

# Curriculum Theorizing in a Time of Genocide, Scholasticide, and (Counter)Insurgency

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**T**HANK YOU FOR THE INTRODUCTION, Tristan. I'm truly honored to have been invited to be one of the keynote speakers. I'm still not sure if I was the right person to invite, but here I am, after so many years since I last presented at Bergamo as a graduate student in 2017. Sometimes I even question whether the work I do has contributed in any significant way to curriculum studies or if my work even belongs in this field. And now here I am as a keynote speaker in a room full of curriculum scholars who have to listen to me speak for hopefully not more than one hour. I hope you're ready because I'm here to talk some shit about academia.

Before I begin, I want to say that when speaking and writing about genocide, I do not claim to be an expert but rather a diligent student of so many Palestinians and their contributions to decolonial thought and praxis—a praxis that entails willingness to take risks by not only speaking truth to power, as the adage goes (which seems to have lost much of its meaning as of late), but by also taking concrete actions against institutions that are actively enabling and participating in the genocide in Gaza. The institutions I'm referring to here are universities and academia writ large.

## **Positionality: A Violently Entangled History with Palestine**

What brings me here today, once again, is not necessarily my expertise, but my experience of being at the receiving end of institutional violence for simply speaking out and organizing against genocide at my university, as well as for my social media posts that used to go viral before Elon Musk shadow banned my account. It seems like being a public intellectual, as Edward Said (1994/2012) wrote about and enacted in his unshakeable commitment to the liberation of Palestine, is perceived as antithetical to the narrowly focused role of the academic who should be confined to the ivory tower, that is, to the tower of ivory and steel, as Maya Wind (2024) accurately reconceptualizes academia when speaking about the ideological as well as the material ways universities participate in violence. If an academic is to have a career, they must know their proper

place. They must remain loyal to the broker intellectual class and its patrons. They must aspire to be the stenographers of imperialism and settler colonialism, not to mention racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy.

As some of you perhaps know, last year my employer, Texas Tech University, suspended me because of my twitter posts denouncing Israel's genocide in Gaza (Fúnez-Flores, 2024a), as well as the United States' complicity and active participation in the livestreamed violence we've seen for over two years now. Despite this, or because of it, since my suspension and my reinstatement, I became a founding member of the Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine and the advisor for the Students for Justice in Palestine chapter at Texas Tech, the founding member of the Palestine Anti-Repression Network, and the founding member and organizer of the Decolonial Conference and EdScholars4Palestine. As a primary hustle, I suppose I'm still an employee at a university.

I typically don't share my lived experiences in settings like these, but I already did with mentioning my suspension, so I might as well continue. I think some biographical elements will help substantiate the argument I'm trying to make, which is that our struggles are and have always been interconnected. This argument is not mine nor is it new, but it is certainly worth repeating. I come from a place that had its fair share of insurgency and counterinsurgency. From the 1960s to the 1980s, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary movements (Contras) emerged in Central America. In this time period, Honduras served as the headquarters of counterinsurgency, particularly since the US effectively prevented the success of an insurrection in Honduras. Honduras became the training ground for the euphemistically termed "low intensity" counterinsurgent operations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Bordering these countries, Honduras was geographically and militarily strategic in the 1980s, especially with the free range use of the Palmerola military base to train counterinsurgents, paramilitary groups, death squads (Battalion 3-16), and traditional military personnel.

I mention this since the geopolitical game the US played in Central America impacted the border region where my campesino village was (and is) located. In fact, Contras entered Nicaragua, crossing the mountains and rivers near my village. It is this history that led many Central Americans to immigrate in the late 1980s and early 1990s. My family chose to immigrate to the country responsible for all the death and destruction in our region. My entire family lived in southern California undocumented, without healthcare or financial aid for higher education, with constant encounters with police violence, incarceration, and threats of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids and deportation. The first time I was incarcerated, I was only 15 years old. This not-so-distant history is what informs my anti-imperial and anticolonial position, both in theoretical and practical terms.

I later learned that the technologies of violence tested on Palestinians and sold to the dictatorial regimes of Central America were used to torture and kill dissidents, including students, campesinos, and Indigenous peoples. The same technologies of violence used against Palestinians and later used against my people in Honduras were certainly used against us by the pigs who surveilled our *barrios* and policed and criminalized our people, not to mention the constant threat of being deported. My brother was deported when he was 21 years old. After the US-backed coup in Honduras, I voluntarily deported myself when I was 23 years old. Today, we're seeing the same technologies used at the border: the same drones, the same fascist techniques, the same brutality.

When I speak of the entangled relationship between Palestinian settler colonial dispossession and neocolonial dispossession in Honduras or in Latin America, it's no longer an abstraction, a metaphor that I want you to consume. It's concrete. It's a matter of life and death.

The interconnectedness of our struggles is so deep that those who were displaced and/or forced to migrate because of counterrevolutionary violence directly linked to Israel and US imperialism are now speaking out and organizing against the same technologies of violence universities assist in producing.

Many are facing consequences, punished for making connections between their histories and geographies of colonial dispossession with the dispossession and genocide of Palestinians. It is the visibility of the entanglement between our struggles across time and space that those in power fear most—from Ferguson to Palestine to Cop City and the anti-ICE LA Uprisings. It is these connections that enable real coalitions to be built. It is this internationalist solidarity that historically has held most strength in the past. We know that concerted efforts to fragment movements is also always part of the long history of counterinsurgency. It's not for nothing that time, energy, and resources are used to foreclose the possibility of insurgent coalitions to be articulated in the present. If this moment has taught us anything, it is that the uprisings we've seen on university campuses and in our communities facing deportation are a testament that our collective resistance is indeed perceived as a threat. Why else would those in power try so hard to silence us if our actions were that insignificant?

### **The Ongoing Nakba: From Ethnic Cleansing and Memoricide to the Genocide and Scholasticide in Gaza**

In *A Century of Cultural Genocide in Palestine*, Daud Abdullah (2019) draws on the work Raphael Lemkin, the lawyer who coined the term genocide and campaigned to establish the Genocide Convention, to conceptualize the dual paradigm of genocide, which takes place in two stages. The first stage is the 'destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group (p. 227),' which is the systematic destruction of the ability to sustain the life of a people. The second stage is 'the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor (p. 227),' which, since 1492, has been a Euromodern and Eurocentric mode of seeing and being in the world.

In the context of Palestine, the Nakba of 1948 not only consisted of ethnically cleansing historic Palestine of over 750,000 people, with over 500 villages and towns "depopulated" and razed to the ground, but it also consisted of the systematic disappearance of maps, archives, and books. Zionist settler colonialism's deliberate effort to disappear everything that reminds it of its original sin is what Palestinians refer to as memoricide, which can be understood literally as the killing of memory. Israel went as far as cutting down thousand-year-old Olive trees and planting non-native pine trees on top of villages to cover the historical presence and existence of Palestinians.

The killing of memory depends first on the destruction of the physical presence of all that represents the Palestinian people and their deep connections to the land. Memoricide proceeds from there by distorting Palestinian history where, as Gold Meir stated in 1969, "There was no such thing as a Palestinian people... They did not exist" (Khalidi, 2018). Memoricide is therefore about the erasure and imposition of a system of knowledge, historiography, and archeology to create the "facts on the ground" that give license to and naturalize the violent presence and permanence of Israel (Abu El-Haj, 2008). From Israel's inception, founded upon incalculable colonial violence, a settler colonial curriculum was designed to kill the collective memory of Palestinians in order to solidify the master Zionist narrative that there was indeed "a land without

a people for a people without a land.” Genocide and memocide are thus two sides of the same colonial coin.

From Israel’s violent material and epistemological foundation, one can see how (mis)education was and continues to be at the heart of its colonial project. So much so that in the first decades of its existence, Israel did not only surveil the commemoration of the Nakba but it also “actively encouraged the so-called ‘Israeli-Arabs’ to celebrate the Zionist colonisation and destruction of historic Palestine” (Masalha, 2012, p. 8). With the coerced collaboration of Palestinian teachers, village and religious leaders, and “notables,” Palestinians living in what became Israel and the occupied territories, including those in refugee camps, were imposed a distorted history, one that would praise those who displaced, tortured, and killed their parents and grandparents. This is certainly an insult to injury, to put it mildly. It is the humiliating experience of having one’s dignity attacked with little means to resist. Colonized peoples everywhere share this experience, until, that is, when an insurgent struggle breaks free, until an intifada shakes off the material and symbolic world imposed by the colonizer.

From this account of memocide, one may wrongfully assume that Israel’s state-sanctioned memocidal project was successful. Paradoxically, the Nakba remains the central “site of memory” (Pierre Nora, as cited by Masalha, 2012, p. 3) and dispossession, a historical trauma that is ever present in the everyday experience of Palestinians living in the diaspora or under Zionist settler colonial occupation. It is a watershed moment in Palestinian’s collective memory no matter where they reside. It is precisely the presence of Palestinian history, identity, knowledge, and resistance that shapes Israel’s genocidal campaign in Gaza since 2023. It is the *sumud* [steadfastness] of the Palestinians that, no matter how systematic past efforts were to kill their collective memory and thus the possibility of resisting in the present, Israel failed miserably. It is this failure that shapes Israel’s genocidal actions in the present to achieve what others could not: permanently erase Palestine and Palestinians.

Not only did Palestinians reject Zionism’s ideological apparatus, but they also reclaimed and reconstituted their history, collective memory, and knowledge system under occupation or in the diaspora. Palestine, then, creates an insurgent decolonial paradigm to see the world not only from the perspective of colonialism’s victims, but, more importantly, also from a radical position to think and do otherwise, even under the most violent conditions. Ultimately, it unsettles the dual paradigm of material destruction and epistemological imposition. It is this decolonial project, aspiration, self-determination, and collective resistance that Israel now seeks to destroy, particularly in Gaza but also anywhere this insurgent decolonial paradigm informs collective action—hence the genocidal onslaught in Gaza, as well as the scholasticide.

### **Genocide/Scholasticide in Gaza: Palestinians are not Just Numbers**

At the time of writing these words, Israel’s genocide in Gaza had already killed, according to official numbers, over 63,000 Palestinians, injured hundreds of thousands, and displaced over two million. A recent estimate published takes into account indirect deaths and puts the minimum number at 463,000, a number far greater than the official numbers coming out of the Gaza Health Ministry, 180,378 of whom are children (Rzepka, 2025).

After the temporary ceasefire announced on January 19, 2025, and later in October of the same year, families returning to northern Gaza witnessed the destruction of their homes, farms, and educational and religious institutions. They returned to the horror of decapitated and decaying

bodies strewn in the streets. The videos and images shared by courageous journalists in Gaza are nothing short of an apocalypse. The end of the world. This is what awaits us all if we dare to resist: a collective punishment for Palestinians and a collective disciplining of those who dare question the genocidal reconfiguration of the modern/colonial world order, marking the end of the world as we know it, one that no longer pretends to defend the superficiality of “Western values,” and instead unabashedly supports the incalculable violence we’ve seen live-streamed on our phones against a people who dared to resist colonial occupation and dispossession, as well as their annihilation.

Colonization undeniably involves genocide, yet it is the destruction and distortion of the history and knowledge of the colonized that serves as a means to erase the past and thus to minimize resistance in the present. That is to say, epistemicide is a means to permanently foreclose the possibility of building another future. It is a close companion of genocide, a violent process that not only destroys other modes of knowing but also alternative approaches to life or other ways of being and relating to the world. Ultimately, it aims to destroy a colonized peoples’ ability to live on their own land. To forget who they are. To forget where they came from. To forget what was stolen from them. To aspire to be what they are not and what they will never be. To side with those who’ve destroyed their lifeworld. To side with the colonizer responsible for the genocide of their people and erasure of their history. These are certainly the aims, but we know that colonial powers, despite how much they have tried to impose their philosophy and pedagogy of domination, they have never gotten rid of the ideas of resistance and the dreams of liberation.

### **Scholasticide: Colonialism’s Dual Paradigm of Destruction and Imposition**

The Palestinian scholar, Karma Nabulsi (Vulliamy & Ahmad, 2009), was the first to conceptualize scholasticide as settler colonialism’s systematic destruction of Palestinian education and intellectual life at all levels, including schools, libraries, mosques, archives, and much more. All higher education institutions in Gaza, for instance, have been systematically targeted and destroyed: Islamic University of Gaza, Al-Azhar University, University College of Applied Sciences, Al-Quds Open University, University of Palestine, University of Gaza, Israa University, Al-Aqsa University, Palestine College of Nursing, Arab College of Applied Sciences, and Palestine Technical College.

Toni Morrison (1989) was certainly right to say that “canon building is empire building” (p. 132). In this sense, scholasticide is integral to Zionism’s settler-colonial project, as it deliberately seeks “to eradicate the physical, intellectual, and political reproduction of the Palestinian people” (Smith, 2024, para. 1). Maya Wind (2024) argues in her book *Towers of Ivory and Steel* that the systematic destruction of education systems is crucial for Zionism because Palestinian education institutions and the insurgent knowledge production therein are perceived as threats by the settler colonial project. The insurgent curriculum Palestinians have developed for decades is what makes it possible to not only critique Zionist settler colonialism’s imposed narrative but also enables Palestinians to understand the deep historical connections to the lands they defend in the present. Whether this insurgent curriculum is found in schools, underground networks, archives, or coffeeshops is beside the point. It is viewed and treated as dangerous. Zionism’s permanence, after all, depends on the erasure of anything that reminds it of its violent genocidal efforts in the past and present.

What's important to keep in mind here is that scholasticide doesn't speak of the killing of knowledge in abstract terms or in the past tense but in the concrete destruction and systemic obliteration of educational, social, cultural, and religious institutions and the knowledge keepers, storytellers, spiritual leaders, intellectuals, scientists, doctors, nurses, teachers, librarians, poets, bakers, archivists, book collectors, and artists who make up said institutions.

Scholasticide resonates with what I have referred to as the coloniality of curriculum (Fúnez-Flores, 2022, 2023, 2024b), which functions as a technology of control and management of knowledge within a broader, more extensive, planetary context. The coloniality of curriculum is geopolitically entangled insofar as it is strategically deployed to prevent the recovery of systematically excluded histories, memories, stories, knowledges, practices, and struggles against colonialism, racism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy across distinct yet historically interconnected geographies.

The coloniality of curriculum thus constitutes the enduring violent, pedagogical acts that systematically subjugate and destroy other interpretations to the degree in which the colonized other views and interprets the world through the colonizer's eyes. The images reflected by these distorted lenses are precisely the negative representation of others—the negation of their humanity. The coloniality of curriculum depends on a pedagogy of cruelty that sustains the intersubjective relations regulating and constituting domination within and beyond the nation-state (Peña-Pincheira & Allweiss, 2022; Segato, 2014, 2018). It points to racialized affects where the suffering of others does not emotionally move the White ethno-class (Ahmed, 2014; Wynter, 2003; Zembylas, 2022). The inability to feel for others is an integral part of the non-ethical affective economies and racial grammars of coloniality. The suffering of others is nonexistent or deserved. The Israeli philologist and professor of education Nurit Peled-Elhanan (2013) explores the colonial, racial, and dehumanizing foundation of the curriculum in Israel. In an interview (Land Palestine, 2025), she asks, “How do you take nice boys and girls and turn them into the monsters, killers of children by the time they reach age eighteen? It takes a very long, thorough, and sophisticated education to do that.”

### **Theorizing (Counter)Insurgency**

Now, I would like to discuss counterinsurgency. First let me start by saying that those with a shared experience of repression have gained insights into how universities reproduce coloniality through concrete violence. As I mentioned initially, I was suspended for publicly expressing my views on the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza. Although I've known for a while about “land-grant” (land grab) universities' role in both displacing Indigenous peoples and conducting research to justify further dispossession, it is only when one sees institutional machinations responding to resistance when one acquires raw conceptual clarity of the extent to which universities, including those where one is employed, ideologically support and materially participate in genocide. It is this raw clarity that makes business as usual department meetings and the overwhelming silence that much more disturbing while the Palestinian people are being annihilated.

This suspension confirmed the urgency for me to write about insurgent decolonial thought and praxis to disassociate myself with the co-opted forms decolonial thought has been expressed in academia. It led me to question so-called decolonial and radical academics comfortably dwelling in the Global North who have said or done little to critique Israel or support Palestinian resistance. It is what ultimately led me to examine the counterinsurgent role the broker intellectual class plays

when co-opting radical thought while pretending to actually give a fuck about concrete struggles. This overwhelming silence and co-optation thus inspired me to learn from Palestinians' militant critiques, leading me to a path of exploration of what it means to be an insurgent thinker who moves beyond critique and toward radical thought situated in sites of struggle: thought that puts one's career at risk by militantly, unapologetically, and (ins)urgently speaking out and organizing against genocide and settler colonial dispossession, no matter the consequences. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) teaches us, critique is great and all, but it doesn't stop people from dying.

In *Tip of the Spear*, Orisanmi Burton (2023) cites the US Army's definition of counterinsurgency, understood as "warfare that involves 'military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency'" (p. 4). Within the context of the US, counterinsurgency is directed by those who will materially benefit the most and have more to lose if an insurgency becomes a revolutionary force. The greatest beneficiary is certainly the White ethnoclass. However, central to counterinsurgency is the dependency, submission, and complicity of those on the receiving end of domination and exploitation. One could argue that counterinsurgency is central to maintaining coloniality, through which race functions not only as a technology of control and management, as well as a central organizing principle constitutive of the modern/colonial capitalist order, but also as a category that creates a social hierarchy—one that seduces those positioned at the bottom who are willing to "sell their souls to the devil", as the saying goes.

Counterinsurgency thus aims to prevent the creation of a "people's war" (Burton, 2023)—that is, the "war of the weak against the strong" (p. 4). A people's war requires an insurgent praxis that entails "irregular, small-scale attacks that aim to disrupt the social order, raising the cost of business as usual to a level that is unsustainable for the ruling authorities, forcing them to relinquish control" (p. 4). Insurgents carry out a myriad of methods to achieve these aims: "political education, critique, protest, organizing, cultural production, litigation, subversion, refusal, rebellion, retaliation, hostage-taking, sabotage, armed struggle, and the intimate labor of care" (p. 4)

Despite the radical commitments of some academics who have infiltrated an institution that historically excluded them and exploited their communities, the efforts academics have contributed to cannot be understood as radical transformations in and of themselves. These efforts, as Rodriguez (2023) points out, can only be understood as small disruptions of a fundamentally colonial institution. Rather than critiquing universities for their "oppressive violence and conquest" in the present (para. 9), the vast majority of academics truly believe that change will come from within, that reforming the university and academia is the ultimate goal, not realizing that this liberal attitude toward a colonial institution linked to concrete dispossession and violence cannot be reformed. There is a difference I want to make between working within, with the aspiration of gradually changing the institution, with the notion of insurgently working within to put sand in the gears of this colonial institution. Sabotage, in other words.

Rodriguez (2023) points out that the institutionalization of radical insurgent thought is exposed in the way certain revolutionary thinkers and texts inform academics who do not commit themselves to anything beyond academia and who are not accountable to concrete struggles. Their sole interest is to engage texts as artifacts of the past that must be "reclaimed" and interpreted for interpretation's sake. These radical academics do not share risks with the most vulnerable and oppressed. While students and untenured faculty were criminalized, suspended, or fired, many tenured professors went about their day as if their refusal to take action against what unfolded before their eyes did not contradict their contributions to radical social theory. Some will even go

so far as to say that activist work detracts from the more serious work of theorizing social reality. This, of course, is just an excuse to absolve them of their silence, complicity, and cowardice. This is the counterinsurgent theoretical position that hastily dismisses the theorizing done in the streets.

One serious question we need to grapple with: How do academics participate in sustaining domination, “while offering rigorous and even radical critiques of its violence and oppressiveness in their scholarly work” (Rodríguez & Sirvent, 2023, para. 25)?

Radical thought is captured within the gradualist liberal framework of institutional reform. Liberal frames constitute and limit what is politically possible, which portrays more militant anti-State action as illegal and violent, action that is diametrically opposed to liberal notions of change at the ballot box. All that matters is small incremental gains to maintain, rather than subvert and destroy a racial-colonial capitalist system that views and treats the global majority as disposable. Liberal counterinsurgency maintains the disposability of others while portraying itself as transformative, thus relegitimizing liberalism’s racial-colonial, possessive individualist, annihilatory, logics of dispossession, criminalization, anti-Black violence, and carcerality (Rodríguez, 2020, 2021).

Take for instance when, as the Chair of the Decolonial, Postcolonial, and Anticolonial Studies in Education Special Interest Group (SIG) at American Education Research Association (AERA), I wrote the most critical Division and SIG chairs to share the Petition for the Resolution for Justice in Palestine. I only heard back from the social studies SIG, so if you belong to this SIG, be proud of their leadership. This remaining silence, however, is an indictment of the field of education. I later wrote a letter responding to the AERA Council’s refusal to even discuss the demands included in the Petition. As some of you perhaps know, the council is composed of Division Chairs, including the Chair of Curriculum Studies and Social Context, two divisions that are known for their critical work. In this letter, I wrote the following:

The AERA Council claims to be worried about the attacks on democracy, education, and research, yet it refuses to democratically engage in dialogue with the demands of over 700 AERA members. It does not seem to be able to make connections between the current attacks on education and the repression of dissident voices who supported and participated in the Gaza Solidarity Encampments and anti-genocide protests during the Biden administration. It is thus content with the role academic organizations play in furthering this repression by ignoring the demands of its members. The AERA Council disregards the attacks on academic freedom and the right to assemble before Trump started his second term, presenting him as solely responsible for what we are seeing today. This dissociates from the sociopolitical and geopolitical context in which pro-Palestine protests were attacked and criminalized by university administrators and politicians, Democrats and Republicans alike. Now we are seeing the consequences of years of silence. Students and professors are having their visas revoked, some of whom are being hunted down by ICE agents to be arrested and deported. The silence of the past is manifesting itself in the present, and the silence and indifference of today will certainly have more serious consequences in the future.

Referring to so-called decolonial and abolitionist scholars in the Council, I ended my letter by addressing the disconnect between “radical” scholars’ academic work and their politics:

That is the legacy you will leave behind, despite the research that appears, on paper, to care about the well-being of oppressed communities. Genocide, as many organizations have called it and what hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of protestors have chanted in the streets, is what is happening in Gaza, despite your denial of it. Your refusal to acknowledge that a genocide is taking place in Gaza will not be forgotten or forgiven. History will not be kind to you.

I ended my letter with the following signature:

Indignantly,  
Jairo

No one should be surprised that I still haven't heard back. Ruha Benjamin was certainly right to say that Black [And Brown] faces in high places are not gonna save us" (Friday Things, 2024)

### **Theorizing the Silence and Complicity**

If we're going to theorize silence and complicity, why not theorize how the university and academia has a hidden counterinsurgent curriculum that captures and enlists even the most radical intellectuals. As counterinsurgent machines, universities will mold us into agents of domination without us realizing it's happening.

The quiet capture of the radical scholars we dearly admire, who refuse to show minimum levels of solidarity, is a result of academia's bourgeois comfort that rewards those who know their subservient place. Edward Said (1994/2012) wrote about this silence over three decades ago, when he stated "Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position, which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take" (pp. 100–101).

Edward Said (1994/2012) examined the complicity of academics who remained silent on what was—and continues to be—a seemingly controversial or complicated topic. As we have seen since October 2023 (and certainly before that), far too many self-proclaimed critical, anti-racist, and decolonial academics have not mentioned Palestine, called for a ceasefire, signed petitions, or critiqued Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza or increasing violence in the West Bank and in historic Palestine. Some of our colleagues who like to begin their conference presentations with superficial land acknowledgments have apparently forgotten that Palestine is a territorial struggle against settler-colonial dispossession.

These same academics appear to only care about colonization and decolonization in abstract, metaphorical terms, or as a historical event that is gradually receding—perhaps a colonial legacy we are slowly moving away from as we progress toward a more egalitarian liberal society. It is evident that academia, for the most part, does not care about material decolonization or radical notions of academic freedom. It merely desires a topic, a subject matter, that refers to the distant past rather than the colonial present. I want to cite the Resistant Archives and A. Tahir (2025) at length since they elaborate on the quiet capture of intellectuals:

Liberation is talked about often—in classrooms, in books, across social media - but the material struggle behind those words has faded. Those who suffer most under capitalism

are trapped in survival, forced to navigate a system that leaves them little time or space to organize. Those with enough comfort to study revolution, to imagine something different, often find themselves unwilling to risk what they have. Comfort turns into a quiet form of captivity... the people with enough stability to think about change are often the ones least willing to risk it. Comfort, even when it is modest, becomes a quiet captor. A steady job, a roof over your head, access to healthcare, the chance to own a home, the easy promises of consumer goods; these things are dangled as proof that the system can work if you just play by its rules... Consumerism has replaced the dream of collective freedom with private ambition, and solidarity has been traded away for individual survival. The fear of losing what little you have becomes stronger than the anger at injustice... (para. 1; 6-8)

As politically committed intellectuals, however, one must do everything we can to refuse this quiet capture. This refusal is what has led me to emphasize how discourses materialize into the cruelest practices, becoming real, concrete, violent. This refusal contributes to interrogating this moment, even if modestly. This refusal is not passive but an active commitment to concrete struggles. It means making real sacrifices for the liberation of Palestine.

### **The Role of the Intellectual in a Time of Genocide**

The refusal I addressed has shaped my understanding of the role of the intellectual in a time of genocide. The entangled history between counterinsurgency and knowledge production shows us that the intellectual has always had a choice, as Edward Said (1994/2012) reminded us. The choice, as he put it, is either to side with the weaker, the oppressed, the colonized, the less well represented, and the systematically forgotten and ignored. The other choice is to side with the more powerful by staying silent or outright supporting domination. This resonates with what the Palestinian intellectual and martyr Basel Al-Araj (Project, 2017) wrote: “If you don’t want to be engaged—if you don’t want to confront oppression—your role as an intellectual is pointless” (para. 10).

The intellectual is not the person who only coins concepts or who theorizes for theorizing’s sake or for the academic market and its consumers. The committed intellectual in this case is not reduced to the academic who we admire for their contributions to a particular field of research. The intellectual is not the person who we consider the founding figure of a particular school of thought. The intellectual is indeed more like an antenna, as Rita Segato (2022) reminds us of when writing about Anibal Quijano, a receptor of the sociopolitical context that creates the conditions of possibility to think and do otherwise, particularly when one’s theorizing is situated in and committed to struggles for liberation. The politically committed intellectual serves as a conduit for the genius of the people—the genius that is born in struggle (Robinson, 2021). The intellectual is understood in its broadest terms to include the insurgent thought that can only be nourished by social uprisings and liberation movements

*Tu teoria le falta calle* [your theory is lacking streets] or as Fred Hampton said, “Theory’s Cool, But Theory With No Practice Ain’t Shit” (Maglalang & Rao, 2021). The Resistance Archives and A. Tahrir (2025) echo this point and write in detail that,

In the heart of the West, revolution survives mostly in theory. It is debated in universities, passed around in books and podcasts, thrown into slogans and branding. But without

material sacrifice, theory is nothing... In a society where even rebellion can be marketed and sold back to us, the sharp edge of revolutionary thought is dulled. We live in a world where outrage is not a threat but a product. Anger is turned into spectacle. Radical words are packaged into careers, personal brands, and performances that leave real power untouched... Talking about liberation replaces fighting for it. Revolution becomes something we consume, not something we build. Without the willingness to step beyond discourse into action, even the most sophisticated analysis collapses into another pillar of the system it claims to oppose... In Palestine, the idea of revolution has never been an academic exercise or a lifestyle choice. It is a necessity born from survival, faith, and an unbroken connection to the land... Revolution in Palestine is not romanticized. It is survival. It is faith carried through generations, collective memory made flesh, and the unbreakable refusal to be erased... If revolution is to have meaning again in the heart of empire, it must move beyond theory and reclaim the courage to sacrifice. It must confront the fear that clings to comfort, the fear that survival will be harder if we resist. True change has always demanded risk, loss, and the willingness to stand firm even when the ground shifts... Comfort is not freedom. It is the quiet reward for obedience, the gilded chain that binds potential to stagnation. The examples of struggle from places like Gaza remind us that when everything is stripped away, what remains is not despair but an unbreakable will to live with dignity. Revolution demands that we remember what matters beyond survival and beyond comfort. It demands that we live, not just speak, the struggle we claim to believe in... We cannot theorize our way out of the chains we are too afraid to break. We cannot speak of struggle while defending the small comforts handed down by the very system we claim to oppose. Every privilege that binds us is a weapon turned against the world we say we want to build. Empire does not fear our anger. It fears our willingness to give up everything we were taught to hold sacred. To fight for the future demands that we let go of the illusions that tie us to the present. It demands a life lived with clarity, with courage, and without apology. (para. 9-12; 14; 18-20)

As the genocide in Gaza continues, we must therefore position ourselves clearly and militantly. We must continue to organize and disrupt the spaces that we know will one day forget that they, too, enabled genocide. We know that those who remain silent today will one day write books and articles on the genocide but only after the fact. In the present, we cannot become what Rabea Eghbariah (2023) referred to as the “scholars [who] tend to sharpen their pens after the smell of death has dissipated and moral clarity is no longer urgent” (para. 7). To act and write with urgency, we must refuse to play the careerist and opportunist game academia loves to play as the world burns around its ivory towers. Mohammed El-Kurd (2025) states, that they will one day lecture the world about genocide in the past tense when in fact they said and did nothing while it unfolded for their unwilling eyes to see. These vultures, as El-Kurd labels them, are in our midst. We can probably picture one or more colleagues who are unbothered by genocide today yet will likely write about it when the literal “dust settles”—when the bodies buried under the rubble are reduced to footnotes in yet another published book, when making land acknowledgements can be made on Palestinian land without consequences. These vultures will one day romanticize what they once condemned, what they did not defend, and what they enabled through their silence. They will not only romanticize the past but also depoliticize, mystify, and commodify it. El Kurd (2025) states that these “vultures will make sculptures out of our flesh” (p. 2) so that the past can be frozen in time in some museum. That’s exactly how counterinsurgency works.

In “Digging Tunnels with Pens,” Yafi (2024) asks, “What do we do, then, when the very structures we seek to change enforce the limits on our activism, writing, and thoughts” (para. 3)? By asking this question, Yafi suggests that one should work toward creating a clandestine publishing network to resist intellectual colonialism and to create “a pathway to knowledge production that bypasses the gatekeepers of Western academia and operates beyond its restrictive boundaries” (para. 3). Only by breaking free from these institutional constraints can we begin to speak truth to power in more radical forms. This does not mean that we need to abandon our positions within academia, but that we need “to master the art of navigating both worlds—maintaining our presence within institutional frameworks while never losing sight of the collective struggle” (para. 14).

Steven Salaita suggested in a podcast interview (*Millennials are Killing Capitalism*, 2024) that we must speak and write as if people in Gaza can hear and read us. Or as the Zapatistas (2023) wrote in 2009 when Israel was bombing Gaza, “Words from afar may not be able to stop a bomb, but they do crack open the dark room of death [that is Gaza], letting in a small ray of light” (para. 31, my translation). The least we can do is to speak and write with urgency as if life depended on it because that’s exactly what’s at stake. There’s no other way to speak and write in a time of genocide.

The student-led Gaza solidarity encampments taught us that speaking truth to power means nothing if we’re unwilling to take risks. In the United States and in Europe, they unveiled the political limitations of the usual symbolic gestures and reformism that characterizes academic activism. It was students who made more visible the importance of going beyond institutional reform, unmasking the counterinsurgency that reform entails. It was students who pointed to the ways in which the university is not only implicated in ideologically justifying the genocide in Gaza but also in actively participating in it by having direct links with the production of technologies of colonial violence battles tested on Palestinians, which are then exported to be used against our communities here in the US. It was students who risked their careers while so many professors watched them get arrested, beaten, and deported. It was students who put everything on the line for a dehumanized people they have been told are not worthy of their solidarity. Students seeking to delink their universities from their material and symbolic investments in colonial projects reveal their insurgent and decolonial potential.

So what does it really mean to be an engaged intellectual or a guerilla intellectual (Rodney, 1990) who wages decolonial resistance not only with pen and paper in hand but also through collective action? Is it not true that alternative modes of reading and theorizing the world emerge from historically specific material contexts, like the flower that springs from the rubble in Gaza despite the incredible odds to do so? Like the seed that germinates and breaks through the cold, lifeless world designed by coloniality, radical thought too spreads its roots to crack open systems of domination that previously seemed indestructible. As Palestinian scholar, political prisoner, and abolitionist thinker Khalida Jarrar puts it, “Hope in prison is like a flower that grows out of stone” (Palestinian Feminist Collective, 2024). Reading and theorizing the world anew becomes a transgressive act that engraves in stone every spoken and written word by working with sites of struggle. In a time of genocide, the role of the intellectual, of the curriculum theorist, is to write and speak with urgency, no matter the consequences, no matter if our careers are jeopardized, no matter if we’re criminalized. Again, there is no other way to write and speak about a genocide.

The student movement taught us what an insurgent mode of theorizing looks like as they urged us to interrogate academia’s complicity and to take direct action to unsettle the technologies of colonial violence in which universities are deeply invested. Student activists remained steadfast

in the face of institutional and police violence. Take for instance, Christopher Lacovetti, at the University of Chicago encampment, who stated that the following

It doesn't matter what you do to us because there are principles and there are human lives that matter more than our careers and our futures...Our commitment to Gaza runs deeper than fears for our safety, fears for our careers, fears for our paychecks" (Insurgent Thoughts, 2024).

Mahmoud Kh, who was abducted by ICE in March, dictated the following words from a detention center in Louisiana: "My detention is a testament to the strength of the student movement in shifting public opinion toward Palestinian liberation...even if the public has yet to fully grasp it; it is students who steer us toward truth and justice" (Khalil, 2025). The political prisoners of Palestine Action who sabotaged the production of killing machines produced by Elbit Systems, and who are currently in a hunger strike write:

As captives imprisoned for our participation in the Palestinian liberation movement in the west, we have a responsibly to each other across borders to pursue our lives in prison with the same steadfastness as the Palestinian prisoner movement held captive in Israeli prisons... As the western left continues to move from crisis to crisis and avoid their responsibilities to Palestine, we are all that we have. By we I am referring to people facing repression for their support of Palestine, who are sacrificing, truly sacrificing....Solidarity is actions, not words. (Abolition Media, 2025, para. 2 and 4)

In relation to writing in a time of genocide, Fargo Tbakhi (2023) asks, "What does Palestine require of us, as writers...within the imperial core, in this moment of genocide?" (para. 1). Tbakhi unsettles the dominant notion of our writing "craft" which represents "the network of sanitizing influences exerted on writing in the English language: the influences... of complicit institutions, and of the linguistic priorities...of empire" (para. 2). What purpose does our writing serve in the hour of genocide, when bombs continue to drop, when mangled bodies are strewn in the streets, when parents carry their children's limbs, bones, and guts in plastic bags and shoeboxes, when paramedics constantly carry real beheaded babies for the world to see, when hundreds of thousands have been killed and starved, when journalists are targeted, when life is no longer sustainable?

We need to center Palestinian voices whose understanding of colonial reality and resistance is indispensable. We must resist the distortion of history and refuse to forget the memories of those who have lost their lives prematurely—those whom Israel decided to kill simply because they were Palestinian. As Maldonado-Torres (2008) suggests, we must not only reclaim "memories of suffering and displacement, but also of happiness and hope in the midst of challenges to human existence by repressive and inhumane social orders" (xiii). We must bear witness to remember those who are no longer here—those who are more than numbers but aspirations and dreams of a Free Palestine. We must write, despite the fact that it's impossible to account for what Palestinians have lost. After all, how do we account for their hopes and their dreams? As Na'ama Carlin (2024) writes, how do we calculate for the tens of thousands of "futures wiped off this earth with unfathomable cruelty" (para. 7).

More than ever, we need to follow Ghassan Kanafani's militancy to encourage others to continue resisting even when overwhelming despair is felt in their heart. It's this despair that has the potential to transform itself into hope and collective action. We must therefore write in an

insurgent form so that despair does not become a permanent condition. We must write so that the dreams, hopes, and aspirations of Palestinians will one day become reality. We must write for the liberation of Palestine and the liberation of all peoples resisting the iron fist of imperialism and colonialism.

I end this presentation with four poetic texts, one written by Jacy Bowles (2024) and the others by a Palestinian writer Ahmad Ibsais (2025):

*Academia is  
dead. No, no... not in the way we know  
death: not as an offering, a sign of a  
new life to come....Academia is dead  
in the way that it never was alive.  
Robotically, it bestrewed itself over the earth, always taking without asking before it  
left...*

*It's dead in a way that attempts to shame the living.*

*I don't want my life's work to be defined only by the work of the dead: dead  
thinkers, dead concepts, dead relationships, and dead dreams. (Bowles, 2024)*

*Palestine is what happens when a people refuse to become ghosts in their own story.  
Palestine is the child who draws her house with the key still in the door, the grandmother  
who saves seeds from a tree that no longer exists, the father who teaches his son to read a  
map that others have redrawn. Palestine is the memory that turns exile into return, the  
name that turns displacement into belonging, the love that makes occupation impossible  
even when it seems complete. This is our testament: we will not disappear into their  
euphemisms. We will not starve quietly in their footnotes. We will not die conveniently for  
their narratives. We are Palestinians, and we are still here, and we will not be moved.  
(Ibsais, 2025)*

Free Palestine, From the River to the Sea.  
Thank you!

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