

## Fragments, Hagar Kotef

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### Words #1

How can a critique be formulated when its material conditions are the object of critique? One can criticize one's state, to be sure; its violence, its wars. But how can one question the legitimacy of their own home; how can one point to the wrongs that are embedded into the very nature of their political existence? What would it mean for a Jewish Israeli not simply to write against "the occupation," but to recognize that her home is historically conditioned upon the destruction of Palestinians' homes; that her attachment to this place is founded upon a history—not such a distant history—of violence and is conditioned, at least to some extent, on the perpetuation of this violence? (And since Israel has become a paradigm of a certain kind of leftist critique, it is worth noting that the only difference between Israel and other settler colonies such as the United States or Australia is temporal density). Once we move to engage in such a critique there is no more separation between the "I" who writes and her object of critique, that is, the state and its doings (military and police violence, planning policy, legal discrimination). The I itself becomes the object of critique and her voice—the place from which she speaks, her language, the dialogues available for her—can no longer pretend to assume a position which is simply and clearly oppositional to injustice.

In my current attempt to envision an alternative reality in which both homes—those of Jews and those of Palestinians—can coexist, I suddenly find myself falling into vocabularies that sometimes seem to me strangely conservative. Perhaps such visions can be voiced only by the colonized? Is any effort to unfold them by the colonizers always another form of taking someone else's place? Should we, Israeli Jews writing critically about Israel/Palestine, limit ourselves to a negative critique without trying to sketch ways out—ways that are perhaps not ours to sketch? But then wouldn't we become yet another "proof" to the claim that there is no solution?

### Words #2

(Therefore,) when I do write about the occupation I often write about Israeli violence and about the Israeli movements that oppose this violence. As Jewish Israelis, I sometimes think we should avoid writing about Palestinians. This often feels to me like a mode of occupation in and of itself. Their voices are not mine to represent. So I limit myself to writing about Israeli powers, public discourse, or resistance. But this limitation carries its own problems: it once again erases the voices of the occupied. Are we confined to this limbo, moving between erasure and occupation, thereby reproducing the logic of the Israeli regime? But at the same time, sitting in Tel Aviv and writing about other subjects so to bypass this limbo seems like a privilege. I therefore often think that instead of writing we should do something.

## Action

But what would it mean “to do something” within such parameters<sup>1</sup>? At least in some ways, all political actions are doomed to fail (even when they succeed beyond all expectations). Political action, as Hannah Arendt noted but as any activist knows from experience, always exceeds the intention of the doer, and is never predictable.<sup>2</sup> Action is often interpellated by different power structures and materializes into consequences that undermine the activists’ goals. It has its own life that cannot be contained within pre-planned “intentions.” Two cases I examined in the past can be indicative here, if only as a very brief illustration. The first is that of Tali Fahima, a radical left activist who decided to protect with her bodily presence (as a human shield) Zacharia Zubeidi. Zubeidi was the leader of Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, a Palestinian military group which planned and executed several suicide attacks in Israel, and was considered by the Israeli army a legitimate target of assassination. Despite a mode of action that sought to demonstrate the possibility of co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians, Fahima’s story—and more accurately a fictive story, in which she took the role of

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<sup>1</sup> A question I posed, with Merav Amir in relation to the checkpoints in the West Bank and the main organization working against them: CheckPoint Watch. For the analysis of both question and answer see Hagar Kotef and Merav Amir, “(En)Gendering Checkpoints: Checkpoint Watch and the Repercussions of Intervention,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Vol. 32 no. 4 (Summer 2007): 973–96

<sup>2</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998).

Zubeidi's lover and a terrorist by this mere association—was taken rather to entrench racial anxieties in Israel. Working against both her actions and her words, Fahima's story was publically re-written as a story of conservative gender roles, in which (presumed) sex with the enemy becomes (presumed) maternal monstrosity (giving birth to a terrorist-to be), that calls for reinstating boundaries rather than questioning them.<sup>3</sup> The second case is that of Anarchists against the Wall (AAtW)—a solidarity-based Israeli group demonstrating in collaboration with Palestinians against the separation wall. As in the case of Fahima, solidarity takes place here via the practice of human shielding. The Jewish activists serve as a buffer between Palestinians and Israeli violence in order to reduce this violence. However in time (and in fact, quite quickly) the Anarchists themselves became legitimate targets of violence. They failed in their effort to shield. Moreover, and perhaps not less importantly, this logic of shielding reproduces, in and of itself, the very division between valued and disposable lives that the act of solidarity seeks to challenge. Two radical failures, then.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, we see the cooptation of leftist action into the mechanisms justifying the occupation, the manners by which a public reading of action can turn it against itself, the ways in which activism is taken to justify the very powers it opposes.

This is not to dismiss political action or call for political passivism. Indeed, failure itself must be thought of also through its productive aspects. Thus, even the moment of the most radical failure can be seen also as a moment of action's greatest success. For Arendt what is disclosed through action is a distinct humanness—a “who”—that is revealed in action's very materialization in the world; in the cases above, and perhaps in all cases of activism, action no longer reveals the activist's own unique “who,” but the power against which she acts.<sup>5</sup> Queer theory can provide some clarification. For Judith Butler, failed performances of gender stances expose an array of alternative potential identities

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<sup>3</sup> For a full analysis see Kotef, “Baking at the Front Line, Sleeping with the Enemy: Reflections on Gender and Women's Peace Activism in Israel,” *Politics & Gender* 7 (Jan 2012): 551–72. For further analyses of such patterns in different contexts see Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mother Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (N.Y. and London, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> See Hagar Kotef and Merav Amir, “Limits of Dissent, Perils of Activism: Spaces of Resistance and the New Security Logic,” *Antipode* 47 (June 2015): 671–88.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 176.

and subject positions beyond the heteronormative dichotomist order, and hence expose also the artificiality of this order.<sup>6</sup> Failure is thus “the weapon of the weak,” in the words of Jack Halberstam, following James Scott: it pushes against the boundaries of the intelligible, the doable, the possible, and in that reveals the logic, as well as the limits, of the heteronormative order, challenging it thereby.<sup>7</sup> A similar structure can be identified in many other cases of activism. The failure to physically protect co-demonstrators in the case of AAtW, for example, exposes an inherent failure in citizenship, which is the failure of democratic order and hence the activist’s greatest success. It points to the breaches in the pretense of the democratic state to protect its own citizens while challenging its legitimacy to hurt its noncitizens. This failure thus exposes the duplicity at the foundation of Israel as a democracy: the idea of a “Jewish-Democratic” state is splintered here twice. First, *democracy* is made fragile when the state shoots its own citizens; and second, the *Jewish* privilege embedded in the state’s definition is fractured when the targets of shooting are Jewish. In fact at this moment, the contradiction of the combination of “Jewish” and “democratic” is exposed, since in a way it demonstrates that once one becomes “too” democratic (in full solidarity with Palestinians) she ceases to be a Jew from the point of view of the regime and its violence. Being shot at, therefore, can be seen both as the pinnacle of solidarity (exposing one’s life to the danger inflicted upon an other) and the clearest manifestation of the activist’s claim regarding the nature of the regime. Failure and success thus become enmeshed.

Focusing on failure is therefore not a claim against political action. It is rather an attempt to struggle with the limits of antioccupation action, as well as its potentiality. But could I not say the same about writing?

### **Writing and its Outcomes**

Many of us writing in Israel about the occupation have been trying to engage in the same practice of revealing the logic of the Israeli regime, questioning the rhetoric of democracy as a façade concealing—and by so doing,

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<sup>6</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> See Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art Of Failure* (Durham, N.C., 2011).

sustaining—a reality of militarized violence and radically discriminatory powers. Much of our work, I believe, rested on the assumption that there is a certain mask that must be removed; not entirely and accurately a lie, but a thin layer of democracy Israel must maintain in order to justify—from both within and without—its doings. Accordingly, many of us sought to expose that which is under this thin layer. We assumed that without it Israel would be vulnerable to both growing international critique and domestic unrest. Many Israelis, we believed, see themselves as peace-seeking liberals. If we could thus demonstrate the mechanisms and logic of governance that tie together the democratic rule prevailing in Tel Aviv with the military rule in Hebron, and if we could show that Israel keeps undercutting any viable political solution, this, we believed, would necessarily lead to the end of occupation. In a way, I think we have succeeded, at least to some degree, in establishing these claims. But it seems that our success in this goal of peeling off masks was also our greatest failure. Once the masks were removed, the space was not democratized—almost to the contrary: with this removal Israel has been undergoing deep antidemocratic processes.

Not so long ago the rhetoric of the two states solution—even if merely a rhetoric and never a guideline for official political action—rested on the assumption that a Jewish democratic state (if such a combination is indeed possible) requires a Jewish majority. However, recently, the reluctance to relinquish hold over the territories Israel occupied in 1967 as well as the legitimacy crisis in regard to 1948 (it is not accidental, I think, that Netanyahu suddenly demanded that the Palestinians “recognize” the “Jewish state”) have been translated into a gradual but persistent abandonment of the Israeli democratic project. More and more people in Israel, on both the right and the left, now say what was not long ago inconceivable: that Israel is not, or soon will not be, a democracy. More often than not, this is not asserted from a critical standpoint, but is rather proclaimed to argue that the state should annex the Palestinian territories without incorporating their residences into its citizenry. In other words, the justification mechanisms that sustained a democratic discourse by talking about “peace process” and a “two states solution” in order to present the state of occupation as temporary, , are replaced by a more direct claim stating

that the state of occupation should become the rule of Israeli sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> Alongside these processes, other nondemocratic enterprises become more and more widespread: from legislation against the Supreme Court to decreasing academic freedom and to political violence in the streets in time of war.

Is it possible that our writings have contributed to this process by pushing the logic of democracy to its limits? Can we see here an analogy (perhaps a reversed one) to the analysis of activism above?

## Writing #2

Beyond this mode of cooptation, wherein by revealing the undemocratic infrastructure of the regime we might have helped to weaken some of its democratic elements, there are other questions to be asked about the conditions of critical writing in Israel. First, akin to the notion of pinkwashing or greenwashing, the antioccupation Israeli research might function as a certain “academic washing.” In criticizing Israel, revealing its wrongdoing, showing its logic of control, we *demonstrate Israel’s tolerance and democratic nature*—an attribute that seems to be proven by the very fact we can write these critiques. Writing against Israel we function as a proof that Israel allows dissent even amidst an existential threat—an ongoing threat, of course, which is part of the very founding logic of Zionism (which means that there is always a crisis of existential nature and accordingly a critique always serves to prove the democratic nature of Israel). Like the Supreme Court, human rights organizations, or gay-friendly policies, Israeli needs us to prove it is, indeed, the only democracy in the Middle East. Yet like the Supreme Court or human rights organization (but interestingly enough unlike gay-friendly policies), this need is becoming more and more a matter of history. As part of the dedemocratization processes in Israel to which I pointed above, it seems it is less and less important for Israel to manifest such tolerance. Thus, in recent years there is increasing

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<sup>8</sup> One might argue that this blunt rejection of democratic principles is better than a reality in which a very partial adherence to these principles serves to undercut their universal implementation. One could maintain that this provides a clearer target for struggle. I used to think so myself but I am no longer sure. It seems to me such a judgment makes sense only if this openness facilitates a turning point. But what if it does not?

legislation against critique, growing censorship in the Israeli academy, and persecution of intellectual dissent by both students and management. Perhaps “academic washing” is no longer called for.

Second, the question of BDS is rearticulated as a series of paradoxical demands or practices when applied to Israeli academia. Some of us support the boycott, but how should such a support—a serious, genuine support—look from within Israel? What happens when we publish, with our names and Israeli affiliation, in international journals? Can the distinction between an individual and an academic boycott make sense here (especially within an economic model wherein universities receive governmental funding according to the number of publications)? Should we therefore encourage international journals not to publish our papers? Do we not violate the boycott regularly when we apply to international grants, when we provide scholarships based on such grants to our students? But can we survive in today’s neoliberal academia without doing so? Can someone belong to Israeli academia and coherently support the boycott then? One can contend that the boycott is not addressed to us, that it is not ours to support or object, that at best, we can make efforts not to undermine it. But don’t we undermine it on a regular basis, especially when we try to be politically and ethically engaged? We collaborate with Palestinian scholars, for example. But in that, don’t we put them in an impossible stance vis-à-vis the boycott? And what would the alternative be? Collaborating with the silencing of Palestinians in Israeli academy? We are back with the limbo with which I opened.

### **Political Grounds**

My main inquiry here concerns the ground from which critique is made. Perhaps all political grounds are unstable, but at times I feel that the one from which we have tried to make our critique is particularly so.

Four of us, all from Tel Aviv University, were sitting in a cab on the way to a seminar in the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. At some point the taxi driver left the main road and took a different, more rapid route—road 443. This road goes through the West Bank and is one of the roads on which Palestinians who are not citizens of Israel are not allowed to drive. We all started moving uncomfortably in our seats. Under any other circumstance we would probably have said something; refusing to go on that road; taking the opportunity to have a political

conversation with the driver. But our driver was a Palestinian from East Jerusalem. Who am I, I thought, to judge? And how would such a judgement look, anyway? Could I have asked my Palestinian driver, given the multilayered privileges at play, how it is possible that he takes a route that is part of the dispossession of and discrimination against his own people? None of us was able to say anything, to ask, to open up a conversation. Sometimes I think that part of what is at stake for left critique in Israel is to keep open more conversations—which are getting increasingly impossible. But could there have been a conversation had it been a Jewish driver? We could have stood our grounds, for sure, insisted he take a different road, and we would have probably felt very good about ourselves—very just—after preaching about rights, violation of international law, or political equality. But could a real conversation take place? Would there be any *movement* in each other's positions? If critique is not a mere deconstruction but always also a productive effort, must we not aim at such movements? Perhaps, however, it was rather in the silence with the Palestinian driver that some movement became possible. Perhaps what we learnt from it, what we were forced to consider, is the emptiness of some political gestures. The paradoxes embedded into our political stance became very clear at that moment.

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