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## Arab and Black Feminisms

### *Joint Struggle and Transnational Anti-Imperialist Activism*

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**ABSTRACT** This essay explores the conditions out of which a diasporic anti-imperialist Arab feminist group came into alignment with the Women of Color Resource Center. It focuses on the history and leaders of the Women of Color Resource Center and its roots in the 1960s and 1970s people of color and women of color based movements in the United States in order to map alliances among black feminist thought, radical women of color movements, and Palestinian de-colonization then and now. **KEYWORDS** Autoethnography; Palestine; Women of color; Arab feminism; Black Power

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To some, alliances between Arab and black Feminisms may seem like a recent trend, or perhaps unheard of. This essay explores the long history of alliances that have existed since at least the 1970s utilizing Linda Burnham and her vision and practices of solidarity as an example. As a black feminist activist Burnham's labor, always in coalition with diverse women of color, testifies to the internationalist history of radical feminisms and broadens understandings of US women of color embodying solidarity with Palestine today. In the late 1990s, I was active in a political formation called the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, San Francisco, California chapter (AWSA SF). AWSA SF was involved in a leftist diasporic Arab movement focused on Palestinian liberation and ending US-led sanctions and ongoing bombings of Iraq. Many of us felt at home within leftist Arab organizing, despite the arduous labor entailed in inserting feminist and queer politics into our movement, and constantly defending ourselves against the charge that criticizing Israel was anti-Semitic or that Arab and Muslim cultures are the most misogynist and homophobic in the global world.<sup>1</sup> As a collective, we educated our audiences politically on a multitude of issues to convey that Pakistan is not Palestine; Jordan is not Georgia; the United States is still bombing populated areas in Iraq despite official statements that the First Gulf War ended in 1991; and the United States and United Nations sanctions were killing 6,000–7,000 children per month. Our work supported feminist leadership in anti-imperialist activism

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and highlighted how US war and Israeli colonization disproportionately impacted women and relied upon on sexual violence—even as the United States and Israel ironically legitimized their invasions through the rhetoric of “saving” Arab/Muslim women.<sup>2</sup>

AWSA SF’s work aligned with an organization called the Women of Color Resource Center (WCRC), which invited myself and another AWSA SF member to join a delegation they were organizing to participate in the 2001 United Nations World Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa. This conference addressed the global racial justice movement in all of its diverse manifestations. As our delegation prepared, little did we know that we were about to participate in one of the most historic battles over: (1) defining slavery as a crime against humanity and (2) naming Zionism as a form of racism.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, I joined the WCRC board, another AWSA SF member joined their staff, and WCRC published *Time to Rise*<sup>4</sup> to present and distribute at the World Conference on Racism.<sup>5</sup> WCRC’s main critique was that US policy circles treated violence, poverty, labor, and globalization as issues of international concern rather than urgent issues that profoundly impact women of color. Given the general silence on Israel settler colonialism at the time, our inclusion of a political analysis critiquing Zionism distinguished *Time to Rise* from most writings by radical women of color feminists in circulation.

AWSA SF also co-authored a paper that names Zionism as “The Forgotten-‘ism,” and analyzed the exclusion of Arab and Arab American women’s perspectives from US feminist, civil rights, and social justice movements. In the preface, we wrote:

We thank the Women of Color Resource Center for including a study of Zionism in their delegation materials for the UN Third World Conference against Racism. . . and for having the courage to be consistent in their critique of colonialism and racism.<sup>6</sup>

We were recognizing the WCRC for standing with Palestinian liberation even though the board members were well aware of the ways Israel advocacy organizations systematically pressured government officials and funders to malign activists and punish organizations that supported Palestinian rights.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, AWSA SF activists worked with WCRC to facilitate anti-war, racial justice, and global economy education.

The WCRC was co-founded by Linda Burnham and Miriam Ching Louie. Burnham, who served as the executive director for sixteen years, says the WCRC “traces its line of descent back to the Third World Women’s Alliance,

and then further back from there to the emergence of gender consciousness among black women activists in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).”<sup>8</sup> Burnham also narrates that black women formed a Black Women’s Liberation Committee (BWLC) in SNCC as they began to discuss their situation as women. . . . SNCC served as an organizational container within which black women matured not only politically vis-à-vis the issue of race, but also as a site wherein women came to identify sexism as a major factor in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

When those who founded the SNCC faced resistance when they called for SNCC to address sexism, they formed the independent Black Women’s Alliance (BWA) to foster intersectional activism against systemic oppressions.

Although dominant trends in US feminist studies fail to identify the roots of intersectionality,<sup>10</sup> some strands of US feminist studies now recognize that intersectionality has its roots in this moment, especially due to a key player in the BWLC’s transition to BWA, Frances M. Beal, who published the pamphlet “Double Jeopardy” in 1970.<sup>11</sup> Beal argues that the capitalist system has “economically exploited and physically assaulted” black women in distinct ways, subjecting them to a specific set of struggles.<sup>12</sup> Internationalist analysis became continually more central as the BWA became the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA) and membership included Latinas and Asian American women.<sup>13</sup> In an interview in April 2016, Burnham told me:

Miriam Ching Louie and I came out of years of organizing within the Third World Women’s Alliance and the Third World Women’s Alliance came out of what we now call the “feminist” impulse inside the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. My activism comes out of a period of the late ’60s into the early ’70s in which people became activated at the tail end of the civil rights movement.<sup>14</sup> There was a process that was prefigured by Martin Luther King’s Vietnam Speech as well as internal education that put our activism in the context of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and the struggle to end the Vietnam War. To be a political activist in that period meant that your thought was framed by the relationship between what was going on here and what was going on in other parts of the world. Much of that has been lost.

When we were young activists, we were studying what was going on in Guinea Bissau and the struggles of women there and in Mozambique, and generally, the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and the Vietnam War. In that context, even in the latter days of the Third World Women’s Alliance and through the ’80s, particularly with Reagan’s wars in Central America, our

orientation was also international. We sent a delegation of women to go to Nicaragua and to El Salvador and we always met with local activist and militant women there. We campaigned around their struggles, organized material aid campaigns, and we celebrated South African Women's Day. We developed relationships with people who represented those struggles and were located here in the US or we sent delegations. This was integral to how we understood the work of women's liberation.<sup>15</sup>

In April 2016, I asked Louie if she could recall the context in which she, Burnham, and their comrades learned about Palestine. She told me:

We learned about Palestine from Palestinian women activists from the Union of Palestinian Women's Association [UPWA], an active force that worked in tandem with the liberation movements Linda was referring to. UPWA worked tirelessly, organizing workshops and educational series about Palestinian history, the gender politics of the Palestinian struggle, and interconnections with other social movements.<sup>16</sup>

Louie and Burnham intimately learned about the political struggles that accompanied Palestinian solidarity. Louie recalled:

During a peace march to Dolores Park in San Francisco in solidarity with our sisters in Central America, the women's contingent split in half when we in the Alliance Against Women's Oppression sang "Palestinian women gonna' win—gonna' win—their liberation." Radical feminists who had chanted as one to "Nicaraguan women gonna' win" and "Guinea Bissau women gonna' win" hooted against the inclusion of Palestinian women. If you'd flown a helicopter over the event, you'd have seen a throng split into two curling rams' horns. Yet that terrible rupture opened up an amazing crash course of study groups and forums on the role of the US and Israel in the Middle East. Of course, it was no fun for this activist to get interrupted with shouts of "anti-Semite!" and "liar!" during an educational event. . . . But over time many of our allies in the building and beyond came to adopt a critical stance towards Zionism and US policies in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1990s, as women of color feminisms were institutionalized in US academia, identitarian approaches that privileged "domestic" politics over internationalist alliances dominated feminisms. Such approaches typically sidelined critiques of US settler colonialism and contemporary imperialism such as nation-state sponsored police and military brutality.<sup>18</sup> In part, this explains why US feminist studies often defines shifts in the 1990s towards transnational feminisms as a beginning rather than a re-constitution of globally conscious

# ALLIANCE AGAINST WOMEN'S OPPRESSION



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A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE STRUGGLE!

## Zionism in the Women's Movement — Anti-Imperialist Politics Derailed

In June of 1982, the Israeli Army crossed the Lebanese border. Leaving a trail of blood in its wake, it began the siege of West Beirut. Day after day the world witnessed the ruthless bombing of the city, the attempt to exterminate the armed wings of the Palestinian Liberation movement and the Lebanese left, the forced exodus of the PLO from its Beirut headquarters, followed by the installation of a fascist Phalange government headed by Amin Gemayel. Then, on September 16-18, came the massacres at Sabra and Shatila, a joint operation of the Israeli Defense Forces and the Lebanese fascist militia in which over 2,000 unarmed women, men and children were murdered in cold blood.

Now, over one year later, Israeli troops still occupy parts of southern Lebanon and 10,000 Lebanese and Palestinians are being held in concentration camps. It seems that the only thing preventing large portions of southern Lebanon from becoming permanently occupied, like

***"Those anti-imperialist forces in the women's movement who stood on the people's side in the struggle in Vietnam, in Southern Africa and now in Central America, cannot afford to sit out the debate over Zionism."***

the West Bank and Gaza Strip before them, are pragmatic considerations concerning the overextension of the Israeli military machine and the political and economic cost of sustaining an occupying army. Meanwhile, Lebanon is em-

broiled in an ongoing civil war, with Israel and the U.S. backing the most reactionary elements in Lebanese society. The ever-escalating numbers and posture of the U.S. military "peace-keeping" forces now threaten to transform the civil war into an international crisis of major proportions.

When the Israeli invasion first broke the news, intense struggle broke out in the women's movement around the question of the relationship between anti-Zionism and anti-semitism. Leaflets and articles appeared arguing that support of Israel and the basic logic of Zionism was crucial to the struggle for Jewish survival and against anti-semitism. At the same time, political debate about Zionism and Israel's role in the Middle East became highly charged, framed as it was by accusations of anti-semitism within the women's movement. Though many women admitted to having reservations about the invasion of Lebanon, as well as criticisms of the Begin government, a



FIGURE 1. Cover page of "Zionism in the Women's Movement," a discussion paper written and published by the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, October 1983. Image courtesy of Alliance Against Women's Oppression.

US feminisms—such discourses problematically erase powerful histories of individuals such as Burnham and Louie and organizations such as the AWSA SF, WCRC, BWA, and TWWA. In 1995, when Burnham and Louie attended the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, China, they noticed that many US women did not situate their struggles globally. Burnham recalls, "In other parts of the world, people were talking about structural adjustment and its impact on their countries. Our folks [US women] couldn't engage in

that conversation. They didn't have the language or concepts."<sup>19</sup> This motivated Louie and Burnham to launch the workbook *Women's Education in the Global Economy*<sup>20</sup> and a women of color economic literacy project that addressed the implications of US imperialist policies domestically and abroad. To advocate for global consciousness among women of color, they wove feminist analyses of US militarism, environmental destruction, and capitalism abroad throughout their work. With Burnham at the helm, it is no surprise that WCRC became a home to anti-imperialist Arab feminists working against US-led war and Zionist colonization. This was particularly meaningful in the 1990s, when US women of color feminisms did not have Palestine or the Arab region on their radar.

Currently, global consciousness within feminist and anti-racist activism manifests among, for example, Black Lives Matter and Palestinian liberation movements.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, activists link the increasing militarization of US police forces that dominate black communities through sexualized violence and murder to their training in Israel, where sexualized state violence against Palestinians has been a systematic and deliberate strategy of colonization.<sup>22</sup> These political linkages strengthen opportunities for joint activism across international borders. There are also growing analyses of how the destruction of neighborhoods, reduction of social safety nets (e.g., healthcare, homeless shelters, and welfare), and deterioration of conditions for poor immigrants and communities of color have everything to do with the expansion of US militarism and aid to Israel.

The Z Collective, a group of Arab activists working closely with African American activists in Detroit, MI, have been practicing what Burnham describes as "understanding the relationship between what's going on in the US and what's going on in other parts of the world and supporting struggles for peace from different vantage points."<sup>23</sup> In 2014, they jointly organized a protest challenging Israel's military attacks against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and water shut-offs in the bankrupted city of Detroit whereby tens of thousands of primarily black, working-class residents are without water.<sup>24</sup> In 2016, Black for Palestine with the Z Collective asserted their joint struggle with the poster in Figure 2.

There are many lessons we can learn about transnational feminism, anti-imperialism, and joint global struggle from Black for Palestine, Z Collective, and black feminist activists like Burnham. Positioning her labor in relation to many people and movements locally, nationally, *and* internationally, Burnham's commitments to collaboration and globalized social justice remind us of the urgency to transform responses to emergencies like Detroit into long-term social movements;



FIGURE 2. *Side by Side until All of Us Are Free*. "This image was produced out of a joint struggle between Black for Palestine and the Z Collective in 2016 and represents Black and Palestinian cultural and political solidarity, toward an understanding that true justice cannot be found unless there is an intentional justice for all."<sup>25</sup> Image courtesy of Noura Hoda Ballout.

movements characterized by political critique of the interconnected domestic and global forces of US imperialism. Focusing on domestic, global, and imperialist dimensions of and Arab and black feminist struggles stands to transform dominant frameworks that define radical feminist and queer concerns solely with US “domestic” issues and reduce the struggles of women globally to simply “foreign.” Drawing Arab and black feminisms into conversation inspires re-establishing historic solidarities to theorize how contemporary oppressions are funding the militarization of US police and the sexist/heterosexist/cisgenderist/classist US war machine. Or, how the United States’ foundation and continued legacies of settler colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and homophobia contextualize why the US empire finds its perfect imperial ally in Israel. Making these and other connections visible enriches our activist landscape and allows us to envision further the more inclusive world that feminisms aim to build. ■

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## NOTES

1. Racist and Islamophobic European and US discourses conflate the categories Arab and Muslim—not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arab.
2. See Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 259–46.
3. Maylei Blackwell and Nadine Naber, “Intersectionality in an Era of Globalization: The Implications of the UN World Conference against Racism for Transnational Feminist Practices,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 2, no. 2 (2002): 237–48.
4. Women of Color Resource Center, *Time to Rise: US Women of Color: Issues and Strategies* (Berkeley, CA: Women of Color Resource Center, 2001).
5. Maylei Blackwell, Linda Burnham, and Jung Hee Choi, *Time to Rise: US Women of Color—Issues and Strategies*, Report to the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, 28 August 2001–7 September 2001 (Berkeley, CA: Women of Color Resource Center, 2001).
6. The paper has since been reprinted as Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi, “The Forgotten ‘-ism’: An Arab American Women’s Perspective on Zionism,” in *The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*, ed. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 97–112.
7. Knowledge of Zionist strategies of repression became more and more widespread with the growing consciousness about Palestinian struggle and anti-Arab/anti-Muslim racism that was consolidated in progressive US politics after 9/11/2001. See Kumars



Salehi, "Stigmatizing Solidarity," *Jacobin*, 27 October 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/10/palestine-bay-area-aroc-jcrc-san-francisco-solidarity-zionism/>, accessed 16 March 2016.

8. Linda Burnham and Erika Tatnall, "Paving the Way: A Teaching Guide to the Third World Women's Alliance" (presentation, Oakland, CA: Women of Color Resource Center, 2006).

9. Ibid.

10. See Linda Burnham, "The Wellspring of Black Feminist Theory" (Working Paper Series No. 1, Oakland, CA: Women of Color Resource Center, 2001), <https://solidarity-us.org/pdfs/cadreschool/fws.burnham.pdf>, accessed 10 January 2016.

11. Frances M. Beal, "Double Jeopardy, To Be Black and Female," in *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970) 109–122. As an example of a foundational reading on intersectionality, see Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

12. Beal, "Double Jeopardy, To Be Black and Female," 109.

13. Ibid.

14. Here, Burnham is referring to definitions of the Civil Rights Movement that assume it culminated in the mid-1960s with the passing of the Civil Rights bill and after Freedom Summer in 1964.

15. Linda Burnham, phone interview with the author, 20 April 2016.

16. Miriam Ching Louie, email interview with the author, 16 May 2016.

17. Ibid.

18. This book provided a corrective to this problem: Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, eds., *The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006).

19. Burnham, phone interview with the author, 20 April 2016.

20. Miriam Ching Louie and Linda Burnham, *Women's Education in the Global Economy* (Berkeley, CA: Women of Color Resource Center, 2000).

21. David Palumbo-Liu, "Black Activists Send Clear Message to Palestinians: 'Now Is the Time for Palestinian Liberation, Just as Now is the Time for Our Own in the United States,'" *Salon*, 18 August 2015, [http://www.salon.com/2015/08/18/black\\_activists\\_send\\_clear\\_message\\_to\\_palestinians\\_now\\_is\\_the\\_time\\_for\\_palestinian\\_liberation\\_just\\_as\\_now\\_is\\_the\\_time\\_for\\_our\\_own\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states/](http://www.salon.com/2015/08/18/black_activists_send_clear_message_to_palestinians_now_is_the_time_for_palestinian_liberation_just_as_now_is_the_time_for_our_own_in_the_united_states/), accessed 1 February 2016. See also Nadine Naber, "The US and Israel Make the Connections for Us," *Critical Ethnic Studies Association Journal* 3, no. 2 (forthcoming).

22. See "Palestine Points of Unity," *Incite!* n.d., <http://www.incite-national.org/page/palestine-points-unity>, accessed 10 April 2016; "Anti-Militarism Organizing Resources," *Incite!* n.d., <http://www.incite-national.org/page/anti-militarism-organizing-resources>, accessed 10 April 2016; Patrick M. O'Connell, "St. Louis County Chief Will Travel to Israel," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 24 March 2011, [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/st-louis-county-chief-will-travel-to-israel/article\\_9b614430-5679-11e0-999b-0017a4a78c22.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/st-louis-county-chief-will-travel-to-israel/article_9b614430-5679-11e0-999b-0017a4a78c22.html), accessed 1 February 2016; Trita Parsi, Twitter post, 14 August 2014, 6:57 a.m., <https://twitter.com/tparsi/status/499917611715813376>.

23. Burnham, phone interview with the author, 20 April 2016.
24. Jimmy Johnson, "Detroit Rallies Largest Turnout for Palestine in Years," *The Electronic Intifada*, 15 July 2014, <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/jimmy-johnson/detroit-rallies-largest-turnout-palestine-years>, accessed 9 August 2015.
25. Noura Hoda Ballout, email to author, 18 April 2016.