights from decolonial scholar-activists, I center the body as insurgent knowledge and method to counter settler colonial logics of elimination and erasure. Simultaneously, I explore freedom dreams as embodied, emancipatory wisdom and abolitionist inquiry. Across these critical engagements, I contend with the kinds of radical re-imaginings and paradigmatic shifts that freedom dreams call for. Do we dare to rethink social inquiry as radical imaginary praxis – an antidote to indifference and atrophying revolutionary sensibilities? Grappling with these issues, I advocate for inquiry as a combative praxis aligned with the material demands of decolonization, striving to unleash our radical imaginaries toward building pluriversal, liberated futures.

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Introduction

A core way in which coloniality operates is by reserving the power to claim what constitutes the beginning. A powerful example of this is the British colonial myth of *terra nullius* that designated Aboriginal lands as belonging to no-one, making those fair game for settler colonial

occupation and conquests (Balla, 2020). As a faculty member teaching at a university in the United States, I am acutely aware that the land on which my institution stands is a testament to the history of settler colonialism, marked by genocide, forced removals, and the violent erasure of the Pennacook people. These are stolen lands and waterways, taken from their original custodians and reshaped in the image of the colonizer (Stein, 2022). These violent histories are erased in the context of institutional histories; even when acknowledged, these are often reduced to empty symbols and artifacts of the past (Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021). The principle of *terra nullius* also determines whose lives and lifeworlds are deemed worthy of existence, and whose deaths are deemed grievable. This past year has brought this reality into focus in the most grotesque ways. As Palestinian poet Yaffa AS (2003) writes:

> under the weight of
>
> injustice in spilled blood
>
> gaslighting and erasure
>
> the weight of
>
> indigenous genocide
>
> fastened to our belts
>
> released only when we are

This is the historical and sociopolitical context of our inquiry as critical psychologists, and especially for those of us who situate our work in the realm of decolonial praxis. Across different strands of critical psychology and decoloniality, there have been calls for closer examination of colonialism and its legacies, attention to transnational justice, focus on marginalized groups especially from the Global South, epistemic disobedience, and decolonial aesthetics (e.g., Carolissen et al., 2017; Kessi et al., 2022; Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective, 2022). What ties together these diverse threads across a vast scope of decolonial work is the importance of localized approaches in building transnational solidarity, aiming to make psychology more relevant in addressing the complex challenges arising from ongoing coloniality. A fundamental directive that stems from these calls is an invitation to reimagine knowledge. However, knowledge does not exist in vacuum. Therefore, today, we confront what it means to reimagine knowledge as the academy, nation state, and markets surveil and discipline the terms of what it means to be human; and the parameters of how we are supposed to resist dehumanization (Dutta & Atallah, 2023). The very title of this paper draws from Audre Lorde's (1984/2007) famous quote:

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." In other words, true liberation cannot be achieved by appealing to the sensibilities of historical oppressors or using their sanctioned tools and modes of thought. This paper invites us to grapple with what does it mean to reimagine knowledge that is tethered to people's struggles and responsive to the material demands of decolonization. *What does it mean to reimagine knowledges that aligns, not with nation states, regimes, institutions, or academic disciplines, but with people's struggles for liberation, justice, and self-determination? What does it mean to co-create knowledges that question and dismantle rather than uphold or legitimize institutions founded on genocide, slavery, colonialism, and exploitation?*

In this paper, I explore the intricate dynamics of bearing witness to oppression and genocide. I begin by foregrounding the historical and contemporary context of settler colonial occupation of Palestine, highlighting the critical role of bearing witness as both a political and ethical act. In the subsequent section, I examine methodologies of defiance that responsible witnessing demands. Centering the groundbreaking work of Palestinian feminist scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, I argue for understanding the body as a site of both insurgent knowledge and method, emphasizing the corporeal and affective dimensions of resistance to oppression. I then engage with Robin D. G. Kelley's concept of "freedom dreams," as an anti-oppressive, embodied, abolitionist method that strives to defy colonial strictures. The paper concludes by reaffirming the importance of combative decoloniality, which must remain firmly rooted in the material and lived struggles for decolonization and liberation. To accomplish this, I employ diverse narrative modes, weaving together historical accounts, critical reflexive analyses of settler-colonial violence, and multiple expressions of resistance including poetry to evoke visceral and affective dimensions of indigenous struggle and survivance. This mosaic was intentionally assembled to dismantle colonial logics, embody resistance, and foreground the radical imaginaries necessary for envisioning and building emancipatory futures. In all of these endeavors, I remain deeply indebted to Black, Brown, Indigenous, Adivasi, Dalit, and Palestinian feminists who teach us what it means to hold on to our humanity in the face of dehumanizing violence.

"Everything that is worthwhile is done with other people," writes Mariame Kaba recalling the wisdom of her father Moussa Kaba (Kaba, 2021; p. 178). In this spirit, I bring to this paper ancestral lessons and legacies from my foremothers. It is from them that I inherited the profound responsibility of attending to the everyday: knowledge, as I learned from them, is located in the interstitial gaps of the everyday – the unheard, the unthought, the unspoken brought to life by the stories we tell (see Dutta, 2023). I speak from my radically rooted place in community and struggles in the Northeastern borderlands of the Indian state where I was born and raised – where for so many communities, home is a perpetual site of existential struggle, where various collectives are fighting persecution and dehumanization against the metastasizing topographies of the Hindu fascist state (Dutta,

2015; Dutta et al., 2024). I speak and write from my intimate knowledge of the registers of colonial difference, invisibility, and disposability that splinter our very being. Yet these resultant scars also constitute a powerful basis for joint struggle (Anzaldúa, 2009). In fact, my praxis as well as my analyses and reflections in this paper are anchored in my beloved South African communities of resistance and care in our interconnected struggles for anti-oppressive futures. I remain deeply indebted to the South African scholarly community[1] that continues to provide an intellectual and affective sanctuary to so many scholar activists who insist on confronting institutional and geopolitical power in their many configurations. South Africa's rich legacy of grassroots anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements has also profoundly shaped this work, offering both a foundation and an ongoing source of inspiration for liberation-oriented praxis (e.g., Biko, 2002; ka Canham, 2023; Malherbe & Canham, 2024; Radebe, & Maldonado-Torres, 2024; Seedat, 2023).

On Bearing Witness to Genocide: Onto-epistemic, Political, and Ethical Orientations

At the moment of writing this article, all universities and 90% of schools in Gaza have been obliterated by Israeli occupation forces. Palestinian feminists have coined the term *sophicide* for us to name and grasp the scope of this obliteration (Palestinian Feminist Collective, 2024; emphases added):

> Sophicide refers to the Zionist regime's deliberate annihilation of Indigenous knowledge traditions inspired by the land itself, as well as the carriers of that knowledge, including elders and women. It involves the crushing of Palestinian life and learning through the systematic murder of **Palestinian students, mentors, teachers, researchers, scholars, academics, writers, librarians, archivists, spiritual leaders, historiographers, creatives, poets, interns, lecturers, professors, staff, and lab technicians**. Such attacks on these Indigenous knowledge carriers impacts entire generations of learners, crushing their aspirations and dreams.
>
> Sophicide also includes *scholasticide*, a Palestinian concept that refers to the **physical destruction of centers of knowledge, educational resources, infrastructures, and archives as well as the silencing, censorship, and repression of Palestinian history, epistemology, scholarship, and subjectivity**. The Zionist regime's academic repression has extended beyond Palestine and into U.S. and Canadian education centers across Turtle Island, reflecting a systemic failure by university administrators and other authorities to protect students, educators, and staff in their communities and the pursuit of knowledge free from harm.

1 While this is in no way an exhaustive list, I would like to acknowledge the solidarity, accompaniment, and care that I have received from the following South African scholars over the last several years: Shahnaaz Suffla, Mohamed Seedat, Ronelle Carolissen, Umesh Bawa, Samed Bulbulia, Ghouwa Ismail, Naiema Taliep, and Nicholas Malharbe.

How does one speak and write amidst this collective mourning of the future with multitudes of possibilities violently stripped away from Palestinian people in Gaza, especially young Gazans? In moments like this, when words are woefully inadequate, I am mobilized to action by a poem penned by Naga Indigenous feminist poet, Theyiesinuo Kesditsu (2019):

> Sometimes there is an urge
>
> To be silent in writing
>
> But if I leave the page blank
>
> Who would know I had written
>
> About saying nothing.

Keditsu's poem captures a powerful paradox at the heart of what it means to bear witness to the excessive, the incomprehensible, and the unspeakable while refusing to be silent about it. In this spirit, I begin my reflections on bearing witness to oppression and genocide by sharing two scenes from my visit to occupied West Bank in Palestine last year (March 2023). I was invited to speak at a small conference on psychology under conditions of settler colonial occupation held in Ramallah. Both of these scenes take place in East Jerusalem as I was driven around by Zakaria Odeh. Zakariya is Coordinator for the Civil Coalition for Palestinian Rights in Jerusalem, who took me to meet several Palestinian families at the frontlines of home demolition exercises by the Israeli state in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah (see Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2012).

Scene 1

As I sat with Zakariya in his car, the walls of the old city loomed on our right, their ancient stones interrupted by the cold metal of Israeli military checkpoints. The traffic crawled, trapped behind a procession of tourist buses. On our left, the vibrant markets teemed with life, a veritable kaleidoscope of colors, scents, and tastes as vendors hawked their wares, from the tart green almonds to the brightly patterned clothes and the intricately carved furniture. Zakariya's voice filled the car, his words painting a picture of the suffocating surveillance of Palestinians by Israeli military checkpoints. As he spoke, my gaze drifted to the side, drawn by a flicker of movement. Three Palestinian youth stood at one of the checkpoints, their postures tense. Suddenly, one of them bolted. Close enough to make out his features, I guessed he was no more than 15 or 16. A grin stretched across his face, a jarring contrast to the gravity of the situation. It took me a moment for the reality to sink in – he was being pursued by Israeli occupation forces. My heart leaped into my throat as heavily armed soldiers from another checkpoint joined the chase, their

weapons glinting menacingly in the sunlight. Fear constricted my chest, stealing the air from my lungs. As the youth blended into the bustling market, swallowed up by the throng of shoppers, I finally drew a shaky breath. He had evaded capture. The relief was fleeting as Zakariya gently reminded me that the boy had escaped *this time.*

Scene 2

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the road as we drove towards my hotel. In the distance, Zakariya pointed out Qalandia checkpoint, a looming structure that stands as a stark reminder of Israeli apartheid policies that control the movement of Palestinian bodies. This checkpoint is one of many that cleave through Palestinian communities and neighborhoods, ripping apart the very fabric of their existence. As we inched forward in the congested traffic, a scene unfolded before me that I will never forget. Schools had been let off, and Palestinian children and youth were lining up in the narrow, suffocating space between the towering fences of the checkpoint. The vibrant chatter of youthful voices and the smattering of brightly colored backpacks stood in grotesque juxtaposition to the menacing fences and the heavily armed occupation forces. This scene was a punch to the gut. A lump formed in my throat that I could not swallow. As I grappled with the weight of what I was seeing, I forced myself to acknowledge that for these Palestinian children, this was not an anomaly – it was their everyday existence. They were born into a world where armed soldiers, barbed wire, and checkpoints were as commonplace as the air they breathe.

These two scenes present the juxtaposition of everyday life and occupation for Palestinians alongside a tiny glimpse into the architecture of Israeli settler occupation and surveillance that Palestinians are subjected to. As someone who studies structural violence (Dutta et al., 2016, 2024), I was not only struck by the daily violence and dehumanization, but also by the indifference to these excruciating moments (see Afana, 2023; Desai, 2021; Youness, 2022): the habitual un-seeing and un-knowing practiced by Israeli families as they go about their daily lives; the unseeing practiced by throngs of tourists with their DSLRs and selfie sticks, whose footsteps never falter as they walk the very streets where Palestinians are denied entry. I did not photograph these scenes. I recoiled at the idea of reaching out for my phone. Author Teju Cole (2019) has spoken of this poignantly as he asks:

> What sort of person needs to see such photographs in order to know what they should already know? Who are we if we need to look at ever more brutal images in order to feel something? What will be brutal enough?
>
> These photographs are mirrors, not windows. We look into them, and what they reflect back to us is something monstrous and hard to reconcile with our notion of ourselves. We look, and look, and then — sated with looking, secure in our reactions, perennially missing the point — we put them away.

The grotesque reality of the Israeli settler colonial occupation, the apartheid conditions, and the immense suffering of Palestinians are seared in me. Bearing witness is not simply a form of "knowing" the world, but also of being and acting in it, and wrestling with it; bearing witnessing must not be self-absolving (Fanon, 2004; Seedat & Suffla, 2017). My centering of Palestinian struggles in this article is part of the moral imperative to be, to act, to speak so that—as the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1973, p. xv) eloquently describes— "this ordinary grief may stop being acceptable."

This calls for the kind of witnessing that decolonial scholar Maria Lugones (2003, p. 7) calls faithful witnessing:

> To witness faithfully, one must be able to sense resistance, to interpret behavior as resistant even when it is dangerous, when that interpretation places one psychologically against common sense, or when one is moved to act in collision with common sense, with oppression.

According to Lugones and other scholars who have built upon her work (e.g., Pillow, 2019; Cruz, 2011; Figueroa, 2015), faithful witnessing is a way of aligning oneself with oppressed peoples in defiance of entrenched power structures. A key feature of this kind of witnessing is that it involves going against the grain of institutional power. It requires bearing witness to truths that demand to be heard, regardless of how uncomfortable or inconvenient it may be – not only for those in positions of authority, but also for those who are bearing witness themselves. This imperative is powerfully captured in an open letter by Miya community activists fighting violent persecution and epistemic violence in the Northeast Indian border state of Assam. Below are some segments of the letter specifically targeted at prospective research partners in the academy (Dutta et al., 2022; p. 12).

> If you want to get together with us, with our people, with community workers, it cannot be project-based. It must not be the kind of work that ends with the funding cycle. For us, there are no deadlines or end points; this is our life's work. . . you must be prepared to be courageous and share the risks. . . We do not need our experiences to be rendered intelligible through your armature of definitions, scales, and criteria or via metaphors that are not our own. We too can speak. We are good enough. As researchers, honor our vocabulary, our metaphors, and our silences. . . if you do tell our stories, tell those with human dignity; tell our stories as an act of solidarity.

To bear faithful witness to injustice and suffering, then, one must have an unwavering obligation to people's struggles at the frontlines of colonial and neocolonial onslaughts. This also requires a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of struggles – whether they are in occupied Palestine, in our communities, on our streets, on our

campuses and across our disciplinary spaces. These active spaces and relationships of struggle constitute the ground that we witness, speak, write, and theorize from (Atallah & Dutta, 2022). Thus understood, bearing witness is predicated on an inseparability of ontoepistemology and methodology. As Sara Ahmed argues, there exists a deep link between *how we know* and *what we* do: "For some of us, to survive a world, we need to transform it. But we still have to survive the world we are trying to transform." (Ahmed, 2023; p. 43). Along these lines, she goes on to state that "When you have to fight for existence, fighting can become an existence." (Ahmed, 2023; p. 240). In our quest to dismantle oppressive structures, witnessing as a mode of inquiry must center the struggles and survivance of those on the margins; and, as Fanon (2004, 2008) also reminds us, we must strive to transform that which we witness. Next, I reflect on some defiant methodologies that lie at the heart of bearing witness that transforms.

The Body in Struggle as Insurgent Knowledge and Method

Central to defiant methodologies to bear witness to genocide is the recentering of the body as both knowledge and method. Bearing witness to genocide, I argue, demands a radical engagement with the corporeal – activating the sentient, wounded, dismembered, reflexive, and the spiritual body that exists in its relationships to land, homescapes, stories, historical legacies, and futurities. This orientation recognizes the body as a repository of ancestral memory, intergenerational trauma, and resilience. Bodies here are not numbers but sites of resistance, remembrance, and regeneration – capable of articulating truths that transcend written or verbal testimony (Salih, 2017). Indigenous, Black, brown, and other non-Western feminist ontoepistemologies have always emphasized the interconnectedness of body, spirit, and land (e.g., Cruz, 2011; Moraga, 2015; Bora, 2019). Radiating from these ideas, a corporeal approach to bearing witness extends beyond individual bodies to encompass collective and intergenerational experiences. This approach recognizes that the truths of genocidal violence are inscribed not just in historical documents or oral testimonies, but in the very flesh and bones of those who survive and inherit its legacies.

A powerful exemplar centering the body as dissident knowledge and method against colonial powers comes from Palestinian feminist scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian. Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian has spent decades theorizing various facets of Israeli settler-colonial occupation and illuminating Palestinian defiance under abject circumstances (e.g., Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010, 2017, 2019, 2020). Earlier this year, Prof. Shalhoub-Kevorkian was brutally arrested, detained, and interrogated by the Israeli state for speaking out against the genocide in Gaza. This was an extension of longstanding persecution she has faced from Israeli institutions for her fierce scholarship documenting Israeli settler colonial occupation and Palestinian resistance[2]. In her article, "Persistent

2 See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/26/political-arrest-palestinian-academic-nadera-shalhoub-kevorkian-israel-civil-liberties-threat.

Faces: Palestinian Fatherhood against Necropower," Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2023) bears witness to the embodied refusal that a Palestinian father (Abu Hassan) enacts for his beloved child, Hassan Manasra. Shot and killed by Israeli soldiers, 15-year old Hassan's body was withheld in a freezer for several years by the Israeli state[3]. The following is a segment in the voice of Abu Hassan as he describes to Shalhoub-Kevorkian his first encounter with his son's deceased body after being finally returned to the family following a prolonged struggle.

> *As if he were alive, I saw his tears … yes, frozen … they froze … but these were my son's tears. I know them. I saw them in that dark place and tried to wipe them. His mouth was semi-open, as if he was about to tell me some things … perhaps expressing something they [the occupiers] silenced … and blood … dark, dry blood was coming out from one side of his mouth … and his mouth was semi-open. I saw a speaking face. My son is not a number … another Shaheed [martyr]. This is my son and his face were crying, speaking to me, screaming for help. Maybe he was not dead when they closed the black bag on him; maybe he was alive. Maybe they suffocated him when they closed the black bag … or when they threw him in their freezers … and his words froze, his tears froze … his eyes froze … so, I kissed him.* (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023; pp. 82)

In the following excerpt, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2023, p. 83) reads Abu Hassan's encounter with his son's body as he gathered in the graveyard that night, waiting to pay his last respects and bury his son with dignity.

> Abu Hassan joined his son's persistent face in being physically proximate to him and by declining to accept his body in its freezing state and in the violent conditions of the colonized. It was in that moment and time of closeness when Hassan's frozen face was between his father's warm hands that Hassan's determined face contested the colonial reality. . . Privileging Hassan's frozen, bleeding, crying, and speaking face over the attempt to turn him into a faceless, silenced, captive face/body opens up space to tell an untold story against colonial necrolegal actions. Hassan's face spoke a different story. It spoke against the state's technologies of vanishing otherized faces, evidencing that the face of a child, a dead child—if read through a father's eyes—can speak back.

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3 In the context of late-modern colonial projects, Achille Mbembe (2003) has conceptualized sovereignty as a form of necropower that determines who matters (and who does not) and who is disposable (and who is not). He argued that the "most accomplished form of necropower is the contemporary colonial occupation of Palestine" (p. 27). Yet, for Palestinians under Israeli occupation, necropolitics extends beyond mere determinations of life and death. It encompasses the power to shape the posthumous existence of the deceased – controlling both their physical remains and their legacy. This authority dictates not just who lives or dies, but also how the dead are remembered, mourned, and honored. It manifests in the withholding of deceased Palestinian bodies in Israeli military spaces, deliberate manipulation of funeral practices, limiting communal expressions of grief and mourning, and regulating commemorative rituals (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2020, 2023). Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2020) terms this as a *necropenological* regime of dispossession, a form of collective punishment that effectively marks the colonized as non-human, even in death.

"Reading Hassan's face is the methodology and Abu Hassan's voice is my archive," emphasizes Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2023; p. 83). She has conceptualized the condition of occupation as one of *ashlaa'*[4]. The Arabic word for scattered flesh or body parts, *ashlaa'* indexes the Israeli settler colonial regime's systematic dismemberment of Palestinian lands, homes, and bodies. Centering Abu Hassan's refusal then, Shalhoub Kevorkian offers a profound re-membering, re-possessing, and re-reading of the body – that uplifts its capacity to speak truth to power and resist the brutal exercise of necropower by the Israeli state: whether it is through unchilding[5] policies that systematically strip Palestinian children of their childhood and their humanity or practices of disciplining and punishing Palestinian bodies even after death[6], withholding dead bodies, defacing them, and controlling burial practices (such as Hassan Manasra's) (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2020). These are all legacies of everyday killing and killability in Palestine under Israeli apartheid policies (Osuri & Zia, 2020; Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Sheehi, 2023). What does it mean to bear witness to this collective punishment inflicted on Palestinians by the Israeli settler colonial regime? Prof. Shalhoub-Kevorkian writes (2003; p. 83):

> Hassan's frozen, speaking face, and his father's eyes call on us to read attentively and affectively. His face poses questions such as: Can we see what Abu Hassan saw as a father? Can we experience what he heard and felt? Is a father's differential facial recognition—against settler-colonial defacing and erasing Palestinian grief—a desire to have his child's narrative back and his own grief acknowledged? What can we make of a face that refuses to submit to the militarized conditions of suffocation and the temporality of death? And how do we read the speaking, crying, and narrating face in connection to the grief of the deceased, the family, and the community?

Through these questions, Prof. Shalhoub-Kevorkian maps a defiant methodology that demands a comprehensive awakening across ontological, epistemological, ethical, political, moral, affective, and corporeal dimensions. Her corporeal methodology is revolutionary in its power and defiance. In a world that perpetuates relentless cruelty and brutality, engaging the body becomes an act of resistance against the logic of elimination and erasure targeted at racialized and colonized bodies. Palestinian anthropologist Ruba Salih's work on Palestinian refugee women's embodied memories offers another compelling example of defiant methodologies that reimagine social inquiry in the context of settler colonial violence (Salih, 2016). In one of her articles, she highlights Palestinian refugee Umm Hassan's account of retrieving her deceased

4 Makdisi, S., Makdisi, U. & Makdisi. K. (Hosts). (2024, March 8). "There is so much love in Palestine" w/ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian [Audio podcast episode]. In *Makdisi Street*. Makdisi Bros.

5 Unchilding, a term coined by Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019, 2024), refers to the ways in which the Israeli settler-colonial state deliberately and systematically strips Palestinian children of their childhood and their humanity. It encompasses physical violence, psychological trauma, denial of basic rights, disruption of family life, and criminalization of children. Through unchilding policies and practices, the Israeli state seeks to infringe upon Palestinian homespaces and disrupt Palestinian futurities.

6 See 3.

relatives' scattered remains following an Israeli military operation. Her narration frames this act not as heroic resistance, but as one of her ordinary duties, akin to other domestic tasks. From a feminist perspective, a focus on the body recognizes the political significance of everyday domestic activities and affective ties. Salih has argued that these ordinary, domestic activities are not apolitical or separate from the broader struggle, but are in fact, crucial sites of political subjectivity and resistance (see also Abu-Lughod, 2008; Bora, 2019; Ihmoud, 2022). A resolute engagement with the body as both method and knowledge are an expression of persistence – the refusal to be relegated to the realm of non-being.

Building on these insights of Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Salih, and other Palestinian feminists along with the work of revolutionary Indigenous, Chicana and Black feminists, I wonder if we could possibly weave ourselves into a collective body – social and corporeal – as a more expansive way of bearing witness to oppression; as Sara Ahmed would say, "getting in the way." Aurora Levins Morales (2019, p. 31) has urged us to imagine a world where we are intimately connected to the struggles of others: "What if we knew with every fiber that we were in this together? What would the world look like then? Who would we be? What if we never again settled for anything less than everything?" Imagine extending this to our corporeal being—– where we are each other's extended bodies. If our collective bodies could hold the physical pain of another, we would be unable to remain passive in the face of injustice. Reimagining the body as knowledge and method in embodied witnessing involves a profound engagement with the corporeal, affective, and sensory dimensions of experience. When we bring our bodies into the act of witnessing, we open ourselves to a more visceral understanding of the realities we encounter. This can manifest in various ways: feeling the weight of occupation in our muscles, sensing the tension in the air during moments of confrontation, experiencing the warmth of communal resilience in shared meals and gatherings. Our bodies become conduits for affect, absorbing and transmitting the complex emotions and energies of the spaces we inhabit and transgress. Simultaneously, they become instruments of action, capable of expressing solidarity through presence, movement, and touch. In this defiant methodology, our bodies become instruments of inquiry and sites of resistance. It demands that we physically place ourselves in spaces of struggle, allowing our bodies to absorb, process, respond to, and resist the realities we encounter.

By adopting such a methodology of refusal in bearing witness, we challenge the foundations of what constitutes valid knowledge and rigorous inquiry. We assert that truly critical social inquiry cannot stand apart from the struggles it examines but must be deeply enmeshed in them, fighting alongside them. In a world where our bodies are linked to the struggles of others, we would put our bodies on the line in fierce defiance of oppression, even when afraid. *Who would we be when we put our bodies on the line in a refusal to accept the unacceptable? What would our bodies teach us about the world as we*

try to change the course of oppression and survive? Perhaps, we might glimpse, if not live, the freedom dreams articulated by Mahmoud Darwish (2009, p. 10) in *Mural*:

> One day I'll become what I want
>
> One day I will become a thought
>
> that no sword or book can dispatch to the wasteland
>
> A thought equal to rain on the mountain split open by a
>
> blade of grass
>
> where power will not triumph
>
> and justice is not fugitive

Freedom Dreaming as Abolitionist Knowledge and Method

The praxis of collective, corporeal resistance finds deep resonance in the concept of freedom dreams as a powerful abolitionist method and knowledge. For Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination,* freedom dream is a verb – it encompasses ways of being, knowing, relating, acting, and imagining rooted in the day-to-day struggles for justice. "Revolutionary dreams," he argues, "erupt out of political engagement; collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge." Central to the praxis of freedom dreams are radical imaginaries birthed and nourished by the struggles and dreams of oppressed peoples. Kelley (2022) for example draws upon the history of Black liberation struggles and the Black radical imagination that dare to dream of a future beyond the seeming ubiquity of racial capitalism and white supremacy. For Chicana feminist Emma Pérez (1999), the radical imaginary is the decolonial imaginary that enables us to rethink and reimagine history in ways that open up spaces for agency and transformation for those on the margins. Embracing these radical imaginaries, freedom dreaming offers a critical methodological antidote to the colonial imaginary and its inherent exclusions. I argue then, that freedom dreams constitute an embodied form of decolonial inquiry integral to bearing witness to injustice.

Freedom dreaming is abolitionist knowledge and method (Gumbs, 2008). An abolitionist framework calls for a profound rethinking of violence, its concrete realities, and its roots in militarism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism (Kaba, 2021). Abolition is a form of generative refusal. It rejects the notion that punishment begets justice, especially collective punishment (https://abolitionistfutures.com). Abolition is an affirmation of and obligation to joint struggle – to build a society based on collective

care, accountability, and transforming conditions that produce harm (Gilmore, 2022). Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2008, p. 145) has articulated a powerful possibility of freedom dreams as abolitionist futures:

> What if abolition is something that sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the tremble holding in my mouth when I turn to you? What if abolition is something that grows? What if abolishing the prison industrial complex is the fruit of our diligent gardening, building and deepening of a movement to respond to the violence of the state and the violence of communities with sustainable, transformative love?

This spirit of embodied freedom dreams as abolitionist inquiry is powerfully exemplified in a recent essay by Devin Atallah and Hisham Awartani (Atallah & Awartani, 2024). Devin Atallah is a diaspora Palestinian scholar activist whose work focuses on intergenerational resistance and healing against settler-colonial violence. Hisham Awartani is a Palestinian undergraduate student at Brown University studying archaeology and math. Hisham survived a near-fatal attack last November, that left him paralyzed chest down. This took place in Vermont, where he was shot along with two of his friends on their way to their grandmother's house for dinner. They were all wearing keffiyehs. Atallah and Awartani's essay, entitled, *Embodying Homeland: Palestinian Grief and the Perseverance of Beauty in a Time of Genocide*, is as an intimate dialogue through which they embody Palestinian grief as a liberatory practice in the face of settler colonial occupation and genocide. This dialogue revolves around a central question posed by Atallah (p. 142): *How can horror and hope occupy the same space?* Awartani responds (p. 142):

> For me, this occupation exists in the corners of my body, connected to the bullet still lodged in my backbone, occupying the same intimate space of my spine. If my back is hope, then the bullet represents the horror. Both stuck together, in my spine forever, occupying the same space in my body. This bullet stole so much from me. I've lost so much of the things that made me who I am, or I guess, who I was.

Bearing witness to Awartani's struggles as he accompanies him, Atallah writes (p. 142):

> You are mourning the past and how things were. And you are mourning the future, alternative possibilities that were stolen from you before you even could feel your way into them. With all that of which you have lost, somehow, I see you still holding onto the beauty in all that you love as you fight for the fullness of feeling—a fullness of humanity, or a tapestry of rich livingness against the paralyzing deathscape that is colonialism. In this way, your grief is not only about the past, but proves itself to be a map of liberated futures.

Reflecting on Shalhoub-Kevorkian's concept of *ashlaa'* or the Israeli settler colonial state's attempts to fragment and dismember Palestinian lands and bodies, Atallah and Awartani's grief becomes a revolutionary act of recollecting and remembering – asserting the worthiness of life. The sentient body, here, is an insurgent method that counters settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure. Their intimate conversations reveal how the body becomes a site of both loss and perseverance, a physical manifestation of the Palestinian homeland itself. These excerpts exemplify the method of freedom dreams rooted in the emancipatory knowledge of the Palestinian body.

I turn now to the Gaza solidarity encampments as another exemplar of freedom dreams as an abolitionist method of bearing witness. Rejecting dominant narratives that reduce the current genocide to a "conflict," students across a multitude of ethnoracial, gender, and religious identities across the globe are demanding that we situate the carnage in Gaza within the broader historical context of the Nakba, of decades of Israeli occupation and apartheid policies, and the suffocating siege on Gaza[7]. In doing so, student organizers have compelled us to confront the active role of the United States—and by extension, U.S. institutions of higher education—in normalizing the settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure targeted at Palestinians. As Palestinians from all walks of life risk their lives to call the world's attention to the genocide, the Gaza solidarity encampments were an exercise in accountability; where so many of us in the United States and Western Europe have institutional or financial ties that implicate us in the occupation and genocide being perpetrated against Palestinians.

As part of the Gaza solidarity encampments, students have been trying to build radically inclusive communities grounded in care, creativity, faith, and joy; where students and community members from diverse backgrounds come together – to learn, sing, dance, pray, create art and music, share meals, mourn, and support one another. The Gaza Solidarity Encampments have reignited vital conversations, not just about the nature of struggle but also about the world that we struggle for (Abourahme, 2024). One of the most profound embodiments of this has been the human chains – the assembly of students' (and at time faculty) bodies relentless in their determination to speak truth to power while steadfast in protecting those more vulnerable (https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655542). Viewed through an abolitionist lens, the collective body here becomes a site of communal struggle to dismantle the prison industrial complex and to build life-affirming communities of care. As they congregate, young people manifest the potency of mobilizing bodily presence to confront structures of domination. Their assembly transforms public space – exposing the deep trenches of the empire that are otherwise masked by civilizing discourses and discourses of civility. In their courageous vulnerability, these abolitionist dreamers plant seeds of transformation, their

7 Please see https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655523; https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655542.

very existence a reminder that another world is possible when we ground ourselves in the body as a source of emancipatory wisdom.

My intention here is not to romanticize or idealize the encampments. I do not wish to flatten the complexities of these intersectional organizing spaces (e.g., Davis, 2023; Deeb & Winegar, 2024; Erakat, 2020). It is also imperative that we calibrate solidarity struggles against the daily struggles of Palestinians, who endure intensifying settler violence in the West Bank and the unspeakable horrors of the genocide in Gaza. These complexities notwithstanding, Gaza solidarity encampments are a microcosm of freedom dreams as verb – the audacious reimagining of a world beyond borders and bloodshed, animated by love and forged through joint struggle. As Devin Atallah and I have argued in one of our earlier papers, *community is not the object of investigation. Community is the method. We become the theories and method we need* (Atallah & Dutta, 2022; p. 439).

Rethinking Critical Social Inquiry as Bearing Witness: A Call for Combative Praxis and Joint Struggle

In this paper, I have argued that bearing witness to oppression is not merely an intellectual exercise, but an onto-epistemic, political, and ethical rebellion that demands a steadfast obligation to struggle; and as importantly, a defiant grounding that goes against the grain of various manifestations of institutional power. This is what decolonial scholar, Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2024) calls combative praxis – a reorientation of our very being toward the needs of ongoing liberation movements. Combativity as a condition of decoloniality has profound implications for bearing witness to genocide. By adopting this stance, those who bear witness to genocide become not just recorders of history, but active agents in the ongoing struggle for decolonization and justice, working to dismantle the colonial-imperial systems that underpin such atrocities. It is at the frontlines where the oppressed resist and defy coloniality, that new decolonial subjectivities are born; and it is in direct engagement in collective struggle that transforms theoretical critique into embodied, collective liberation, and vice versa. Therefore, we remain indebted to Palestinian people at the forefront of struggles for liberation and decolonization; especially Palestinian fems—activists, organizers, artists, scholars, healers, water and land protectors—who are not only confronting the patriarchal settler colonial apparatus, but also teaching us about love; showing us what it means to resist unspeakable brutality without forfeiting our own humanity (https://palestinianfeministcollective.org/a-love-letter-to-our-people-struggling-in-palestine-2/).

Combativity demands unflinching self-critique, relentless questioning of colonial structures, and unwavering solidarity with those at the frontlines; thus, transforming the act of witnessing into a form of resistance. This, Maldonado-Torres (2024) argues cannot be accomplished by simply "plugging into" movements while leaving the foundations of coloniality unshaken. Combativity transcends academic discourse,

demanding a fundamental reorientation of one's entire being towards the urgent needs of those bearing the brunt of colonial oppression. Therefore, for academic intellectuals, it may require abandoning the comfortable confines of academia to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with those at the frontlines of decolonial struggles. Aligning ourselves with liberation struggles means that we must refuse the allure of rhetorical decolonization detached from the exigencies of land rematriation and right of return for Palestinian and other Indigenous groups (Simpson, 2016). It is morally reprehensible to theorize decoloniality without committing to the material demands of decolonization. As Robin D. G. Kelley (2022; p. xxviii), echoing queer Black artist Laren Halsey, notes: "freedom dreams are not petit-bourgeois exercises of describing utopias on Post-it notes from the safety of a museum or university and leaving on a spiritual high with no obligation to struggle." Building upon these legacies of refusal and responding to the exigencies of the present moment, we must call for a moratorium on decolonial rhetoric that fails to accommodate Palestinian struggles against settler colonial occupation. Our commitment to decolonization cannot just be semantic or rhetorical – it must be material, visceral, affective, and uncompromising.

The kind of witnessing I discuss here is in active transgression and defiance of nation state borders or allegiances. The modern nation state is a colonial formation and to act on those allegiances is to distort our capacity for solidarity (Mignolo, 2013). The same holds for institutions – whether these are universities or professional organizations or disciplines – including psychology (Bell et al., 2018; Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Dutta & Atallah, 2023). Thus, this paper is not about resuscitating or rescuing any disciplinary or epistemic project of critical psychology (including a decolonial iteration). Rather, it behooves me, as someone who is implicated in the discipline, to demand accountability of psychologists as they engage in social inquiry in the face of genocide, especially those who claim to be committed to a liberatory agenda. Therefore, I ask that we resolutely and persistently interrogate our silences: *How are we rationalizing our silences and the many forms it takes? Who does it serve to be concerned with civility in the wake of genocide? Who or what does our silence protect? At what cost? Who bears this cost? What are we doing to our Palestinian colleagues with our silences and our defense and justification of silences?* Yes, there are risks and costs of speaking truth to power; but any risk must always be calibrated against the struggles of Palestinians facing occupation, apartheid, and genocide. Our moral compass of what is at stake must be anchored in our unwavering commitment to care for our Palestinian colleagues – it is them who are in the frontlines of active struggle – in Palestine and here in the US. In times of genocide, our moral imperative is clear. We cannot retreat into abstractions or silence. As Cornel West has argued: *justice is what love looks like in public.* We must then translate our convictions into bold, unapologetic, unmistakable public acts. Our solidarity with Palestinian struggles must be tangible – reverberating, felt, heard, and seen across the different spaces we occupy, claim, and transgress.

As we confront the colossal scale, and what feels like inescapabilty of the empire, we must also remember that the seeds of liberation are already present in the marrow of our resistance; as we have seen through powerful examples like Abu Hassan's defiant fatherhood, the embodied perseverance of Hisham Awartani, and the life-affirming Gaza solidarity encampments. If we are serious in our commitment to rethink social inquiry as a form of bearing witness to injustice, we must embrace insurgent methods that are unsettling, that defy codification, and resist analytic closure. We must become the theories and methods we need. In a time of escalating violence, disposability, and unfreedom, may we have the courage to embrace an epistemology of liberation rooted in the visceral wisdom of our collective bodies, as we become sites of resistance and perseverance. Let us dream dangerously. For it is only by unleashing our radical imaginaries that we can hope to dismantle the master's house, even if it is brick by brick, to build the pluriversal liberated futures we deserve. As June Jordan has written, *we are the ones we have been waiting for* (Poem for South African Women). In this spirit, I end with another of her poems, *Intifada Incantation: Poem #8 for b.b.L.*

I SAID I LOVED YOU AND I WANTED
GENOCIDE TO STOP
I SAID I LOVED YOU AND I WANTED AFFIRMATIVE
ACTION AND REACTION
I SAID I LOVED YOU AND I WANTED MUSIC
OUT THE WINDOWS
I SAID I LOVED YOU AND I WANTED
NOBODY THIRST AND NOBODY
NOBODY COLD
I SAID I LOVED YOU AND I WANTED I WANTED
JUSTICE UNDER MY NOSE
I SAID I LOVED YOU AND I WANTED
BOUNDARIES TO DISAPPEAR
I WANTED
NOBODY ROLL BACK THE TREES!
I WANTED
NOBODY TAKE AWAY DAYBREAK!
I WANTED
NOBODY FREEZE ALL THE PEOPLE ON THEIR
KNEES!

I WANTED YOU
I WANTED YOUR KISS ON THE SKIN OF MY SOUL
AND NOW YOU SAY YOU LOVE ME AND I STAND
DESPITE THE TRILLION TREACHERIES OF SAND

YOU SAY YOU LOVE ME AND I HOLD THE LONGING
OF THE WINTER IN MY HAND
YOU SAY YOU LOVE ME AND I COMMIT
TO FRICTION AND THE UNDERTAKING
OF THE PEARL

YOU SAY YOU LOVE ME
YOU SAY YOU LOVE ME

AND I HAVE BEGUN
I BEGIN TO BELIEVE MAYBE
MAYBE YOU DO

I AM TASTING MYSELF
IN THE MOUTH OF THE SUN

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