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# #FromFerguson2Gaza: Spatialities of Protest in Black-Palestinian Solidarity Movements

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**Abstract**

Palestinian and Black activists have maintained a history of solidarity and mutual support since the 1960s, yet in recent years, this solidarity has strengthened and expanded. Joint Black and Palestinian activism against state-sanctioned violence was further energized during the 2014 Ferguson protests, when activists expanded their collaborations over social media, in demonstrations, and through jointly organized meetings, conferences, and workshops. While the Palestinian quest for self-determination and Black American struggles for racial equality have been examined extensively, recent intersections between the two movements have received little scholarly attention. This paper investigates the spatiality of Black and Palestinian activists' engagement in transnational collaborative resistance efforts to counter American and Israeli hegemony, through both physical space and cyberspace. While previous studies have examined the symbiotic potential of physical and cyberspace activism, our case study demonstrates how young people have used their tech-savvy knowledge of the benefits and shortcomings of the Internet to strategically raise their narratives to the fore, and consequently incite global awareness and participation in the Black-Palestinian struggle. By capitalizing on the spatialities of online and offline activism, young people have re-spatialized the movement, democratizing it to foster inclusive transnational collaboration, flatten power hierarchies, and raise new leadership within the movement itself.

**Keywords**

Transnational solidarity, social movements, spatialities of protest, Palestine, Black Lives Matter, cyberspace

## Introduction

Black American and Palestinian activists have a rich history of political and social organizing against state-sanctioned violence in their respective homelands. Social justice campaigns for Black and Palestinian rights dominated the national orthodoxy and activist scenes in the US and Palestine in the 1960s and 1970s, marking an integral period for resistance movements against white supremacy and settler-colonialism. The aligned timing of their struggles paved the way for Black and Palestinian activists to join hands in solidarity for each other's anti-imperial and liberation struggle. This marked the beginning of a long-standing solidarity between these two communities that has in recent years transformed into global and widespread activism.

While their histories of oppression are varied, Black Americans and Palestinians share several commonalities as victims of racialized injustice. Both groups experience institutional racism, with basic provisions of housing, electricity, and water often denied (Black Solidarity with Palestine, 2015; Davis, 2016), and suffer under militarized control of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and US police state (Bailey, 2015; Black Solidarity with Palestine, 2015). In response, activists have formed international resistance efforts to counter the practices of the US and Israeli governments, whose political, social, cultural, and economic hegemony restricts their freedom and mobility. While their resistance originated as independent efforts to challenge oppressive institutions of power, the convergence of these movements has produced new networks of connections and mutual Black-Palestinian support.

The 2014 mainstream emergence of Black-Palestinian solidarity demonstrates the necessities of Black and Palestinian activists to protest for joint liberation in an increasingly hostile online-offline environment. Using Black-Palestinian solidarity as a case study[1], we argue that the tandem use of online and offline spaces is necessary for rising young activists to navigate around physical restrictions of movement, corporate and state cybersurveillance, and domineering global white supremacy. Extrapolating upon Massey's (2008) examination of how solidarity is mobilized through identifying common enemies, oppressive experiences, and aspirations to rework power-geometries between places, we examine how spatial synergies used in Black-Palestinian activism have allowed young people, whose voices have been overlooked and suppressed in historical Black-Palestinian activism, to broaden awareness around their joint struggle and unite global communities to fight racism. While their participation is not new, the strategic use of physical and cyberspace activism has allowed marginalized

[1] We conducted in-depth 1-on-1 semi-structured interviews with 12 activists ranging from students to middle-aged activists involved with Black-Palestinian solidarity in activist circles, university clubs, and universities in the US, Canada, Jordan, and Palestine. To complement our interviews, we attended Israeli Apartheid Week, including a student-led conference on Black-Palestinian solidarity at McGill University on the experiences of Black and Palestinian activists online and offline organizing. Furthermore, online data was pertinent in understanding the ways in which activists seek out communication. Examining Twitter and Facebook posts, hashtags, videos, and photographs provided data on the public forms of communication undertaken by Black and Palestinian activists, the nature of their public displays of solidarity, and revealed images of joint protest in offline space. We ran frequent Twitter hashtag searches in 2015-2017 commonly used in Black-Palestinian solidarity campaigns, such as #FromFergusontoPalestine, #Black-PalestinianSolidarity, #PalestinianLivesMatter, #FromFergusontoGaza, #BlackSolidaritywithPalestine to observe the content and nature of public posts about their solidarity.

actors within Black-Palestinian activist circles to elevate their voices in the movement. This paper interrogates how this wave of activism has enabled younger activists to imagine new possibilities for global solidarity and to challenge Israeli and American hegemony by producing counternarratives against settler-colonialism and police terror, bringing these to global attention.

## Praxis and Discourses of Social Movements

Black and Palestinian social movements and the geographies of Black and Palestinian spaces have significantly transformed over the past several decades. While geographers are increasingly examining various forms of activism, we propose that analysis the intersection of physical and cyberspaces of protest and Black-Palestinian solidarity is underdeveloped and would benefit from scholarly attention. In order to examine contemporary Black-Palestinian solidarity, we first provide an overview of scholarship on transnational solidarity movements, the history of Black-Palestinian solidarity, and current debates on cyberactivism.

### *Contemporary Transnational Solidarity Movements*

A growing body of literature examines how solidarity is mobilized through reworking the socio-spatial relationships between distant geographical spaces (Massey, 2008). Most prominently, scholarship has examined the contemporary geographies of solidarity movements and how they are manifested in offline and online space. Scholars have examined how transnational solidarities have linked distinct geographies to reshape social movements whereby global protests are produced at the local level (Massey, 2007), and are bound together by protestors across geographies linking common enemies, shared experiences of oppression, and similarities between places, ultimately opening up opportunities for alliances (Massey, 2008).

In London's Non-Stop Picket protesting South African apartheid from 1986 to 1990, Brown and Yaffe (2014) examine the multidirectional travel of solidarity, in which small groups of organizers broaden awareness of movements across spatially diverse places. Mobilizing solidarity extends local activism, while amplifying protests' influence by attracting new supporters in previously unreached places (Featherstone, 2012). Rather than framing international solidarity as a movement flowing from one place to another, scholars conceptualize solidarity as intertwined flows in multiple locations wherein movements contest local struggles by drawing global participation and attention to their situation (Brown and Yaffe, 2014; Featherstone, 2012; Frenzel, Feigenbaum, and McCurdy; Massey, 2008).

Yet, physical spaces of protest are still critical for activist convenings and movement building. Physical spaces, such as protest camps, allow activists to rework the power dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed by strategically tailoring their protest in response to threats imposed by the opposition (Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto, 2008; Rozema et al., 2015; Routledge, 2017). Moreover, abolitionist scholars have written about how marginalized communities like incarcerated folks work around physical constraints of prisons to contest local struggles (Gilmore, 2008). Incarcerated people have used creative strategies like writing to communicate beyond prison walls, to respatialize their oppression, and to resist and to reject the dehumanizing logics of carceral terror (Gilmore, 2008). Scholars have further emphasized that when interracial and decolonial solidarity in environmental justice movements convene, they produce abolitionist imaginaries that are capable of contesting capitalist and racist spaces created by state and corporate powers, to protect the lands on which they live through an exchange of resources and activist skills (Pulido and De Lara, 2018).

In recent years, cyberactivism, or the use of online technologies to pursue social change, has radically altered solidarity movements and how protests are shaped at various scales (Featherstone, 2005; Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto, 2008). Online and communication technologies are integral to mobilizing

populations and disseminating information across networks in social and political movements (Van De Donk, *et al*., 2004). Solidarity movements capitalize on online mediums to strategize about protests, and to extend their solidarity with other social justice campaigns worldwide (Gerbaudo, 2012). With technological advancements, activists have developed new understandings of how social change can be achieved (Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski, 2018; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Gutiérrez, 2018).

In particular, movements like Black Lives Matter have used mediums like Twitter to build solidarity amongst communities of colour and develop narratives for self representation (Cox, 2017). Blogs and social media have allowed youth in the Middle East to mobilize and voice their disdain of government oppression through less-regulated channels (el-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013; el-Tantawy and Wiest, 2011). Social media has increased the potential for youth to communicate to other youth and the public about their lived experiences (Meek, 2012). With increased online communication, this has led to movements linking commonalities with other physically disparate movements, producing new geographies of solidarity towards collective justice (Aiken *et al*., 2014; Massey, 2008; Sundberg, 2007). The forging of relationships across distance has consequently played an important role in reconfiguring power geometries, where physically distant communities have bonded to contest local and global forms of hegemonic oppression (Featherstone, 2012; Massey, 2008). Despite the dramatic increase of cyberactivism, scholars contend that it still heavily relies on its relationship to the material spaces of its infrastructure and the physical spatial practices of Internet users to contest and transform social, cultural, and economic landscapes (Featherstone, 2012), as our research on BLM-Palestinian solidarity demonstrates.

### *A History of Black-Palestinian Solidarity*

In the 1960s and 1970s, Black civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. publicly backed Israel as a Zionist state (Lubin, 2016). Well-known Black Americans were signatories of 1970s advertisements in the *New York Times* pledging support for Israel, while the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) expressed their approval (Miller, 1981). In contrast, Black radicals like Malcolm X and Huey Newton were outspoken critics of Israel, which they viewed as an enabler and product of Western imperialism and colonialism (Feldman, 2015; Lubin, 2016; Young, 1972). Similarly, Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) lent their support to Black nationalist movements, and Black leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X (Lubin, 2014). At the time, these organizational and political leaders were monumental in mobilizing their respective communities to support Black and Palestinian fights for self-determination (Lubin, 2014; Miller, 1981).

Yasser Arafat and the PLO maintained close contact with Black radicals in the US over the years, and were increasingly joined by Black Power groups such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) in condemning Zionism, at a time when pro-Israel narratives pervaded the Global North (Brenner and Quest, 2013; Feldman, 2015; Lubin, 2016; Miller, 1981; Young, 1972). After the Six-Day War in 1967, support for Zionism declined sharply in response to Israel's increasing aggressions and the PLO received greater support in newsletters and in speeches written by Black radical groups, where they alluded to the mutual victimhood of Black and Palestinian bodies (Feldman, 2015; Lubin, 2014; Miller, 1981).

In the 1980s, alliances continued to develop at the organizational level, with delegations of activists from the BPP travelling to the Middle East, and Palestinian political leaders reaching out to open dialogue with Black liberation leaders (Feldman, 2015; Lubin, 2014). During this time, Black-Palestinian alliances leading up to the 1980s were characterized by highly visible political and organizational leadership like the PLO and the BPP (Miller, 1981). The continued alliances between movement leaders set up a strong foundation for the public re-emergence of their solidarities around the time of the Ferguson

protest, when Palestinians reached out to US protestors on how to resist militarized police forces (Bailey, 2015). This paved the way for the contemporary revival of Black-Palestinian solidarity, with an emerging leadership that has continued historical forms of joint Black-Palestinian alliance.

### *Politics of Cyberactivism*

The emergence of cyberactivism has significantly invigorated geographical perspectives on the Internet's privileges and dangers. Geographers have diverged into two main camps on the efficacies of cyberactivism. On the one hand, techno-optimists have championed technologies as powerful tools capable of mediating links between individuals and non-state actors to challenge traditional governance structures and contentious politics (Elwood and Leszcyznski, 2013; Lemke and Habegger, 2017). They posit that technologies can reshape power hierarchies by producing alternative forms of knowledge to dominant forms of print and TV media. Online platforms enable the public to curate alternative truths that challenge dominant state and corporate-owned forms of knowledge production (Carty and Onyett, 2006; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2013; McCaughey, 2014). Proponents of cyberactivism underscore how social media circumvents the immediate physical scrutiny that on-the-ground organizers experience, thus giving rise to new voices that contest normative politics (el-Tantawy and Wiest, 2011; Lemke and Habegger, 2017; Prouse, 2018). They emphasize that technologies enable journalists and the public to respond to violence by informing domestic and international populations, and sharing mobilization tactics with which to confront police (Prouse, 2018).

However, other scholars argue that cyberspace serves as a space for surveillance, citizen repression, and inaction amongst a people connected only tenuously online (Christensen, 2011; Shelton, 2019). As non-state actors contest entrenched power hierarchies, governments also use technology for the purpose of civilian oversight (Khazraee and Losey, 2016). Governments have used technology to impose censorship, causing security concerns for activists (Casilli and Tubaro, 2012; Prouse, 2018). Moreover, despite the seemingly 'neutral' apparatus of the Internet, Black and Palestinian scholars have drawn attention to the perils of online activism. For instance, scholars have underscored the racial biases of technologies, and how Internet search engines and social media are controlled by corporate interests and white epistemologies to reinforce racial stereotypes (Brock, 2011; Noble, 2018). Palestinian activists and scholars who espouse pro-Palestinian narratives have been chastised by online and offline communities, which has led to severe consequences in offline spaces, such as the termination of professional appointments and academic contracts (Salaita, 2015). While many scholars have discussed the liberatory nature of the Internet, some scholars of racialization have contested this claim, noting how corporate and state powers have gained the ability to preserve white supremacist narratives on online platforms and to simultaneously profit off them (Brock, 2011; Noble, 2018). This challenges techno-optimist perspectives on the seemingly liberatory nature of the Internet, given how online narratives are often produced and promulgated by white actors.

Furthermore, despite the seemingly liberating semblance of the Internet in spurring social change, scholars point to 'slacktivism', or the use of social media for activism requiring little commitment. Consequently, such 'slacktivism' often propagates notions of saviourism and augments the possibility for the co-optation of marginalized folks' struggles (Christensen, 2011; Koopman, 2008; Rotman et al., 2011; Valenzuela, 2013). Under-resourced grassroots movements may lack the capacity to engage in global solidarity, and these power imbalances enable some movements to gain traction in online and offline spaces while constraining the ability of others (Cumbers and Routledge, 2013; Koopman, 2008; Sundberg, 2007). Thus, this emphasizes a fundamental necessity to understand how cyberactivism can equally exist as sites of racial repression and sites of resistance.

Our research builds on these debates to examine how Black-Palestinian solidarity movements are navigating these spatialities of physical space and cyberspace in an attempt to redefine leadership,

energize supporters, and challenge the status quo in an increasingly hostile online-offline world. By examining Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity in physical space and cyberspace, our research suggests that these spatialities are most productively examined together as a hybrid subaltern space in which activities in different locations and political contexts can work together to challenge hegemonic white and state power.

## Transnational Solidarity in Physical Space

Prior to COVID-19, the possibilities of physical meetings and dialogue over transnational borders had expanded through increasingly efficient and affordable technologies and inventions in recent years. The reduced cost of plane tickets and increased frequency in flights that connect North America and Palestine have facilitated transnational meetings and discussions about occupation and militarized policing among activists, scholars, and the general public. The new mass connectivity has dramatically expanded the possibilities for Black American and Palestinian delegations to travel between Palestine and the US, and for university campuses to host activists who expose new audiences to a re-invigorated and more inclusive form of Black-Palestinian solidarity.

### *Strategic Activism and Communication in Physical Space in the Ferguson-Gaza Era*

While collaborative efforts to support each other's resistance continued throughout the late twentieth century, it was not until the 2014 Ferguson protests that a public revival of Black-Palestinian solidarity emerged. In the subsequent years, Palestinian and Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists have collaborated in expanding Black-Palestinian solidarity against police brutality and institutional racism. After the shooting of Michael Brown, Gazans tweeted out supportive messages with advice on how to counter law enforcement (Bailey, 2015; Copeland, 2015; Molloy, 2014). Palestinian activists based in St. Louis expressed solidarity with Brown's family, while Black activists mobilized with them, waving Palestinian flags in retaliation to Israel's military aggressions (Black Solidarity with Palestine, 2015). Black activists took to social media to thank Palestinians and continued the dialogue in public displays of gratitude. Since then, there has been an unprecedented wave of mutual support and communication between Black activists and Palestinians, revitalizing a historic solidarity.

Present-day spaces of Black and Palestinian collaboration occur in a variety of settings, from the spontaneous to the highly organized. Impromptu street protests can arise in response to a sudden injustice, while other events may be strategically organized, such as academic panels and conferences. Social justice groups and university clubs catering primarily to university students[2] frequently organize informal sit-ins, protests, or events and conferences following a public and politicized incident. Activists' Twitter posts provide visual documentation of face-to-face interactions between BLM activists and Palestinians in Palestine and shows of solidarity. Photographs of protests depict Palestinians holding signs in solidarity with victims of police brutality (Figure 1a), while BLM activists are photographed with Palestinian *keffiyehs*, the black and white scarf that is a symbol of Palestinian nationalism and solidarity, and flags in many sites of protest (Figure 1b). They reveal that while these interactions are excluded from mass media coverage, face-to-face exchanges of dialogue occur with increasing frequency. Interviewees reveal that most of the collaborative efforts between activists take place within university campus and organizational headquarters, thus emphasizing that even within the 'physical world' spaces of protest and collaborative Black-Palestinian efforts, there are distinct geographies that foster and privilege Black-Palestinian alliances.

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[2] University club websites and event advertisements on social media reveal that organizational events, protests, and sit-ins are taking place on campuses across North America.


**Figure 1a.** Palestinians showing support for Eric Garner in the West Bank (December 2014). Photograph: Hamdi Abu Rahma


**Figure 1b.** Delegations of Black activists expressing their support in Palestine (August 2016). Photograph: Dream Defenders

In addition to the interviews that we conducted with Black and Palestinian activists based in the US, Canada, Palestine, and Jordan, we offer a case study of a one-day Black-Palestinian solidarity event jointly coordinated and hosted by a Palestinian human rights club and a Black student organization at McGill University, which reflected the increasing trend of university-based Black-Palestinian collaborations. This event is one of many Black-Palestinian solidarity events hosted on university campuses across North America and Palestine as part of Israeli Apartheid Week, a weeklong series of sit-ins and picketing protests, documentary screenings, and conferences covering issues related to Palestinian self-determination and the fight for justice. At the event, speakers spoke of their experiences in Hebron, where Black American and Palestinian activists convened to exchange protest tactics and how to scale up their joint movement. They reflected that what began as an online communication led to physically convening in Palestine, where they were able to discuss the difficulties in their activism and share strategies on how to overcome obstacles in their respective and joint movements.

Although this event was advertised through social media channels, most attendees were students involved in Black and Palestinian social justice groups and it was clear that they operated within a similar activist network. While the speakers and student activists live in different locations, attendees were cognizant of the key organizations in each other's cities working towards joint justice, alluding to the power of the Internet in learning more about each other's struggles. Similarly, students at the event also reflected that in addition to the Internet serving as a knowledge hub for Black-Palestinian solidarity, they equally used it to avoid bureaucratic oversight from university administration. At the conference, we bonded over our mutual positionalities as young activists, which led to attendees confiding in us that their use of social media existed primarily to revitalize Black-Palestinian solidarity from a youth

perspective and to publicize these narratives where paper trails of social media posts sustain the historical traditions of the joint alliance.

In our interview with John[3], a former Black Panther Party member now in his 70s, he described the difficulties in acquiring information about the Palestinian struggle outside radical Black circles prior to the 1967 Six-Day War. This contrasts with the experiences of many young folks we interviewed, who often referred to the Internet and university events in providing significant access to information about the Black and Palestinian struggle. In reflecting upon his past, John noted that Black activists generally endorsed the Zionist struggle as it 'was presented as an anticolonial struggle and a struggle for a democratic state…in an environment where you had remnants of colonialism'. He went on to explain that the high level of Jewish involvement in supporting the civil rights movements was a key reason why so many mainstream civil rights leaders supported the Zionist cause (personal communication, October 2, 2016). He stated that:

> one of the problems that frequently happens here in the US is that people don't pay attention to history…they engage in a level of magical thinking, and so they believe that the current wave of solidarity between Black activists and the Palestinians sort of popped out of nowhere…it's complicated because it really is rooted in 40 years of work that was carried out by groups like the Panthers, the Republic of New Afrika, the African Liberation Support Committee, some of the – what were called at the time – communist groups, a lot of which had substantial African American membership. You had the National Black United Front, you had the role of Reverend Jesse Jackson in '84 and '88 campaigns. So none of this stuff appeared magically. (personal communication, October 2, 2016)

However, while the post-Ferguson formation of Black-Palestinian solidarity has extended the legacy of their alliance, there is a notable difference between historical and contemporary Black-Palestinian solidarity, particularly in the nature of leadership within these movements. Historically, whether protests took place at the local, regional, or national scale, they existed in a hierarchical, centralized system, where solidarity movements were curated by notable activists and organizations, like the PLO and Malcolm X. This alliance was restricted to a small subset of the activist population, consisting primarily of movement and masculine leadership. By contrast, students at the McGill event as well as the student activists we interviewed discussed how the Internet serves as a vehicle where they can claim greater ownership in a movement that is dominated by older and respected activists and scholar-activists. Writing their expressions of dissent online allows activists to claim representation as young people who have not been taken seriously, and to publicize their opinions in a movement that has historically limited its leadership to men and older activists. In comparing the different forms of leadership in Black-Palestinian solidarity over time, its recent resurgence has piqued public awareness around the solidarity movement, and has allowed marginalized voices within the movement to occupy key positions in leading it.

Black and Palestinian activists and speakers at the McGill University event revealed that one of the aspects most integral to the advancement of Black-Palestinian solidarity is the importance of physical space. Despite the prevalence of social media, they emphasized that 'there is no substitute for face-to-face contact'. While initial contact with activists from remote locations may begin with online exchanges, activists use these platforms to expand their growing

[3] Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of interviewees.

relationships until they are able to travel to each other's countries to exchange information in person. Moreover, when asked about their initial interest in Black-Palestinian solidarity, activists discussed the influence of their ancestral ties, or an inner-circle friend or family member who encouraged their participation in the Black-Palestinian transnational cause. One Palestinian student-activist explained, 'due to my upbringing, my Palestinian identity, and the political activity of my parents during my youth, I have always been politically engaged, at least ideologically'.

However, interviewees pointed out that meeting in physical spaces poses several limitations. Student-activist Julia noted that, 'state authorities are directly confrontational and have the power to restrict mobility' with infrastructure and militarized and corporate-contracted checkpoints. Some resistance efforts are obstructed by governments, while others require protest permits and disclosure of demonstration routes. Since vigils and nonviolent protest in city streets and public spaces requires time-sensitive planning, demonstrations can be challenging to organize. Thus, geographical boundaries can also impinge on the mobility of Black and Palestinian bodies, and restrict their voices in physical spaces.

Black-Palestinian collaborations on university campuses continue the tradition of North American youth-led activism, yet they notably have limitations. Since students organize under institutional bureaucracies, this limits the scale at which protests can be carried out. Furthermore, while Featherstone (2012) emphasizes the need to mobilize and engage a demographically diverse and new populace to join social movements, campus activism frequently limits participation to mainly students. Many grassroots campaigns in physical space go unnoticed by the public, particularly small-scale efforts, and activists struggle to reach audiences outside those in their immediate periphery. However, university-based collaborations between Black and Palestinian activists in the post-Ferguson era incite less hostility and resistance from State and corporate actors than other types of more public protest. Additionally, cheaper airfare has enabled for a greater frequency of such events, further expanding and deepening their solidarity in ways that constrained previous efforts.

Despite these setbacks, interviewees also spoke of the necessity of their geographically-specific activism to address Black-Palestinian food insecurity, electricity and water shortages, political repression, and state violence. Rather than debating whether physical or cyberspace activism is more useful for their movement, activists discussed how both are fundamentally necessary in the post-Ferguson era of activism. To them, despite the persistent physical apparatus of contemporary demonstrations and conferences, they are inherently tied to cyberspace due to the normalization of online advertising and the necessity of outreach for physically organized events. Activists acknowledged certain shortcomings of physical protest and recognized the need to resort to additional spatialities of protest to express their resistance. This reaffirms that even though physical spaces of protest still serve as a key locus for transnational activism (Brown and Yaffe, 2014), contemporary modes of physical protest cannot be detached from online solidarity building. The mutually reinforcing nature of in-person events and their publicization online not only expands Black-Palestinian solidarity but also creates greater inclusivity, where more global communities are engaging in conversation with each other about a joint movement for justice.

## Transnational Solidarity in Cyberspace

In many ways, physical distances between communities have diminished considerably with the advent of the Internet. Social media can solicit and coordinate large and rapid responses to political events and has provided unprecedented opportunities for distant communities to communicate with one another (Routledge, 2017; Shirky, 2011). Cyberspace is integral in

facilitating contemporary Black and Palestinian activism and deepening their alliance. In the past several years, social media increasingly serves as a space to document police brutality against Black and Palestinian civilians, inciting the mobilization of activists in cyberspace. The Internet has emerged as an alternative news outlet, where citizens and activists are able to document state-sanctioned violence through less regulated channels of social media.

### *Twitter Activism*

Twitter is among the most prominent spaces for dialogue between Black and Palestinian activists, and has played an integral role in bringing an unprecedented number of activists into contact since the Ferguson protests (Bailey, 2015; Davis, 2016). In particular, Twitter has become an important form of participatory journalism, enabling citizens to play a role in the documentation of human rights violations, offering alternatives to traditional journalistic mediums. Drawing upon Koopman (2008) and Sundberg's (2007) assessment of unequal power geometries in knowledge production, we argue that Twitter activism challenges longstanding journalistic practice that have denied marginalized communities a visible platform. In the post-Ferguson era, activists who carry the brunt of US and Israeli racial violence but have also been sidelined by other activists within their respective movements are now able to claim space and representation on social media, redefining leadership in Black-Palestinian solidarity. This has not only allowed for the emergence of activist voices that have been excluded by mainstream media, but has allowed young Palestinian and Black activists whose narratives have been excluded within their movements to come to the fore.

Given the increasingly accessible use of telecommunications even in the Occupied Territories, Twitter offers unprecedented opportunities for Palestinian youth to follow the activities of and communicate directly with BLM activists. Due to physical constraints on Palestinian mobility, social media offers alternative engagement in global activism, and an ability to communicate Palestinian struggles to international audiences. Gazans were among the first to tweet advice to Ferguson protestors on how to avoid teargas when confronting police. These public displays of solidarity resulted in increased attention by activists to the importance of Twitter activism (Figure 2a). Palestinian activists promptly identified the teargas canisters used by the Israeli military against Palestinian protestors as the same manufacturer of teargas canisters used against Black activists in Ferguson (Figure 2b). Black activists quickly responded with reactions of gratitude towards Palestinians, thus resulting in a newly revitalized and public display of solidarity.


**Figure 2a.** Ferguson and Palestinian activists exchanging protest strategies (August 2014). (Twitter)


**Figure 2b.** Palestinian activist link teargas canisters used against Black and Palestinian activists (August 2014) (Twitter)

The state and corporate authorization of teargas use against civilians and policing crackdowns underpins how the US-Israel alliance produces racialized forms of disposability at home and abroad. As Massey (2008) notes, solidarity building can arise from a common enemy. Public tweets such as those about teargas expose to a global public the geopolitics of security and the alliances of empire that enable and normalize settler colonialism and state-sponsored violence. Black-Palestinian solidarity over cyberspace reflects a new channel of knowledge production and solidarity building that seeks to reveal the violent alliance between the US and Israel.

### *The Promise and Pitfalls of Cyberactivism*

Activists involved in social justice campaigns expressed in interviews that successful campaigning is also highly reliant on social media to protest in smaller-scale, localized areas. By capitalizing on networks to advance their local struggle, activists receive feedback from external communities online. Many student campaigns that apply pressure on administrations to divest from private prisons and companies complicit in the Israeli occupation of the Occupied Territories often garner online support from other university campuses. Activists exchange information online with fellow organizers regarding on-the-ground strategies. The accelerated speed and nature of communication via the Internet have widened the impact of Black-Palestinian solidarity to a more global scale.

Online citizen engagement has been increasingly important in amplifying the voices of Palestinians and Black Americans, who document their daily struggles in blogs and social media. Online information sharing, which allows for the dissemination of petitions, viral videos, and strategy documents, has transformed the spatial connectedness between activist communities. Activists gather inspiration from each other's movements to advance local causes in their community, and far beyond (Bailey, 2015; Davis, 2016). The ability to hold remote press conferences and organize multi-place protests has piqued activists' imagination on how to creatively apply pressure from multiple geographies on the opposition to respond to ever more mobile people.

Similar to Massey's (2008) suggestion that solidarity is created over mutual movement goals, the activists we interviewed emphasize that finding commonalities between Black and Palestinian people is integral for moving forward towards racial parity. Linking Black and Palestinian social justice movements allows for an intersectional analysis of racialization and discrimination. Ghalia, a Palestinian student-activist, explains how contemporary activism is mostly carried out online:

> … this is especially true of communities that are geographically separate…at the height of the Ferguson protests, Palestinians in Palestine and Black people in Ferguson began corresponding with each other on Twitter, sharing experiences and advice on various topics, such as how to recover from being pepper-sprayed or how to avoid the negative medical consequences of tear gas. (personal communication, February 2, 2017)

In line with Ghalia's observations, other activists reiterated that many of these online platforms seek to bridge communities by creating organizations that work towards a common goal.

Perhaps not surprisingly, interviews with activists revealed that the use of technology for cyberactivism is frequently contingent on age. Activists in their 40s and older often spoke of physical mobilizing techniques and attending rallies and meetings in community centers, often highlighting the importance of social media when referring to youth activism. They acknowledged the usefulness of the Internet but did not speak directly to its potential for activism. In contrast, younger activists emphasized the pertinence of online campaigning. In an interview with Sally, a Black scholar-activist, she described social media as the tool in which she 'primarily connects to other activists and gets informed about causes, events, articles, etc.' and cites the Internet as the initial medium that enabled her to learn about, and later participate in, Black-Palestinian activism.

However, Georgia, a Chicago-based Palestinian student-activist, revealed her challenges with social media, stating that her Palestinian activist group has 'to be careful with technology because so many people are able to get into [their] messages and stored files'. At times she has considered deactivating her account but realized it was 'not plausible with how many people [she has] connections with on Facebook' for purposes of her activism. The paper trail of online statements and social media posts allows third parties and blacklisting agencies to target activists, thus posing an increased risk in security, especially for an already vulnerable group of people. Despite this, Georgia elaborated that she continues to use the Internet for various reasons:

> If we try to publish and gain online support from just any general online community, we're often unsuccessful. But if we direct our online posts to our university community, we have the potential of gathering wider community backing, which strengthens the possibility that our voices will get heard…because of the nature of cybersurveillance, to be producing pro-Palestine narratives online you'd typically have to carry a notable title or be a famous activist, otherwise it is dangerous for young organizers like us to use online channels. That's why our goal is to first get student and staff support through online and offline spaces, and then continue elevating our stories and resistance in online spaces with a strong backing. This makes it a lot harder for our voices to get shut down online. Otherwise, Palestinian activism is headlined by a few key people, but ignores our voices, or those whose stories are seen as less credible. (personal communication, February 7, 2017)

This sentiment was also echoed by many young Palestinian activists. This concordance shows that while marginalized activists risk surveillance in online space, young activists are still willing to engage in these cyberspaces to claim greater representation within mainstream discussions around justice and liberation, in addition to claiming space within their own movement, which has sometimes excluded their voices.

Activists also raised the concern that many people engaged only nominally through social media and are not otherwise committed activists. In an age of 'slacktivism', physical protests increasingly convey a greater legitimacy and authenticity and carry greater social currency to activists, who are frustrated by the many 'keyboard warriors' with 'no skin in the game'. Others were frustrated that the sheer volume of information on the Internet overwhelms their causes, noting how the Internet has failed

to capture public attention beyond ephemeral interest. As such, activists noted that they cannot solely depend on cyberspace, yet these quick online interactions still play a critical role in ensuring visibility and keeping Black-Palestinian solidarity relevant in mainstream discussions. In these instances, activism in physical space is a way to advocate for local change while avoiding the threat of being blacklisted and potential third-party interference. When Black and Palestinian individuals are apprehended by state police, nearby protestors can physically mobilize in immediate response in ways that are more potent than on social media, yet can then be amplified through social media.

### *Black-Palestinian Joint Campaigns in Cyberspace*

Social media continues to be a powerful tool that elucidates and publicizes the parallel struggles of both communities, resulting in joint campaigns for Black-Palestinian liberation. Websites such as Black-Palestinian Solidarity, established in 2015 (www.blackpalestiniansolidarity.com/), explain the commonalities between Black and Palestinian struggles to the wider public. Black-Palestinian Solidarity, a platform featuring prominent Black critics and activists such as Angela Davis and Cornel West, draws parallels between Black and Palestinian efforts for liberation as a means to attract members to their movement (Black-Palestinian Solidarity). The activist website Black Solidarity with Palestine (www.blackforpalestine.com/) has garnered the signatures of over 1,100 Black activists, artists, scholars, students, and community organizers in support of the Palestinian cause, and Black-Palestinian Solidarity Conferences are increasingly posting calls on Twitter for conference participants (https://twitter.com/bps_2019?lang=en). These campaigns include multimedia videos, press releases, and signed statements unifying Black and Palestinian activists, while other platforms, such as policy statements released by the Movement for Black Lives (https://policy.m4bl.org/invest-divest/), demand collective support for the BDS movement (Black Lives Matter; The Movement for Black Lives).

Moreover, while physical spaces, such as university campuses, are often fertile ground for progressive social protest, these spaces also overlap with cyberspaces of protest. Clubs and affinity groups frequently release solidarity statements online to reach a university's student body. Black Student Unions and Palestinian rights clubs increasingly campaign online for the divestment of institutional investments from corporations inflicting harm on Black Americans and Palestinians. Racial justice organizations and youth groups have created campaigns as joint efforts to pressure universities and companies to comply with their ethics standards, and continue to circulate petitions (https://apartheid-divest.rhcloud.com/, www.sjpbruins.com/divest.html), event hosting (https://www.eventbrite.com/e/co-struggling-towards-liberation-black-palestinian-solidarity-tickets-33453662806#), and letters (https://www.facebook.com/cubso/posts/10150503388479957), in addition to physical flyers. The signatories of these petitions and press releases have been from Africa, Asia, North America, and Europe, which demonstrates that the activists engaged in Black-Palestine solidarity not only come from the US and Palestine but from across global geographies.

Cyberactivism also allows activists to reach out to communities with ideologically different opinions and to engage in discussion to dispel misconceptions of the Black and Palestinian struggle. Online mediums have allowed Black-Palestinian movements to express their shared dissent against police terror and to challenge adverse narratives perpetuated by state and corporate-owned media. The publicization of these counter-narratives produced by Black Americans and Palestinians in cyberspace has augmented transnational resistance (Aiken et. al, 2014; Massey, 2008; Sundberg; 2007) under decentralized and diverse leadership. The emergence of young activists has inspired new generations to reimagine long-standing power geometries that give rise to Israeli and American knowledge production and dominance. Solidarity statements on Twitter, Facebook, and e-newsletters challenge US-Israel state-driven tropes by directly communicating to people about Black and Palestinian peoples' lived experiences. Through online technologies, activists are linking the historical and contemporary ways in

which the US and Israel dehumanize Black and Palestinian bodies, resulting in the revival and expansion of a historical rapport that rearticulates a sense of connection between these communities. Coverage of past events of Black-Palestinian solidarity fosters a sense of nostalgia for older activists who have passed the torch to a younger generation of activists to continue the movement.

**The Mutually Reinforcing Nature of Physical and Cyberspace**

While techno-optimist scholarship focuses on the transformational nature of cyberactivism, our research demonstrates how physical spaces like universities are fundamental as organizational nodes for online organizing. Drawing upon Featherstone's (2012) and Massey's (2008) conceptualization of solidarity as efforts to disrupt spatial mechanisms of the state to oppress people, contemporary manifestations of Black-Palestinian solidarity present alternative ways to understand youth-led joint advocacy and social protest. Specifically, our research reveals that there has always been diverse participation in Black-Palestinian solidarity, yet marginalized activists within social justice movements, like young people, have not always been given attention or a voice. Their activist efforts, born out of cyberspace and sustained in physical space, demonstrate why the two spatialities of activism are integral to achieving recognition in the solidarity movement.

Many studies have tended to divide physical space and cyberspace and have interrogated each of their shortcomings in activism (Elwood and Leszcyznski, 2013; Lemke and Habegger, 2017). Our case study, in contrast, serves as an example of how both are critically used by marginalized Black and Palestinian youth to challenge the oppression enacted against their communities but also the exclusionary leadership environments within their activist movements. The curtailments of human rights imposed by Israel and the US in person and online have prompted activists to alternatively organize, where strategies for change and counter-narratives of their struggles can be co-produced by young people around the world. We expand on Routledge's (2017) concept of 'knowing your place', in which activists strategically use their local environment to shape their mode of protest. Not only do activists engage with their immediate surroundings, but we also suggest that young activists use physical and cyber activism to challenge the geopolitics of empire and white supremacy in local *and* global environments. Despite the varied scales and types of modern-day protest, our research demonstrates that the physical and cyber spaces of Black-Palestinian activism cannot be separated, as the youth we interviewed consider neither to be adequate on its own. Rather, it is their synergy that is fundamental in working towards joint liberation and that enables new imaginaries of transnational solidarity.

Scholars have often debated the true effectiveness of technologies in transforming traditional power hierarchies, with skeptics expressing concern over cybersurveillance and slacktivism (Carty and Onyett, 2006; Casilli and Tubaro, 2012; Christensen, 2011; Elwood and Leszcyznski, 2013; Lembke and Habegger, 2017). However, our research demonstrates that there is a distinct rationale that underpins activists' decisions to organize in physical space and cyberspace, which is often contingent on their individual positionality. Our interviews with Black and Palestinian activists demonstrate that they strategically opt for specific communication channels, including Twitter, Facebook, shared Google Drive folders, e-newsletters, and activist forums. Physical spaces set the boundaries of how Black-Palestinian activists can express their resistance, while cyberspaces convene activists, especially young people, in targeted online spaces such as student Facebook groups, organization websites, and Twitter circles to strategize, commiserate, and publicly communicate their resistance. While these discussions develop in cyberspace, unrestricted access to public posts allow Internet users from various geographies to adopt and support Black-Palestinian liberation movements locally. Our research demonstrates how new modalities of transnational cyberactivism between geographically disparate movements allows for the co-production of knowledge and truths curated by marginalized Black and Palestinian activists to a global audience.

## Conclusion

Social media has played a key role in the evolving camaraderie between Black and Palestinian protestors, and physical spaces like Ferguson and the Occupied Territories have served as equally important sites of physical resistance that open up dialogue around on-the-ground racial justice activism in cyberspace. This article makes two key contributions to understanding the effect and interplay of cyberspace and physical space on the manifestations of Black-Palestinian solidarity.

First, we demonstrate that through the synergistic interplay between physical space and cyberspace, Black-Palestinian solidarity has become a decentralized and global movement with a far broader membership beyond the US and Palestine. This in turn has increased participation in both physical protests and online activism. Unlike previous decades when Black-Palestinian solidarity consisted mainly of statements of solidarity by Black and Palestinian leaders, the online publicization of the Black-Palestinian solidarity movement has led to a greater recognition that there are diverse groups of activists who are leading the movement for joint liberation across the world. The use of physical and cyberspace organizing in tandem has allowed younger activists, who have been previously sidelined or unable to assert their leadership in visible ways, to share their narratives with wider audiences. These joint spaces of online-offline resistance demonstrate that Black-Palestinian solidarity is more than just a US or Palestinian struggle, but a global and diverse movement against empire, surveillance, and state and corporate-sanctioned oppression.

The interplay of physical and cyberspatialities in amplifying Black-Palestinian solidarity has de-emphasized the individual and radically democratized the movement, in contrast to the historical leadership of Black-Palestinian organizing. The mutually reinforcing use of physical space and cyberspace for Black-Palestinian activism has not only built greater awareness around joint solidarity, but also gives credit and acknowledgement to global communities and activists like young students, who daily organize but whose efforts often get overlooked by mainstream and progressive media. Our research therefore underscores how often overlooked leaders within transnational solidarity movements can be identified and acknowledged for their work by examining not only *what* narratives are being co-produced through physical and cyberspaces, but also *whose*.

Second, drawing on Noble's (2018) argument that the Internet is dominated by white state and corporate powers, our research demonstrates that activists are highly aware of these drawbacks of cybersurveillance. Yet, while scholarly arguments have debated the efficacy of the Internet, our research reveals that some activists, particularly young Palestinian activists, are willing to confront these dangers to gain greater visibility within their own movements. While scholarship often bifurcate between techno-optimists and pessimists, our research demonstrates that positionality also determines the extent to which communities are willing to negotiate their use of online spaces in order to get their voices heard. Historically, Black-Palestinian solidarity saw notable leaders like Malcolm X and Yasser Arafat drive the relationship between the two communities. In contrast, our research demonstrates that the revitalization of Black-Palestinian solidarity through this hybrid form of organizing has seen a redefining of leadership, where younger people who have historically been denied the ability to lead their respective movements have emerged as key organizers.

Despite the robust state of Black-Palestinian solidarity, a threat looms over cyberspace, one that has significant implications on strategizing tactics of Black and Palestinian activists. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has spearheaded a charge to censor accessible and educational information online by repealing government regulations that ensure Internet users receive equal treatment by their providers (Morrison, 2017). These mediums play an integral role in providing citizens with information and are under threat from institutional powers seeking to repeal net neutrality, which could consequently stifle the voices of activists who rely on social media platforms (Perri, 2017). The victims

could include thousands of Black and Palestinian activists who are increasingly relying on social media to engage audiences and express themselves, particularly those whose resources are constrained by the US and Israel (Mahesh, 2017; Mohamed, 2017). The Internet, as demonstrated in our research, is a powerful gateway to information and knowledge. Nonetheless, while it has the emancipatory potential to empower and energize a new generation of activists, the fragility of online freedoms may increasingly pose challenges for activists seeking to forge international alliances and sustainably empower their movements in the years to come.

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