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Student Movements Against the Imperial University: Toward a Genealogy of Disability Justice in U.S. Higher Education

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Ahmed (2017) reminds us that “it is through the effort to transform institutions that we generate knowledge about them” (p. 93). Although academic disciplines may work, as the name suggests, to discipline us—separating necessarily connected work, areas of knowledge, and people—university professors are not the sole producers of knowledge within universities. University students, staff and faculty workers, and broader community members generate knowledge through collective work aimed at institutional transformation. Heeding Ahmed’s words, this article explores knowledge produced by student activists working toward social transformation through social movement spaces on college campuses. I emphasize knowledge that contests and refuses the university and its collusion with imperialism, settler-colonialism, and white, able-bodied supremacy. I focus on collective student action to resist a sense of cynicism or despondence that is all too easy to slip into (i.e., both for students committed to fighting oppression, and for workers situated within academe) when we recognize that universities are not the “engines of social transformation” that dominant ideology would have us believe (Kelley, 2016, para. 14). Building off scholarship that analyzes higher education’s institutional support for the mutually-imbricated forces of settler-colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and white and able-bodied supremacy, this article takes as its focus the insurgent spaces—those non-sanctioned learning spaces where knowledge with transformative power is produced—created by student-organizers collectively challenging institutional complicity with these systems (Ahmed, 2012; Boggs & Mitchell, 2018; Grande, 2018; Howell, 2018; Stein, 2018). My argument is twofold: (a) Challenging the university’s enmeshment with empire—including military ties and material and ideological investments in U.S. and Israeli settler-colonialism—is part of the work of disability justice in U.S. higher education, and (b) all of us situated in higher education can learn from anti-imperialist and anti-racist student movements past and present in undertaking that work. As a current movement that has been especially effective in unveiling connections between intersecting forms of oppression and building coalitional struggle against university support for imperialism, ableism,

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heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, and settler-colonialism, the latter half of the article highlights the student movement for justice in Palestine as especially illustrative in this project.

Thinking about implications for *change*, this article focuses on specific moments of collective student resistance *against* U.S. imperialism, settler-colonialism, and racial capitalism in higher education and argues that they can be read as— or bear the signposts of— struggles for disability justice.² Building on the work of disability justice organizers and writers who argue that disability movements need to actively oppose these systems to realize disability justice, I suggest that these histories, which are largely positioned as beyond the purview of canonized/white disability studies and histories (Bell, 2006; Erevelles, 2011), matter in establishing an archive of disability justice movement work in higher education. As Puar (2017) and Mingus (2011) note, while disability is everywhere, historically it has largely been white disabled people who claim disability as a political identity in the United States.³ That white disabled people are still most likely to identify as politically disabled can be explained by a variety of reasons pertaining to the intersection of white and able-bodied supremacy (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011), yet disparity in identification with disability identity does not mean that disabled embodiment is not informing the resistant practices of those not interpellated as “people with disabilities” within a liberal disability rights framework.⁴ Though important recent scholarship examines disability and ableism as constituted in relation to settler-colonialism and imperialism (Deerinwater, 2019; Erevelles, 2011; Jaffee & John, 2018; Mingus, 2017; Puar, 2017), little disability studies work specifically analyzes the role universities play in maintaining the co-construction of ableist and settler-colonial violence, or the role of student movements in contesting university complicity in ways aligned with disability justice. This article thus explores the question: In approaching the university as a site of struggle for disability justice, what might we learn from past and present anti-imperialist student movements that have been rendered outside of or apart from canonized disability work/studies?

Building on the work of scholars like Jasbir Puar, Nirmalla Erevelles, and U.S.-based disabled organizers, I situate movements not often framed as disability issues, such as the present-day student movement for justice in Palestine and 20th century student organizing to end U.S. intervention in Vietnam and Cambodia, as movements for disability justice. As opposed to reformist demands for inclusion within universities, the student movement for justice in Palestine works to end universities’ economic, political, and military ties and normalization of apartheid and U.S. imperialism that have profound and uneven consequences for disabled people. Through research in the student protest archives at Syracuse University, I try to make links between moments/movements that have been seen as separate or distinct by tracing continuities in student organizing that resists inclusion, access washing (Milbern, 2019; Jaffee, 2020), settler-colonialism, and imperialism, as well as the structural forms of disability violence and disablement these systems propagate.

Methodology and Outline

Drawing on the framework of disability justice, I analyzed news coverage of student movements on U.S. campuses during the second half of the 20th century and into the present that oppose and unveil the relations between imperialism, racial capitalism, and Israeli settler-colonialism. I also analyzed political education resources created in the context of these movements. By political education resources, I refer to materials—newspapers, flyers, and pamphlets—created by organizers within movement spaces with the

² I use resistance throughout this article to refer, broadly, to collective and direct action aimed at challenging or curbing the structure of settler-capitalism, premised as it is on intersecting forces of imperialism, white supremacy, and cis-heteropatriarchy.

³ That said, the still nascent disability justice movement has arguably introduced an analytic framework that renders disability as a political identity more relevant to and likely to be claimed by queer and trans women of color and gender nonconforming people of color.

⁴ Althusser (1970) uses interpellation to describe a process by which ideology “recruits” or transforms individuals into subjects.

purpose of educating either fellow activists or a broader public about the issues with which they are concerned. I highlight the 1970 student protests against racism and U.S. imperialism at Syracuse University and the present-day movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel (BDS) across U.S. campuses. Syracuse University serves as a historical case study due to its prominent history of both disability inclusion—and the development of disability studies as a discipline—and campus militarism (News Staff, 2018).⁵ Whereas I analyzed archival materials from one university, the student protestors who created these materials were participating in a much larger national anti-imperialist and anti-racist movement in 1968–1970. I focused on the chosen student movements because the BDS movement is ongoing and a significant present-day iteration of organized anti-imperialist struggle by U.S. college students, whereas the opposition to U.S. intervention in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s represents the largest-scale anti-imperialist organizing on U.S. campuses in recent historical memory. As such, this historic anti-imperialist student organizing might have something to offer present-day student organizers committed to struggles that extend beyond the walls of the university (Hayes, 2016; Kelley, 2016). Or as Ferguson (2017) puts it, “there’s much we can learn from those earlier campaigns as we figure out how to clarify and launch our own” (p. 4). I examined archived educational pamphlets, leaflets, and newspapers created by striking students protesting U.S. intervention in Vietnam and Cambodia at Syracuse University in 1970. I collected the analyzed texts by sifting through all of the boxes in the University’s archives containing materials related to anti-imperialist and anti-racist student organizing during the second half of the 20th century. This included several boxes, each with hundreds of archived resources organized in folders. I scanned materials for references to disability, whether or not explicitly named as such. Drawing on feminist theorizations of alternative and overlooked archives, I analyzed archived pamphlets and educational newspapers created by students protesting U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia and white supremacy on U.S. campuses, including the eight Syracuse football players who protested medical discrimination during the 1969–1970 school year.⁶

While I found a wealth of information in the university archives, I also recognize the limitations of university archives, insofar as the institution has a vested interest in hiding the violence in which it participates. I further recognize the limitations of archived newspaper coverage, particularly as working within movements has allowed me to see firsthand how the labor of women and femmes—and particularly disabled, queer, and women and femmes of color—is erased or marginalized by media coverage that privileges the activism of cis-men. This can be understood in part by the fact that forms of organizing that are less accessible, like speaking at rallies and leading marches, are often framed as “real” activism (Piepzna-Samarsinha, 2018).

As defined by transnational feminist disability studies scholar Nirmala Erevelles (2016), I understand disability as a “materialist [category] constituted by the exploitative conditions of labor in transnational capitalism” (p. 111). Disability studies in education scholars understand that disability is not an individual medical problem or deficiency, but a social category made meaningful through material and ideological shifts across time and space. Throughout this article, I use *disablement* in reference to disability produced through systems of oppression, exploitation, and appropriation. I distinguish disablement in this way in an attempt to avoid reinscribing a hegemonic conception of *disability* as inherently negative/undesirable—an ableist conception that erases disability as a valuable social identity and epistemic

⁵ The first disability studies program in the world was established at Syracuse University in 1994. Syracuse University is also the campus where I participated in, learned from, and grew through direct involvement in collective student protest and direct action. My primary concern with Syracuse University in this article is thus also from my location—at the time of this writing—as a worker/student/activist connected to student organizing on Syracuse’s campus. My interest in compiling and analyzing archived student protest materials derives, in part, from a commitment to conducting research that might have something to offer current and future generations of student activists at Syracuse University.

⁶ McEachern and Slade’s (2018) interview with Alexis Pauline Gumbs offers an excellent discussion of Black feminism and overlooked archives.

location. As Kafer (2013) writes, “there is a difference between denying necessary health care, ongoing dangerous working conditions, or ignoring public health concerns (thereby causing illness and impairment) and recognizing illness and disability as part of what makes us human” (p. 4). A disability justice framework holds together the value of disability as an epistemic location/identity asserted by disabled peoples while contesting oppression and exploitation that unevenly produce disablement.

One of the goals of this article is to contest framings of disability as only a tragic outcome of settler-colonialism and white supremacy, a vestige of the ableist logic that frames disability as an endpoint or form of social death (Baker, 2002).⁷ Within the context of Palestine/Israel, for example, disability is often referenced as a tragic outcome of the occupation, erasing the ways disabled people are actively engaged in the BDS movement and in resistance to settler-colonialism, imperialism, and other forms of state violence linked to ableism, both in Palestine and in the United States. While naming and challenging tactical disablement as a tactic of power is part and parcel to disability justice, so too is understanding that life goes on after or with disability, and particular forms of knowledge and ways of being and resisting derive from disability as a valuable epistemic position. Jefferson’s (2003) analysis of the shared experiences of disabled Black World War II veterans upon returning home is illustrative. Jefferson described how disabled Black veterans, many of whom were already exhausted from the emotional stress and mental health impacts of fighting racism within the U.S. Army, returned home only to find themselves “barred from access to the special vocational compensation and rehabilitation allotted to them under Public Law 16 and the GI Bill of Rights” (p. 1119). Anti-Black and ableist ideologies, rooted in eugenic logics, led medical and Veterans Affairs’ personnel to dismiss the severity of disabilities among Black veterans, attributing their disabilities to “moral depravity, physical and mental weakness, and stereotypical behavior” associated with Blackness (p. 1104). Consequently,

the sense of outrage that they felt regarding the de-evaluative policies of the VA [Veterans Affairs] while trying to obtain their GI Bill entitlements, and the grim resolve to forge a new existence led some black veterans to get involved in organizing and community activism. (p. 1121)

Jefferson describes a group of disabled Black veterans in Cleveland who not only developed programs to support the rehabilitation of disabled Black veterans, but collectively organized “wheel-ins” and “body-pickets”—public demonstrations rooted in disabled subjectivity—to demand rehabilitation centers and housing for returning disabled veterans. Bailey and Mobley (2019) make a similar point in their critical intervention proposing a Black Feminist Disability framework. They write that “Black women are disallowed disability and their survival is depoliticized. Survival is a form of resistance and a source of celebration” (p. 21). Calling for a reassessment of history with the recognition that “disability [is] an equally powerful force shaping a person,” they point, for example, to the “painful epileptic seizures of Harriet Tubman that helped her stay ahead of bounty hunters,” and “the Mississippi appendectomy that spurred Fannie Lou Hamer’s activism” (p. 34–35). This scholarship serves as a reminder that disability has always been not just an outcome of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy but an embodied experience that shapes and informs practices of resistance to and refusal of intersecting systems of domination and exploitation.

I approach this writing from the doubled positionalities of being both in and out of the academy, straddling scholarly and activist lines. I am interested in both the possibilities and impossibilities of the work we do in our capacity as academics—both scholars and teachers— while maintaining that these roles should not be conflated with activist and organizing work within or beyond the academy.⁸ I want to think critically about how the academy absorbs difference and how we can do our work without becoming part of or feeding the machinations of the settler academy. This is not a claim to innocence but a commitment

⁷ For example, Erevelles (2011) recalls a close friend proclaiming, regarding her late husband’s disability, “I would have killed myself!” (p. 3).

⁸ Many thanks to my dear friend and comrade, Vani, for conversations clarifying these distinctions.

to thinking through how to reduce harm while working, teaching, and researching in—and collecting a paycheck from—a settler/imperial institution.

In what follows, I begin with a brief synopsis of scholarly work that lays bare the university's foundations in settler-colonialism and imperialism—analyses that undergird my subsequent arguments—and define terms like disability justice. Using archived political education materials to inform my analysis, I then read historical examples of anti-imperialist and anti-racist student protest at Syracuse University through the lens of disability justice. Without claiming these examples as paragons of disability justice, I suggest that they bear the signposts of disability justice work while rarely situated in a lineage of disability movement work. The subsequent section analyzes contemporary examples of student organizing for justice in Palestine on U.S. campuses, a struggle led by young Palestinians and their allies in the diaspora. I frame this work, which has gained much steam on college campuses in recent years, as both itself disability justice work and as a powerful and growing current iteration of anti-imperialist and anti-racist student organizing. Although this movement is distinct from earlier student struggles against racism and imperialism on U.S. campuses, I situate the fight for justice in Palestine currently playing out on U.S. college campuses as part of this longer lineage of struggle against U.S. empire, as many Palestine solidarity student organizers themselves position their work (e.g., Barrows-Friedman, 2014). The work of student BDS organizers who are making critical connections to the Black Lives Matter movement, migrant justice work, struggles against heteropatriarchy, and disability justice is, perhaps, one of the most prominent forms of present-day anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggle on U.S. college campuses.⁹

Defining Terms: The Settler Academy, Imperial University, and Disability Justice

Drawing on the work of transnational and Indigenous feminists, I situate the university through the analytics of the imperial university and settler academy because of its entrenchment in war, imperialism, and settler-colonialism. Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira (2014), describing the imperial university, write that “the academy’s role in supporting state policies is crucial, even—and especially—as a presumably liberal institution. Indeed, it is precisely the support of a liberal class that is always critical for the maintenance of ‘benevolent empire’” (p. 7). They argue that U.S. imperialism and racial statecraft rely on a state of permanent war supported by military, academic, and cultural pillars. The framework they introduce situates the foundations of the U.S. academy in the imperial nation-state as having ongoing implications for present-day imperialist interventions and racist domestic repression, surveillance, and containment within the U.S., including on its college campuses.

Through the framework of the settler academy, Indigenous feminist Sandy Grande (2018) situates the university “as an arm of the settler state—a site where the logics of elimination, capital accumulation, and dispossession are reconstituted” (p. 47).¹⁰ Grande explains that as an institutional site of dispossession, enslavement, exclusion, and forced assimilation, the university served the ideological and material interests of the settler state from its founding. Elaborating on the university as an institution of the settler state, la paperson (2017) contends that land accumulation and settlement were not just part of the early establishment of U.S. universities. Rather, “land is a motor in the financing of universities, enabling many of them to grow despite economic crises,” and despite ballooning tuition costs and the increasing precarity

⁹ As they explained in interviews with Barrows-Friedman (2014), in 2011, Students for Justice in Palestine organizers at the University of New Mexico built a mock wall to represent the United States–Mexico border wall and the border in the West Bank, which they used to initiate conversations about borders, militarization, Indigenous rights, and social justice on their campus.

¹⁰ Writing in the Palestine Discussion Papers of the General Union of Palestine Students, van der Hoeven Leonhard (1971) defines settler-colonialism as occurring in a situation where “a substantial number of foreigners (and we mean here: Europeans) came to settle in a given country, and where such settlement was effected with the help, overt or covert of the European political system and forces and where those settlers having established themselves, proceed to exercise authority over the whole country to which they came, and over the whole indigenous population that was or still is in occupation of that country” (p. 52).

of staff and faculty workers (p. 25). In analyzing United States-based students' opposition to military ties and the Israeli state, I am building off these understandings of U.S. higher education as intimately embedded in U.S. empire.

Building from these analyses, I am less concerned with formal educational spaces, such as classrooms with institutionally sanctioned curriculum,¹¹ and more with what we can learn from the political education work of student organizers. Specifically, I focus on non-institutionalized educational work that happens within student-created social movement spaces on U.S. campuses. The student movements I explore are rooted in an understanding that “universities are not walled off from the ‘real world’ but instead are corporate entities in their own right,” and as such they are exemplars of historical and present-day work undertaken by students to demystify the university’s oppressive and exploitative practices (Kelley, 2016, para. 12). Although the list is certainly far more expansive, some examples of these informal educational spaces include sit-ins, meetings, rallies, and teach-ins.¹² Through political education, student-organizers have long created spaces of resistance to the institution and the imbricated systems it props up (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Ferguson, 2017). By political education, I refer to forms of education with the express goal of liberation from intersecting systems of domination, exploitation, and appropriation through collective, direct action. Direct actions include student strikes, occupations of administrative buildings, boycotts, and campus protests, as opposed to dialogue or collaboration with higher education institutions, which Marxist, transnational, and Indigenous feminist analyses unveil as materially invested in and committed to seeing that oppressive and exploitative systems remain largely unscathed (Grande, 2018; Green, 2020).

Kelley (2016), offering an incisive critique to college student activists, challenges student demands that mistakenly see “universities as the leading edge in a socially revolutionary fight” (para. 14). Arguing that universities are not up for this transformative task, he writes:

Certainly universities can and will become more diverse and marginally more welcoming for Black students, but as institutions they will never be engines of social transformation. Such a task is ultimately the work of political education and activism. By definition it takes place outside the university. (Kelley, 2016, para. 14)

With this in mind, I highlight the political education and activism of college students who are engaging with broader political struggles, bringing to bear these analyses to reduce the harm advanced by the imperial university at the local level. The campaigns discussed here are undergirded not by a view of universities as themselves “engines of social transformation” (Kelley, 2016, para. 14) or the vanguard of revolutionary struggle. Instead, student-organizers advancing these movements are working where they are against multiple forms of institutional complicity. As a university worker reckoning with my own complicities, I am interested in learning from the collective struggle of students and workers positioned *in* the university who refuse to be *of* the university, or those working within its walls while actively working to tear them down (Grande, 2018; Harney & Moten, 2013; Kelley, 2016). I thus focus on struggles and demands that are less about creating a moderately less hostile/oppressive environment within the university’s walls, and more concerned with challenging the role the university plays within U.S. empire, broadly.

Queer and trans, femme, Black, Brown, and Indigenous disabled organizers, writers, educators, artists, and cultural workers have named and theorized disability justice as a framework and practice that recognizes that the struggle against ableism is also a struggle against capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, imperialism, and settler colonialism. Their work serves as a powerful reminder to those of us working within universities, and particularly within disability studies in education, that the important

¹¹ Leftist and left-leaning professors are under attack for work critical of existing systems of power within classroom spaces, too, but my interest here is in the informal educational spaces created through social movements.

¹² Although not my focus here, I would also include among this list digital spaces created through movement work, particularly insofar as digital spaces can be more accessible for poor, physically disabled, chronically ill activists, and activists who are caretakers. The pandemic has made especially clear the value and necessity of remote digital organizing skills that disabled organizers have long cultivated (Hayes, 2020).

and necessary work of making schools inclusive and accessible for disabled people—evinced in calls to create the university as a fully safe/inclusive space—is insufficient for realizing justice for the majority of the world’s disabled people. Within and beyond U.S. borders, many disabled people are subjugated and rendered disabled by systems of power that U.S. universities prop up. This is not a question of either/or (Hill Collins, 1990), but a reminder that working to gain access to or inclusion within universities is not an end goal. It is work to be undertaken in tandem with challenging the university’s investments in systems of domination that unevenly disable racialized, Indigenous, third world, and undocumented peoples. In this, we can learn much from student movements past and present that confront university entanglements with intersecting systems of domination that engender disability violence.

Traces of Disability Justice in Student Protest at Syracuse University

So long as disabling militarism, racism, and corporate ties have existed on U.S. college campuses, so has student resistance to these forces. As Syracuse University student protestors wrote in a political education leaflet in 1933, “our first duty is to oppose every move of the militarists on our campus” (Handbill Condemning R.O.T.C., 1933, p. 1). Discussing the history of student struggle on college campuses, Barrows-Friedman (2014) describes how college students in North America, Europe, and Latin America played a significant role in social movements opposing the Vietnam War, white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, ableism, and political persecution in the 1960s. College campuses became loci of struggle for young organizers, and organizing for the liberation of Palestine was an important part of this work (Barrows-Friedman, 2014). Student mobilization and resistance—particularly to the Vietnam War, and to U.S. imperialism, racism, and sexism, broadly—was so strong and widespread on college campuses in the late 1960s and early 70s that, sounding the alarm, a 1970 U.S. News and World Report article on “Campus Crackdown” reported: “new lines of defense have been worked out at [secret] strategy meetings” by college administrators as “a matter of survival” (p. 16). At the time of the article’s writing, students had organized strikes and boycotts at roughly 450 schools, forcing many—including Syracuse University—to close at points (Campus Crackdown, 1970). Administrators are cited emphasizing the need to maintain law and order on campuses, achieved through practices like increasing campus police presence, introducing state laws that enabled harsher punishment for student demonstrators, the use of long-range cameras to photograph protestors, procedures to “weed out undesirable students at entrance time,” and the introduction of student identification cards “to keep non-student disrupters off university campuses” (p. 18). Practices and policies implemented in response to this wave of student protest in the 1960s and 70s have been wielded against—in particular—Muslim, Black, Brown, and Indigenous students engaged in anti-imperialist, decolonial, and anti-racist student movements to this day (Ali, 2019; Barrows-Friedman, 2014).¹³

Despite fierce repression, student activists continue to resist U.S. imperialism in higher education. Without romanticizing or idealizing past struggles, I look to student movements at Syracuse University from the 1960s on, that can be read in a lineage of disability movement history, with relevance for contemporary disability justice struggles in higher education. These movements were not described with the language of *disability justice*—a term queer and disabled women of color had not yet coined (Berne, 2015; Mingus, 2011; Piepzna-Samarsinha, 2018)—and it is not my intent to re-write these movements as paragons of disability justice. Undoubtedly, the organizing was not always accessible. Whether because of the prohibitive cost,¹⁴ lack of political education or understanding around accessibility, or because it simply was not prioritized, accessibility was often not at the forefront, or was at best an afterthought. This is not an excuse to ignore access needs, but an acknowledgment of the settler-capitalist structure that normalizes inaccessibility, or promotes a very narrow conception of access (Milbern, 2019). Learning from disabled

¹³ Student organizers today are doing critical work to challenge the presence of repressive state violence on college campuses through organizations like the Cops Off Campus Coalition (copsoffcampuscoalition.com).

¹⁴ Institutionally recognized indices of accessibility like CART (communication access real-time translation) and interpretation services, ASL or otherwise, are economically unviable for many budding radical movements.

people's knowledge, organizers today are more likely to work toward creating collective and insurgent access within movements. As Mingus (2017) writes,

We talk about the importance of making our movements and communities accessible and yes, that is important. We have to make our work and spaces more accessible. There is no way around it. Access is concrete resistance to the immense isolation that disabled people face everyday. But I don't want us to just make things 'accessible,' I want us to build a political container in which that access can take place in and be grounded in. *Access for the sake of access is not necessarily liberatory, but access for the sake of connection, justice, community, love and liberation is* [emphasis added]. We can use access as a tool to transform the broader conditions we live in, to transform the conditions that created that inaccessibility in the first place. Access can be a tool to challenge ableism, ablebodied supremacy, independence and exclusion. I believe we can do access in liberatory ways that aren't just about inclusion, diversity and equality; but are rather, in service of justice, liberation and interdependence. (Liberatory Access & Interdependence, para. 1)

Mingus warns that access—which for the purposes of this article, we can think of as access to the imperial university—is not inherently liberatory. Disability histories in higher education have largely focused on access to universities, overlooking the ways in which universities themselves are invested in systems that undermine justice, liberation, and interdependence for disabled people. Although I am not claiming that the movements I discuss were exemplars of accessibility, I don't think they should be excluded from lineages of disability movement history, particularly as a way to re-think crip genealogies, or what constitutes disability history (Chen et al., 2017). The Disability Rights Movement (DRM) is often framed as inspired by earlier movements for women's rights and racial justice, a narration that continues to sunder, conceptually, disability politics from other issues. If disability justice movements are to be anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-settler-colonial in their understanding of disability, then these movement histories are relevant to the genealogy of disability justice. More recent critiques of the omission of anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial politics in the DRM and disability studies can have the effect of writing disabled activists and scholars as white, thereby aligning the DRM with the white/imperialist state. This has material effects, enabling the state to wield rhetoric of disability inclusion to serve the interests of racial capitalism and imperialism (Milbern, 2019; Jaffee, 2020). This narration also obscures the ways disabled people of color have engaged in these broader struggles as well as the anti-racist politics they bring to disability movement work. A more recent shift to explicitly addressing accessibility within social movements is a testament to disabled people's ongoing struggle for access. As one example, at Black Lives Matter rallies in my city this summer, the organizers made sure American Sign Language interpreters were present and made an announcement at the start of the event to ensure that there was space up front—within view of the interpreters and abiding by physical distancing guidelines—for Deaf folks. The genealogy assumed in these more recent critiques can also have the effect of framing anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial movements as wholly outside of or apart from the politics of disability. In what follows, I look at archived materials from separate but connected historic student protests at Syracuse University (SU) that include: (a) a struggle against systemic disablement via U.S. imperialism, (b) re-signifying disability in the context of draft-resistance in opposition to U.S. imperialist intervention, and (c) a struggle against one of U.S. empire's many domestic manifestations— interwoven systems of ableism and white supremacy that resulted in Black students being denied access to healthcare.

Protesting U.S. Empire's Debilitating Chemical Use in Vietnam

Often framed as an "antiwar" or pacifist movement, Hasbrouck (2012/2016) notes that many draft resisters "both in the USA and other settler-colonial countries in particular, have framed their motives for draft resistance in terms of opposition to racism and imperialism and/or an unwillingness to participate personally in racist and imperialist wars, occupations, and invasions" (p. 9). Draft resistance is not just about vague opposition to war or consciousness-raising about racism but using collective power to subvert

the state's racist foundations and imperialist interventions. As a leaflet from the 1970 student strike at SU explained:

an imperialist will is common to the military, financial, industrial, and governmental decision-makers who now determine domestic and foreign policy. That is, they see the economic superiority and national prestige of the United States as the primary factors to be considered in such matters as U.S. presence in Asia and the conduct of war. [...] A psychology of racism is also common to the military, financial, industrial and governmental bureaucratic institutions which maintain the war. Apparently, it is 'easy' to wage war against Asians, be they Korean, Laotian, or Vietnamese. [...] *In a very direct sense, this racism manifests as political repression against members of the Black community in the United States: Black Panthers and other insurgent Blacks in particular* [emphasis added]. (Syracuse Radical Mobilization Committee, 1970)

Although there is always internal ideological struggle within movements and organizers are not monolithic in their beliefs, much of what I came across in the archives at Syracuse University—like the above pamphlet—specifically condemned U.S. imperialism and racist violence domestically and internationally, as opposed to war, broadly.

Recruiters for corporations that supplied the U.S. military were a common target of students protesting U.S. imperialism, racism, and war. Major protests targeted recruiters from Dow Chemical at Harvard University, the University of Wisconsin (UW) at Madison, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1967 (Eichsteadt, 2007; Kennedy, 1991; Springer, 1967). In 1965, Dow Chemical won a contract that made it the U.S. military's sole supplier of the chemical napalm, used to physically disable and psychologically terrorize Vietnamese en masse during the Vietnam War.¹⁵ In February 1968, over 200 people protested when recruiters from Dow Chemical came to Syracuse University to talk to students. Students shut down the Syracuse University Placement Center with a lie-in (Stamm, 1968b).¹⁶ The protest led to an administrative building sit-in opposing campus recruitment by Dow Chemical (Stamm, 1968a). That spring, SU students protested the continued campus presence of recruiters from war-allied industries including Dow Chemical, General Electric, Newport News Shipbuilding, Boeing Aircraft Corp., North American Aviation Co., and Caterpillar Tractor—corporations they condemned for making bombs, missiles, warships, and more (People for Freedom and Peace & Students for Democratic Society, 1968). Caterpillar Tractor is described in educational literature created by student protestors as a “war profiteer, which makes engines for armed forces use, and whose construction equipment builds the wast [sic] American bases in Vietnam” (Students for Democratic Society, 1968, p. 2). Notably, both Boeing and Caterpillar Inc. continue to profit from U.S. imperialism and Israeli settler-colonialism, which has made them targets of the Palestinian-led BDS movement today (Chambers, 2016).

Literature distributed by Students for a Democratic Society (1968) noted, “We have discovered that Dow Chemical is an annual financial supporter of Syracuse University! Hughes Aircraft, Chase Manhattan, Ford, G.E., and Bristol Labs all regularly contribute funds to this university” (para. 2). Preceding the vastly expanded corporate and military funding of today, they noted that

¹⁵ Though many Americans particularly associate napalm with the Vietnam War, during which it was used extensively and in particular for its psychologically debilitating effects, napalm was also used by U.S. forces during WWII and the Korean War. During the Korean War, the U.S. dropped 250,000 pounds of Napalm on Korea daily (Napalm in War, n.d.). Despite its use against civilians being banned by a 1980 UN Convention, the U.S. military has used napalm in the Iraq War (Buncombe, 2003). Israel also used napalm against Palestinians in the 1967 War and in Lebanon in the 1980s (Napalm in War).

¹⁶ Educational literature about the Placement Center and the war-complicit corporations that recruit there, distributed by protestors, notes how few students actually interviewed there and that those who did were predominantly men, leading organizers to conclude, “we must question [administration's] ‘primary concern for the student.’ In fact, our investigations have shown that the university is intimately connected with major corporations, foundations, and government agencies” (Students for a Democratic Society, 1968, p. 3).

in addition to the annual contributions, large corporations have contributed to the multi-million-dollar Syracuse plan for expansion. For the fiscal year 1966-67, [...] the Defense Department offered over 2.5 million dollars in funds for research, and the State Department, NASA, and the Atomic Energy Commission 1.5 million dollars for research. There is an additional 5.5 million dollars given by the Defense Department to SU's 'front' organization— the SU Research Corporation. (para. 2)

Largely hidden away in university archives today, the political literature distributed by student protestors—at their peak organizationally in 1968–1970—is a testament to the longstanding role of the university in backing U.S. imperialist endeavors through military and corporate connections, and to the equally long history of student resistance to university complicity.

Student resistance was met with fierce repression. In 1971, roughly 30 students sat in at the Army and Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) Offices of the Men's Gymnasium. SU subsequently issued a temporary restraining order and took four SU Law students to court for their protest, seeking a permanent injunction that would have prohibited SU students from occupying campus buildings and even protesting on the quad (State of New York Supreme Court, 1971). The judge granted a motion that lifted the temporary injunction, and the University withdrew its petition to the State Supreme Court pursuing a permanent injunction (ROTC Injunction Withdrawn by SU, 1971). In a Daily Orange interview, student defendant, Ira Kurzban, asserted that “by standing up for our rights in court yesterday, we demonstrated that we will not be intimidated by the University. The students will end University complicity with the military” (ROTC Injunction Withdrawn by SU, 1971, p. 2). By fighting the injunction in 1971, anti-imperialist students-protestors protected rights that continue to impact student protestors, for whom occupation of campus space remains an important tactic (Howard, 2015; Stranglin, 2020). While these efforts were not entirely effective in their goals (SU has the longest, continuously running ROTC program in the country), the severe repression of student dissent demonstrates that student resistance poses a very real threat, one recognized by those at the helm of power in the university, to corporate and military ties that sustain the imperial university.

Noting that disability is one of the major outcomes of war, disabled writer and activist Eli Clare (2015/2009) argues that we need an anti-imperialist politic that “thinks hard about disability” and refuses to turn “disability into a symbol of either patriotism or tragedy” (p. xxiv). This requires asking, as Clare does: “Who gets killed, and who becomes disabled? Who profits from that killing and disabling? Whose bodies are used as weapons, and whose are treated as expendable?” (p. xxiv). Though the U.S. disability rights movement was still nascent at the time these students were organizing, the materials explored here suggest that they were thinking hard about the politics of who becomes disabled and who profits from disabling. The political education literature they created condemned the uneven disablement of populations under white supremacy and imperialism and unveiled university investments in the U.S. empire's disabling war economy. These examples demonstrate student opposition to disablement consequent of U.S. imperialism, the next section highlights how student organizers strategically mobilized disability identity to challenge U.S. racism and imperialism.

Mobilizing Disability Identity to Resist U.S. Imperialist War

During the spring semester of 1970, SU students, with support from many faculty and staff, went on strike to condemn the United States's racist and imperialist practices, as well as SU's complicity in these systems. A major impetus for the strike was Nixon's April 30th speech announcing the invasion of Cambodia (The Strike, 1970).¹⁷ As delineated by the Strike Committee, their demands were:

1. An end to U.S. intervention in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and the unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Southeast Asia.

¹⁷ When Nixon visited Syracuse two years prior—during his first presidential campaign in October 1968—more than a thousand SU students protested (Carpenter, 2012).

2. An immediate end to the repression of the Black Panther Party, including the freedom of Bobby Seale.
3. “An immediate end to university complicity with the military-industrial complex” (Strike Committee, 1970a, p. 1). This demand was later clarified to include, specifically, the demand to end defense and counterinsurgency research at SU and ROTC contracts (Strike Committee, 1970b).

As a tactic in the anti-imperialist movement, the Committee on Draft Resistance at SU distributed literature on how draft registrants could request medical interviews to appeal having qualified during pre-induction physical exams. The purpose was to slow recruitment by being categorized with a disqualifying medical condition (Procedure for Medical Interview, 1970). As expressly stated in one Committee for Draft Resistance leaflet, “the purpose of all these suggestions is to slow down the processing within the selective service offices by overloading them with extra paperwork” (Committee for Draft Resistance, 1970, para. 8). Although discussions of war and disability often frame disability as a tragic outcome of war, akin to social death, within this context, claiming disability took on social meaning as simultaneously a claim of disability identity and a form of collective action against U.S. imperialism. Anti-imperialist student protestors strategically mobilized disability intending to slow the draft and impede disabling U.S. incursions in Southeast Asia. The Draft Resistance Committee expressed as one of their four programs “[encouraging] all people to exercise their full legal rights in an attempt to halt the flow of manpower that the selective service sends to the armed forces” (Committee for Draft Resistance, 1970, p. 1). The handouts offered thorough instructions for making medical appeals for draft disqualification through the Army, including detailed instructions on how to appeal a passed physical exam through the U.S. Army Recruiting surgeon, followed by the Chief of Physical Standards Division, and with final recourse to the Surgeon General (Procedure for Medical Appeal Through Army Channels, 1970). One leaflet explained, for example, that after a registrant has been classified as available for military service or available for noncombatant military service (conscientious objectors):

The registrant should request an interview with the board’s medical advisor citing the Medical Interview Regulations, as found below. [...] Enclosed within the body of the letter requesting a medical interview, the registrant should also cite the appropriate section(s) from the Army Medical Standards which describe his condition (Procedure for Medical Interview, 1970, para. 2–3).

If a medical interview is rejected, registrants are advised to “write to the local board and request that they send all pertinent medical information [...] to the Army Physical Examination Center you have been ordered to report to” (Procedure for Medical Appeal Through Army Channels, 1970, What to do if ordered to report for a pre-induction physical heading, para. 2). Distributed leaflets include information on relevant Army medical standards for determining draft qualification. Using existing parameters, student-protestors with various disabilities claimed disability as a tactic to “slow down the draft machinery” and oppose U.S. imperialism (Committee for Draft Resistance, 1970, para. 1).

Given that SU is a private, predominantly white institution, it is worth countering revisionist histories of draft resistance broadly as predominantly a movement of privileged white college students. As Hasbrouck (2012/2016) notes, “as an organized movement, draft resistance in the USA has long been multi-racial and often explicitly anti-racist” (p. 8). That a 1974 Rand Report, prepared for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, reevaluates the physical standards for the military in order to reduce the number of disqualifications suggests that this tactic had some efficacy (Chu & Norrblom, 1974). These claims of disability—as part of a collective organizing campaign with the express purpose of slowing the draft to oppose U.S. intervention—should be distinguished from the individual claims of members of the white bourgeoisie for the sake of evading military service.¹⁸ While social location has certainly allowed people in positions of power to evade U.S. military service on an individual basis, the examples above suggest that

¹⁸ Donald Trump’s diagnosis of bone spurs, for which he received a medical exemption from the Vietnam War in 1968, is one notable example (Eder, 2018).

student organizers with explicitly anti-imperialist principles strategically and collectively mobilized disability identity to oppose U.S. empire. They invoked disability to reduce U.S. military strength and logistically and ideologically challenge U.S. military intervention.

In a flyer condemning SU's support for ROTC on campus, the May 4th Coalition wrote,

We will assert our inalienable right of self-determination. We will no longer sit idly by while the institution trains the 'personnel' that run the Amerikan¹⁹ military machine. We are serving notice that Syracuse is OUR university. We are serving notice that ROTC has no place among us" (May 4th Coalition, 1970, para. 3).

ROTC, as a highly visible site of militarism and imperialism on campus, had been a target of protest for years. In 1964, students demonstrated at the annual Chancellor's Review of ROTC cadets on the quad.²⁰ Despite years of dissent, in 2017, SU celebrated its 100th Annual Chancellor's Review for ROTC (News Staff, 2017). Yet the university's exaltation of its century-old ROTC program belies the longstanding and fiercely repressed student-led political opposition to this program and the conspicuous alignment with U.S. empire it represents. At the same time as students at SU and across the country protested U.S. imperialism's disabling effects in Southeast Asia—normalized by white supremacist ideology domestically and recognized as a manifestation of white supremacist violence globally—Black students at SU were organizing against the health repercussions of white and able-bodied supremacy domestically.

The Syracuse 8

During the 1969–1970 school year—the same year as the student strike in protest of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, political persecution of the Black Panther Party, and SU's military complicity—nine Black student-athletes at Syracuse sacrificed professional football careers to protest racism on the football team. In a 2015 article about the Syracuse 8, as they came to be known (despite their being nine Black student protestors), former protestor Alif Muhammad reflects: "Look at the four demands we were asking for. The first one was: better medical treatment for all athletes — not just the black players, all college athletes" (The Players' Tribune, 2015, para. 2). A Daily Orange article from September 15, 1970, lists the first complaint of the protesting Black athletes as: "(1) Medical malpractice by the football team physician, particularly in the case of black athletes" (Leogrande & Hemingway, 1970, p. 6). As Syracuse 8 member, Greg Allen, recalled, the team's doctor was hesitant to touch Black bodies, to the extent that,

there were two sets of latex gloves. And anything that could be avoided, was avoided. You're at a major university, and at the time one of the best football programs in the country, and you don't think enough of your players to get them expert medical care. (Given & Springer, 2017, para. 3)

Universities' reliance on the unpaid labor of young Black students in athletic programs where injuries are rampant signifies the racial and disabling logic undergirding the university's revenue streams (e.g., Hawkins, 1995, 2010). Though not generally recognized within histories of disability movement work in higher education, collective resistance like the protest of Black student athletes at SU objecting to racist medical treatment is part of an ongoing struggle for disability justice playing out on U.S. campuses.

The historic struggle of Black students for healthcare is especially noteworthy in the midst of a global pandemic that has laid bare the uneven rates of disability and death Black and Indigenous peoples experience consequent of white supremacy within a privatized healthcare system. And yet, the lived experience of disablement as a consequence of white supremacy can stoke resistance to multifarious forms

¹⁹ The satirical misspelling 'Amerikan' was commonly used by leftists in the 1960s and 70s to denote the United States—meant either as a reference to the KKK or, as the German spelling, an allusion to Nazism.

²⁰ During the demonstration, then Chancellor William Tolley hit demonstrator James Overgaard, a former SU student who was at the time working in the university's library, with his walking cane (Chancellor Tolley 'Canes' Picketer, 1964).

of disability injustice. The resistance of Black student athletes at SU who recognized and refused to submit to their conditions evokes the words of Audre Lorde, who reminds us of the knowledge gained through disabled embodiment. Theorizing breast cancer as a Black lesbian feminist experience, Lorde (1980/1997) wrote that “breast cancer, with its mortal awareness and the amputation which it entails, can still be a gateway, however cruelly won, into the tapping and expansion of my own power and knowing [emphasis added].” (p. 54). Lorde reframes disabled embodiment—produced through conditions of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy—as a source of power within a nexus of oppressions. By withholding their unpaid labor, Black student athletes laid bare the racist and inadequate provision of healthcare to which they were subject. The ongoing and widespread exploitation of Black students by university athletic programs today makes Black Syracuse students’ refusal to play, and thereby to provide free labor to the university, especially significant (Hawkins, 1995, 2010).

Disability Justice and/in Anti-Imperialist Student Movements

Though there are surely others, the aforementioned movements suggest five distinct but connected ways that disability justice can be theorized as linked with student movements against settler-colonialism, white supremacy, and imperialism. First, disabled students, who may or may not have identified as such, were involved in these movements (including for example, students using medical claims to slow the draft). If disability movement history remains primarily concerned with folks who identify as disabled and claim disability pride, these histories will remain overwhelmingly white. As the disability justice movement and other QTBIPOC disabled activists, writers, and cultural workers have shed light on the heterogeneity of disability as a social category, 20th century disability histories that only recognize disabled-identifying subjects will also replicate a narrow focus on visible disabilities that circumscribes who “counts” as disabled.²¹ Second, challenging structural disablement—which unevenly impacts racialized, Indigenous, and occupied peoples—is part and parcel of disability justice work. Protests against DOW Chemical at SU and across U.S. campuses during the Vietnam War exemplify this. Third, disability justice can be theorized within student movements insofar as, through their efforts, student-organizers were fighting for and working to create more accessible learning spaces. This is evidenced by the creative ways student activists who engaged in the 1970 strike conveyed knowledge, including through theater and poetry readings. Although not framed through contemporary language of universal design, one reason access might be more prioritized in student movements is because student-organizers have a vested interest in encouraging the broadest participation and engagement possible. By engaging in a movement, student organizers have some shared purpose and are working to achieve concrete goals (despite often clashing ideas about how they might best be achieved). Those goals are most likely to be achieved when materials, resources, activities, and actions are accessible to the broadest possible audience. This differs from an approach to accessibility as a legal or institutional mandate, as is the case in many university classrooms. The inherent limits of an individualized notion of access rooted in legal compliance are evidenced by ongoing struggles for access among disabled college students.²²

²¹ Mia Mingus, Liat Ben-Moshe, Keah Brown, Jen Deerinwater, and Jasbir Puar, among many others, have all written on the over-representation of white people among those claiming disability identity. As Puar (2017) notes, with reference to Mingus’s arguments, “in working poor and working-class communities of color, disabilities and debilities are not non-normative, even if the capacitizing use of the category disabled may be tenuous and the reign of ableism is a constitutive facet. The goal of these activist efforts does not remain at the restitution of the disabled subject— soliciting tolerance, acceptance, and empowerment— but rather directs attention to the debilitating conditions of the medical-industrial complex itself” (p. 16). Disability pride and struggle against debilitating conditions of U.S. empire are by no means mutually exclusive, but if disability histories are preoccupied with pride and identification with disability, much disability justice work will remain at the margins or excluded entirely from these histories.

²² In 2001 at Syracuse University, disabled students formed the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee to advocate for a more expansive understanding of disability and accessibility and confront the limitations of the institution’s preoccupation with legal compliance.

Tactical disablement, or a practice of intentionally disabling protestors to quell collective organizing and resistance, is a fourth way that disability in/justice can be named and theorized within student movements. As one example, in the midst of the Syracuse 8 protests in 1970, the Syracuse Police Department pepper sprayed hundreds of Black students and their supporters on Marshall Street—a main campus road—where they were protesting university racism (Bryan, 1970). A more contemporary example is the swift repression of BDS organizers on U.S. campuses through psychological intimidation, surveillance, and the criminalization of student protest. Such practices impact mental health and exemplify how disablement is deployed to subdue student resistance to U.S. empire and Israeli settler-colonialism (Barrows-Friedman, 2014). Fifth, the practice of pathologizing protestors to delegitimize their claims—a tactic disproportionately used against Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (e.g., Metz, 2009)—is rooted in and perpetuates ableism.²³ For example, during a speech to the Onondaga Bar Association in February 1969, then SU Chancellor Tolley accused “unwashed” student-activists of having a “pathological” hatred of America, specifically complaining about Black student-activists (Eichstadt, 2007; Tolley, 1969). This list is far from comprehensive, but these are five of many possible ways to name, conceptualize, and theorize how anti-racist and anti-imperialist student protests are enmeshed with the struggle for disability justice.

On U.S. campuses today, anti-imperialist and anti-racist student organizing persists through the student movement for justice in Palestine. The demand for U.S. universities to boycott and divest from Israeli apartheid is a major contemporary site of struggle for disability justice in higher education because it is a demand to end institutional support for a colonial occupation that has profound impacts on Palestinians’ health and wellbeing (e.g., The Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists, 2018). In a statement urging colleagues to boycott the 2019 conference of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy if held in Israel, the Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists wrote:

Recognizing the impact of violence on individual health and collective well-being, we feel an additional responsibility to communicate our voices and to highlight the moral issue of our responsibility, as mental health workers, to study the context in which we treat our patients. We understand very well the impact on mental health of oppression, political struggle, economic constraints, and war. (Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists, 2018, para. 14)

The Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists endorsed the cultural boycott of Israel as a way to promote mental health justice for Palestinians, specifically naming the impact of occupation and economic divestment as mental health issues in Palestine. Within the context of U.S. higher education, support for academic boycott and divestment from Israel is a way to work toward disability justice while being *in* but not *of* the university (Grande, 2018; Harney & Moten, 2013). Whereas previous sections focus on archived materials from anti-racist and anti-imperialist student protest at Syracuse University in the 1960s and 70s, the subsequent section broadens in scope to analyze still unfolding (and not yet archived) student organizing against Israeli settler-colonialism and racism—and the U.S. empire’s investments in both—across U.S. campuses. I briefly summarize United States-based student organizing in response to the Palestinian-led call for BDS. Building on the work of United States-based disability justice organizers who insist that Palestine is a disability issue, I situate this organizing within the framework of disability justice (Sins Invalid, 2014).

Building Upon Past Struggles: Palestine Solidarity Work on U.S. Campuses

²³ The FBI’s covert operation to break into the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist after he released the Pentagon Papers—in an attempt to discredit Ellsberg by publicizing his medical files—attests to the dangers of attempting to build resistance movements without rejecting ableist logics (Krogh, 2007).

We were talking with [Israeli Parliament (Knesset) member] Dr. Jamal Zahalkha, who said that Benjamin Netanyahu came to the Knesset and said that the third most strategic threat to the state of Israel, behind a nuclear weapon and terrorism, is U.S. student activism. [...] This is a very effective thing. (Taher Herzallah, a Students for Justice in Palestine [SJP] organizer, in Barrows-Friedman, 2014, p. 126)

Although—or perhaps because—U.S. universities are central institutions bolstering U.S. state support for Israeli apartheid, settler-colonialism, and occupation, U.S. campuses have also been major hubs of BDS organizing within the United States. When sifting through the archives of student protests against racism and the Vietnam War from 1968–1970, there was marked continuity in tactics and rhetoric of repression from state institutions (e.g., universities and police) in response to past and present-day anti-imperialist student organizing. Some of these tactics included: using police intimidation and surveillance, trivializing student activists as rowdy/whiny youth (Ferguson, 2017), using the language of “outside agitators” to suggest students are not genuinely concerned with the issues being raised (and deny their agency), taking legal action and threatening suspension/expulsion against student organizers, and attempting to re-route attention-garnering direct action to institutionally sanctioned settings via closed-door meetings, student associations, public forums, listening sessions, and institutionally-appointed working groups. By the same token, there is continuity in student-activists’ practices of resistance. For example, disorientation guides—created by and for students in the 1960s to delineate the complicity of their universities in corporate theft, white supremacy, and the military-industrial complex—have also been a useful tactic for United States-based college students engaged in the struggle for justice in Palestine (Eichsteadt, 2007; NYU Disorientation Guide, 2017; Street, 1969).

Campaigns to boycott and divest from South Africa during apartheid, in which students played a large role, provided precedent and inspiration for the BDS movement, which has similarly garnered major support on college campuses across the United States. For example, the New York University (NYU) Student Government Assembly voted to pass a divestment resolution in 2018 (Pilgreen, 2018). Providing historical precedent for the decision, the Student Government Assembly divestment resolution recounted that:

On April 11, 1985 the New York University Student Senators Council unanimously voted for and called upon the University to divest from all South African businesses during the Apartheid era where South Africa was systematically oppressing and disenfranchising its black citizens. (Resolution on the Human Rights of Palestinians, 2018, p. 2).²⁴

When Wayne State University became the first university in the United States to pass a resolution calling for divestment from companies doing business in Israel in 2003, the resolution stated both that South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu urged divestment from Israel due to its apartheid policies and that “Israel was a long-time, close ally of White Apartheid South Africa” (WSU Student Council Votes for Divestiture, 2003, para. 6). As noted by Hampshire College’s SJP, Hampshire College carried on its legacy as the first U.S. university to divest from apartheid South Africa by becoming the first college to successfully implement its resolution to divest from Israel in 2009 after an intensive two-year organizing campaign by SJP (Student for Justice in Palestine- Hampshire College, 2009).

The continuity in the repressive practices of university administrations and resistant practices of students is perhaps one of the reasons universities hide these histories away in archives. The erasure of lineages of anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-ableist student struggle has the effect of siloing and delegitimizing present-day struggles against U.S. empire and Israeli settler-colonialism and further isolating

²⁴ The NYU Resolution also specifically condemns the effects of Israeli state violence on disabled people, noting that “on July 18, 2006, an Israeli warplane attacked the home of Lebanese civilians in a village east of Tyre. The strike killed an 80-year old woman, a disabled 20-year old man, and a seven-year-old Brazilian-Lebanese dual national” (p. 4).

students engaged in these movements by framing them as anomalous dissidents disconnected from their historical predecessors. Hackneyed rhetoric of student protestors as unreasonable, unruly, and aberrant are regurgitated by university administrators and detractors who view such activities as unwelcome disruptions of everyday educational practices (Ferguson, 2017). By siphoning off and obscuring the links between generations of student protest, universities effectively work to sever these links and disallow connections between student organizers across time and space that strengthen movements. Highlighting the connections between past and present struggles against racial capitalism, settler-colonialism, disability injustice, and U.S. imperialism on college campuses is part of the work scholars and activists undertake to allow and foster those connections.

The BDS Movement and/as Disability Justice

The BDS movement was launched by 170 Palestinian unions, political parties, refugee networks, women's organizations, professional associations, popular resistance committees and civil society bodies in 2005 (BDS Movement, n.d.a.). The demands of the movement, as explained by the Palestinian BDS National Committee are threefold:

1. End the occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantle the apartheid wall.
2. Recognize the right of Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality.
3. Recognize and support the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, as stipulated in UN Resolution 194 (BDS Movement, n.d.a).

The academic boycott is a component of the BDS movement and recognizes the role of universities, especially but not exclusively Israeli universities, as “major, willing and persistent accomplices in Israel’s regime of occupation, settler-colonialism and apartheid” (BDS Movement, n.d.b , para. 1). Paralleling the military-academic-industrial ties in the U.S. and underscoring the role of universities under settler-capitalism as articulated by Marxist, Indigenous, and transnational feminist theorists, the Palestinian BDS National Committee specifically notes that “Israeli universities have played a key role in planning, implementing and justifying Israel’s occupation and apartheid policies, while maintaining a uniquely close relationship with the Israeli military” (BDS Movement, n.d.c, para. 1). Because the United States provides immense economic, political, and military support for Israeli settler-colonialism and given the close ties between U.S. universities and its military, U.S. higher education has been a primary locus of both resistance and repression for the BDS movement in the United States.

Palestinian theorists, writers, and activists have helped situate Israel as a settler-colonial state and U.S. support for Israel as integral to the U.S. imperial project. The work of Palestinian scholars also articulates the urgency of and advances the BDS movement within higher education (Olwan, 2015). Issued by Palestinian scholars and academics in 2004 and endorsed by numerous Palestinian unions and civil society organizations, the call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel explains that:

Since Israeli academic institutions (mostly state controlled) and the vast majority of Israeli intellectuals and academics have either contributed directly to maintaining, defending or otherwise justifying the above forms of oppression, or have been complicit in them through their silence, [...] We, Palestinian academics and intellectuals, call upon our colleagues in the international community to comprehensively and consistently boycott all Israeli academic and cultural institutions as a contribution to the struggle to end Israel's occupation, colonization and system of apartheid. (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, 2004, para. 2–7).

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel has since released additional guidelines for the international community clarifying appropriate boycott targets and activities. These include events that whitewash Israel’s apartheid regime or projects that promote the normalization of Israel by presenting a false parity between oppressor and oppressed (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, 2014).

Helping us understand the BDS movement as deeply entwined with disability justice, Puar (2017) contends that “Black Lives Matter and the struggle to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine are not only movements ‘allied’ with disability rights, nor are they only distinct disability justice issues” (p. xxiv). Similarly, I situate these “fierce organizing practices *as a disability justice movement*” insofar as they are building power to challenge precarious conditions that “debilitate many populations” (p. xxiv).²⁵ This move is significant because it challenges the false genealogy that white disabled people in the United States and United Kingdom are at the forefront of challenging disability oppression, with disabled Black, Indigenous, and other people of color showing up only recently to critique the whiteness and Eurocentrism of the movement. As Puar notes, these movements are “anchored, in fact, in the lived experiences of debilitation, implicitly contesting the right to maim and imagining multiple futures where bodily capacities and debilities are embraced rather than weaponized” (p. xxiv). Her insistence that BDS and Black Lives Matter are movements for disability justice acknowledges the work that disabled Black and Palestinian people are *and have long been* doing to fight for disability justice by challenging structures and institutions that produce higher rates of disability among racialized and Indigenous peoples (e.g., the Black Panther’s free healthcare clinics; Nelson, 2013), rejecting the pathologization of racialized and Indigenous peoples (Abdelhadi, 2013; Metz, 2009), and fighting restricted access to healthcare and other social, political, and economic supports that render bodily differences disabling (Deerinwater, 2019; Schweik, 2011).²⁶ Positioning the BDS movement within the framework of disability justice recognizes disabled Palestinians engaged in the movement—expanded on below—and recognizes the movement as, among other things, a fight against the disabling conditions of settler-colonialism.

On December 15, 2017, the Israeli state murdered Palestinian Ibrahim Abu Thuraya, one of four demonstrators killed by the Israeli forces that day while protesting Donald Trump’s decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem (Ibrahim Abu Thuraya, 2017). Abu Thuraya lost both legs and a kidney from Israeli airstrikes in 2008 during Operation Cast Lead, during which Israel killed more than 1,400 Palestinians in three weeks. Prior to his disablement, Abu Thuraya was a fisherman, an industry decimated by strict Israeli fishing zone restrictions enforced by Israel Defense Forces’ ships off Gaza’s coast (Ibrahim Abu Thuraya, 2017). Testament to how becoming disabled can be impetus for new forms of engagement in collective resistance, one journalist noted that “since Ibrahim Abu Thuraya lost his legs in an Israeli attack a decade ago, he and his wheelchair have been a regular feature at protests along Gaza’s border with Israel” (Ibrahim Abu Thuraya, 2017, para. 1). Hours prior to his death, Abu Thuraya had climbed an electricity pole to raise a Palestinian flag. Whereas the media often only covers the production of disability, rendering invisible the lives of disabled people, Abu Thuraya is quoted as saying, with regard to his disablement, “life should go on” (Ibrahim Abu Thuraya, 2017, para. 17).²⁷ That he committed his life to struggling for Palestinian liberation—ultimately being killed while protesting the establishment of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem—attests to the necessity of opposing Israeli settler-colonialism and U.S. imperialism for realizing disability justice in Palestine. Within this context, self-determination for disabled Palestinians cannot be divorced from Palestinian national self-determination.

As disabled, queer, and trans anti-poverty activist Withers (2014) notes in their blog, responding to Israel’s incursion on Gaza in 2014 and articulating Palestine as a disability justice issue, “the process of

²⁵ The denial of vaccines to occupied Palestinians at the same time as Israel has garnered international praise for its vaccine rollout is a gross display of the disabling conditions of Israeli settler-colonialism (Butu, 2021).

²⁶ This is not to say that either the BDS or BLM movements are beyond critique. The Harriett Tubman Collective, a collective of Black Deaf and Black disabled organizers, published an important piece critiquing the limited analysis of and failure to name ableism in the BLM Policy Platform in 2016 (Harriett Tubman Collective, 2016). Social movements grow through thoughtful critique that sharpens the theory and political practice driving them.

²⁷ Abu Thuraya’s words, which insist on the value of disabled lives, echo the words of Black feminist poet June Jordan. Writing shortly after September 11, 2001 and months before dying of breast cancer, Jordan wrote: “Some of Us Did Not Die/ We’re Still Here/ I Guess It Was Our Destiny To Live/ So Let’s get on with it” (Bedford, 2009, p. 30; Jordan, 2003, p. 12-14).

disablement through war is reprehensible. People committed to disability justice can still hold pride in the fact that they are disabled or in disability in general while deploring the violent and unjust processes of disablement” (para. 3). Withers’s assertion connects to Puar’s (2017) claim that asserting disability pride is neither primary in realizing disability justice nor antithetical to its achievement. Withers also points to Israeli state logics of genocide/eugenics, noting that an “Israeli parliamentarian called for the murder of Palestinian women. She called Palestinian children ‘little snakes’” (para. 4). The words of Israeli politician Ayelet Shaked represent a gendered and ableist logic that is part and parcel of the state’s founding settler ideology, concerned with disappearing Palestinians to justify Israeli land theft and occupation. Israel’s national ideology frames Palestinian women as threats to the Israeli state because their potential reproductive capacity threatens settler-colonialism’s imperative for population control (e.g., Kanaaneh, 2002). Withers concludes that “if you are Canadian or American, you are implicated in this violence—whether you want to be or not” (para. 5). Noting that the United States and Canada are the two biggest economic and political backers of Israel, Withers points to the BDS movement as a way to support the Palestinian struggle for disability justice. When Palestinians are debilitated as a consequence of Israel’s violent repression of protest—in tandem with under-resourced hospitals consequent of the Gaza blockade—supporting the BDS movement is part of the work of practicing disability justice.

On U.S. campuses, disabled Palestinian student organizers play an important role in the BDS movement. Blind Palestinian-American and former co-president of SJP at NYU Shafeka Hashash has made important connections between workers’ rights, disability oppression, and the Palestinian struggle. Hashash has specifically pointed to boycott as an important tactic in fighting both legal sub-minimum wages for disabled people in the United States and Israel’s system of racial apartheid (Hashash 2013; Jablons, 2013). When NYU’s Graduate Student Organizing Committee became the first private university labor union to vote to join the international BDS movement in 2016, Hashash commented that the “historic endorsement of BDS by GSOC [Graduate Student Organizing Committee] at NYU occurs in the wake of growing momentum for the movement across university campuses and labor unions nationwide” (Silver, 2016, para. 12). Hashash’s words attest to the power of workers and students within U.S. higher education who resist institutional support for Israeli occupation through collective action.

Describing her experience being criminalized by the U.S. police state and forcibly hospitalized in Minnesota, Abdelhadi (2013)—a self-identified “mentally ill Palestinian, Muslim womyn”—describes the entwinement of ableism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and settler-colonialism (para. 1). Her story further clarifies why BDS cannot be ignored within the struggle for disability liberation. “Using a disability justice framework,” she explains, “has allowed me to take the conversation deeper to address how the violence I experienced was an attack on my intersecting identities, as I cannot separate being Palestinian, from being disabled, from being a womyn” (Abdelhadi, 2013, para. 1). Abdelhadi notes that “in the context of the war on terror we are struggling against governments and state/police agents who continuously find ways to profit and gain power and control from the disabling of entire communities” (para. 6). As well as “the pathologization and criminalization of anyone who does not fit the mythical norms of the white ableist supremacist cis-sexist heteropatriarchal and heterosexist sexist ‘productive’ capitalist ideals” (para. 6). Those of us working in U.S. universities—institutions of the settler-capitalist state—ought to be vigilant in naming how these institutions support and profit from the “disabling of entire communities,” including occupied peoples in the United States and in Palestine (Abdelhadi, 2013, para. 6). Drawing on a long lineage of student organizing against the U.S. empire’s disabling consequences for racialized, Indigenous, and occupied peoples, we can learn from students engaged in the BDS movement in doing this work.

Conclusion

The historical and contemporary examples of student movements explored here help us think about what disability justice work can look like from within the imperial university. Student movements like the anti-imperialist and anti-racist movements against the Vietnam War in the late 20th century and the BDS movement in the 21st century, are not isolated or insular to U.S. campuses. Rather, these movements make their way to U.S. campuses, specifically contesting the broader material and ideological investments of U.S.

universities in disability injustice locally, nationally, and globally. The Palestinian-led student movement for justice in Palestine exemplifies student movement work that contests *structural conditions of disability injustice*. Student activists are refusing university complicity with systems of settler-colonialism, white supremacy, and apartheid that unevenly disable Palestinians, target Palestinian health workers, and destroy public infrastructure that supports disabled lives. I see this as disability justice work that we can learn from as a way of being “in but not of the university” (Grande, 2018, p. 49).

Engaging with analyses of the university put forth by Black radical scholars and Indigenous and transnational feminists, this article builds from an assumption that making universities more accessible is a *necessary* reform but an *insufficient* demand for realizing disability justice. By examining archived materials from past and present anti-imperialist student organizing on U.S. campuses, I argue that:

1. Opposing military and settler-colonial ties to the university is part of the work of disability justice within the context of U.S. higher education.
2. Those of us working and teaching in U.S. universities can take a lead from student movements, including the student movement for justice in Palestine, in doing that work.

From student opposition to U.S. intervention in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 20th century to the present-day Palestinian-led BDS movement on college campuses, student movements against U.S. empire, racial capitalism, and settler-colonialism are contesting racialized and state-sanctioned disablement, and often their resistance is rooted in disabled embodiment and knowledge. The BDS movement is actively combatting the uneven and racialized global geography of disability consequent of military occupation and attacks, the Gaza blockade restricting access to medical care, and the destruction of public health infrastructure—the disabling effects of which are deeply amplified in the midst of a global pandemic. To be clear, I am not arguing that there is no work to be done within anti-imperialist, anti-apartheid, and anti-racist movements to bring politics and practices in sharper alignment with principles of disability justice. We do not yet live in a world conducive to accessible organizing: among a litany of other systemic factors impeding access, old buildings are often not wheelchair accessible, communication access real-time translation is costly, and most readily available cleaning products are made with chemical irritants. Disabled people have and are organizing to insist on making movements more accessible through creative means and to delineate the impossibility of collective liberation without actively combating ableism. Movements that are committed to access understand that “there is no liberation without disabled people” and are finding creative ways to make movement spaces accessible within these constraints (Mingus, 2017, para. 22). Without the finances to afford communication access real-time translation for the duration of their 18-day sit-in and subsequent meetings, press conferences, and teach-ins, in 2014 The General Body student-organizers at SU assigned members to live-type transcripts displayed on a projector at hosted events. These efforts to increase access signify insurgent or collective access (Berne, 2015; Hamrie, 2013), as distinguished from institutionalized forms of access that are often more about checking off boxes than making spaces truly accessible for the bodies in them. At the same time, movements for disability liberation must be actively anti-imperialist and anti-settler-colonial in their framing and understanding of disability. Without this explicit politics, as the late disability justice organizer Stacey Milbern (2019) reminds us, struggles for disability rights can be easily appropriated through access washing that replicates the existing, intrinsically ableist and disabling settler-capitalist structure.

Underscoring the limitations of a politics that seeks recognition with the state, in a statement of solidarity with Palestine during the attacks on Gaza in the summer of 2014, the disability justice-based performance project, Sins Invalid (2014), wrote: “Thousands of Palestinians have become permanently disabled in the recent attacks on Gaza. We are not burdens. We are beautiful. Because we are survivors. The targeting of hospitals, ambulances, and rehabilitation facilities are attacks on disabled people” (p. 1). Refusing to cede disability politics to being another site for restabilizing imperial power mandates taking to heart Puar’s (2017) assertion that BDS organizing is disability justice work. As a Palestinian-led movement that issues a clear call for international support and which has taken particular hold on U.S. college campuses, the BDS movement is a means of challenging the systemic disablement of Palestinians under Israeli settler-capitalism. Particularly relevant to those of us working within universities—where we

are so often siloed from our fellow workers at a time of unprecedented precaritization of labor—Kelley (2016) reminds us that “the impulse to resist is neither involuntary nor solitary. It is a choice made in community, made possible by community, and informed by memory, tradition, and witness” (The Personal is Not Always Political, para. 3). Especially resonant in the midst of a global health crisis that is unevenly impacting Black and Indigenous communities, radical student movements engaging in collective, direct actions serve as a powerful reminder that nothing about the way we live is inevitable, fixed, or ineradicable.

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