

# Against Carceral Expansion: Academic Quicksand in Times of Genocide

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**ABSTRACT** Palestinian students, studying to build a future in an institution animated by carcerality and erasure, are faced with fundamental questions: what are the social, affective, and actual experiences of Palestinian students amidst a genocidal war? How do they respond and deal with the state's settler-colonial and carceral politics in higher education? And what constitutive role does higher education play in state genocide? Drawing on voices of Indigenous students inhabiting the colonizer's academic institution, the paper analyzes the contours of affective politics and the colonized's refusal of settler colonial violence during an ongoing genocide exposing the decoy politics (Collie & Alcantara, 2024) of the colonial university. Under the academic oppressive politics, the university punishes and incarcerates voices of dissidents to wash away the historical and ongoing injustice of the present's genocidal brutality. Against the quicksand and carceral expansion of Israeli higher education, the paper shares students' pedagogies of refusal, and their active affective abilities in staging their solidity and rootedness in land/life—through the abolition strategies of *sumud*, refusal, and *ribaat*—in their decolonial liberatory strategy for durable livability.

**KEYWORDS** abolition; academic complicity; genocidal violence; carceral higher education; Palestine; settler colonialism

**I ENROLLED IN THE UNIVERSITY TO LIVE RESPECTFULLY...**build my future...but the military occupation hunts every aspect of our life...and during the genocide in Gaza, the university became the tool of persecution...to further occupy and incarcerate our lives...I tried to order my life away from the occupation...but they incarcerate us...in every move...it is exhausting...and we as Palestinian students need to survive the challenges of higher education...[We] face psychological and political warfare...every minute...in every act...but, I continue to walk tall.

Rana, a Palestinian student from Occupied East Jerusalem (OEJ) studying in the Israeli academy, describes how there is no relief for the hunted and incarcerated, but she continues to walk tall.<sup>1</sup> She

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<sup>1</sup> All personal names referenced in this paper are pseudonyms used to protect the confidentiality of the individuals involved. *Occupied East Jerusalem, Israel, and West Bank* are names of geographical places that are part of historic Palestine controlled by the Israeli settler-colonial state since their military seizure in 1967. Both areas, East Jerusalem and the West Bank, are subject to an apartheid militarized regime. For more information on recent occupation, see OCHA (2025a, 2025b).

explains how her choice to enroll in the settler-colonial academy—institutions of higher education which function as an extension of the state’s settler colonial mission—was an attempt to order her life against the hardships imposed by living under military occupation (Al-Jubeh, 2017; Baumann, 2016; Nasasra, 2019; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015). Rana’s narration reveals evidence of psychological warfare as a result of the relentless hunting of the colonial machinery. Simultaneously, her narrative insists that survivance is a core part of her being a Palestinian. This article engages with voices like Rana’s to comprehend Palestinian students’ experiences in the settler’s university. It also aims to unpack the interlocking psycho-politico-educational policies operating in the Israeli academy during ongoing genocide against Gazans.

Recent reports by Adalah (2024) and aChord (2024) have documented how the current “zero tolerance” politics of the Israeli academy following Hamas’s attack on Israeli settlements on October 7, 2023, and the ongoing genocide against Gazans have heavily impacted Palestinians studying at Israeli academies. The high rate of disciplinary proceedings—taken against more than 200 Palestinian students alongside over a dozen faculty members who spoke in public and posted social media content challenging Israeli public consensus—turned universities into sites of censorship, creating a hostile and unsafe academic environment (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Hager, 2024; aChord, 2024; Adalah, 2024). The attack against the Palestinian students, scholars, narrative, and knowledge culminated in the ongoing genocidal war, locally and internationally, bringing the Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi, as well as other Palestinian and international scholars, to argue the deliberate “scholasticide” and “sophicide” carried out by the Zionist Israeli state to repress “Palestinian history, epistemology, scholarship, and subjectivity” (Palestinian Feminist Collective, 2024). Locally, Abu-Rabia-Queder and Hager (2024) have explained how the Israeli academic sphere has played a crucial role in reinforcing racist colonial structures. For example—and long before the genocidal war in Gaza, even before the creation of the Israeli state—Hebrew University (HU) served a key role in creating Jewish nationality and later in producing and disseminating Jewish Zionist state knowledge. Wind (2024) has also exposed the complicity of Israeli universities, long before the genocidal war on Gaza, in the dispossession and suppression of Palestinians and their narratives, as well as how they generate knowledge used in state efforts to colonize Palestinian land; militarizing higher education, the university trains the military and police, participates in weapons laboratories, and feeds the *hasbara*—the Israeli state’s efforts to peddle its military operations and violations.

In light of militarized Zionist higher education, Sa’di-Ibraheem and Furani (2022) discussed the conditions of Palestinian students and lecturers in Israeli universities, describing these students as “swallowed inside the leviathan” (p. 13). This metaphor speaks to the complexity of being Palestinian in the Israeli academy, of struggling with Israeli higher education’s hegemonic and colonial discourse on Palestine while trying to seek a future under settler-colonial dispossession. Diab (2024) has used the metaphor of “navigating tempestuous waters” to capture Jerusalemite Palestinian students’ experience of isolation, detachment, questioned identity, emotional exhaustion, ambiguity, marginalization, stress, and discrimination while navigating their educational journey within Israeli educational institutions.

Many scholars have argued that despite recent Israeli higher education policies of diversity and inclusion (DI), significant challenges for Palestinian students and lecturers endure (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Hager, 2024; Diab, 2024; Halabi, 2023). For example, one of the aims of the Israeli government’s Homesh plan for OEJ is to increase the number of Jerusalemite Palestinian students studying in Israeli institutions, including HU. However, Lavie et al. (2018) and Qadah (2024) have

argued that the Homesh plan promotes Israel's sovereignty over OEJ and furthers the city's "Israelization" by shaping the consciousness of younger generations of Palestinians. Indeed, Faibish et al. (2023) found that Palestinian Jerusalemite students in Israeli higher education express more positive attitudes about their encounters with Israeli students, as well as integration within the Israeli community in Jerusalem. Returning to Rana's voice, we must wonder how the Homesh plan impacts Palestinian students' psychosocial experiences while "integrating" or "being integrated" into the Israeli society.

Scholars have underscored the ways in which higher education is embedded in global structures of racism, repression, militarism, neoliberalism, and colonization (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Fúnez-Flores, 2024; D. Rodríguez, 2012), and they have illustrated the relationship between higher education and empire through its contributions to state violence and domination (Oparah, 2014). Zembylas (2021) has argued that the colonial and neoliberal university plays a crucial role in replicating and maintaining neo-slavery and racial capitalism. As a means of colonization (Fúnez-Flores, 2024), higher education's procedures and strategies of surveillance, punishment, and containment prompted scholars to debate carcerality in contemporary neoliberal higher education (Cabral, 2024; Castro & Magana, 2020; Mokhtari, 2024; Stein, 2021), and they have conceptualized the expansion of state carcerality into the higher education institutions in a number of ways, including "carceral campuses" (Collins & Buenavista, 2023), "school-prison nexus in higher education" (Gardner et al., 2024), a "college-prison nexus" (Johnson & Dizon, 2021), or "academic-prison symbiosis" (Oparah, 2014). Oparah (2014) demonstrated how funding universities feeds the prison industrial complex to produce workforces, to mine important data, to dehumanize the racialized, and to produce knowledge that maintains carceral technologies, and she suggested that academia is no longer just complicit with the carceral state: "it is a constitutive," making "the faculty, and administrators...active participants within the academic-prison-industrial complex" (p. 115). Further, D. Rodríguez (2012) has insisted that structures of oppressive violence, a "violence...with specific and morbid implications for some peoples' future existence" (p. 812), secure the academy's racial and colonial foundations and exceed the effects of the academy's neoliberalization, requiring an urgent, strategic, mutual centering of the analytics of racial/colonial genocide.

As a result of the academy's racial and colonial complicities, scholars have invited us to abolish it (Boggs et al., 2019; Oparah, 2014; D. Rodríguez, 2012; Stein 2021; Zembylas, 2021). Scholars agree that abolition deploys double strategies: the first is to dismantle structures of oppression, and the second is to create new modes of living and being. Thus, abolition is plural and varied (Boggs et al., 2019; Cabral 2024; Gilmore, 2008; McDowell & Fernandez, 2018). The object of academic abolition, according to Harney and Moten (2013), like the abolition of racism, is "the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society" (p. 42). Boggs et al. (2019), on the other hand, have suggested that the university is a resource to be exploited, an object of analysis and intervention, and a place to be critiqued as a foundational source of epistemological and material violences, liberalism, and capitalism. Accordingly, scholars questioned the practicality of deploying abolition in education (Cabral, 2024). Theorizations on abolition coming from social work discuss its paradoxes and possibilities and how to "move abolition from theory to praxis" (Kim et al., 2024, p. 6). Learning from the long discussion about social work, carcerality, and abolition, we must reconsider the role of academia in perpetuating state carceralities and how to challenge the universities' settler-colonial policies while advancing

abolitionist visions and practices. Subsequently, Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Sheehi (2023) have argued that abolitionism in academia “undoes, disobeys, and defies this interlocking matrix of power[,] constructing new paths and praxes toward thinking, visibilizing, acting, living, believing, and sensing otherwise” (p. 142).

Borrowing from these conceptualizations of racial-colonial carcerality in higher education alongside the calls to abolish it, this research asks what are the psychosocial, affective, and actual experiences of Palestinian students of HU studying within settler-colonial genocide? How do they respond to and deal with the state’s settler-colonial and carceral politics in higher education? And what constitutive role does higher education play in state genocide? This research is part of a four-year investigation of experiences of Palestinian students from OEJ studying at HU within the context of the Homesh Plan. The article utilizes feminist, Indigenous, anti-colonial, and context-informed methodology (Code, 1991; Ferguson, 2017; Harding, 2004; hooks, 2000; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010, 2015; D. Smith, 1990) to analyze the psychosocial, political, and educational everyday narrations of the students. Borrowing from Neary and Saunders’ (2016) notion that students are “producers of knowledge” in the context of higher education, this paper assumes that students’ negative critiques of higher education constitute acts of resistance through a collaborative process of knowledge between academics and students together. This assumption challenges prevalent practices of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), including the construction of students as consumers (Boden & Epstein, 2006). To center Palestinian students’ voices and narrations, 75 students and five HU staff who work with Jerusalemite students were interviewed via semi-structured interviews during a genocidal war, from October 2023 to January 20, 2025. The researchers also conducted nine focus group discussions (FGD) with Jerusalemite Palestinian students following the outbreak of the genocidal war and one FGD immediately after the ceasefire in January 2025. Students shared emails they received from HU as well as HU’s social media posts. Following approval from the ethics board of HU’s Institute of Criminology within the Faculty of Law, researchers gathered informed consent guaranteeing anonymity and clarified the option to withdraw at any point from all the participants before gathering any data.

## CONTEXT

In order to present the students’ experiences in context, the paper starts by sketching the three interlocking psycho-politico-educational policies operating at HU before and during the current genocide: the Homesh Plan, university diversity and inclusion policies, and the “zero tolerance” policy.

### The Homesh Plan

The Homesh Plan is a government economic development strategy for Palestinian communities in Israel, first issued in 2018 for five years. A second phase of the plan started in 2023. The plan authorized special resolutions (number 3790 for 2018–2023 and number 3791 for 2023–2028) for OEJ with the aim of further developing education for Palestinians. While the education component is considered the most important, the plan also aimed to bolster transportation, local economies, and the employment rate of the Jerusalemite Palestinians, as well as to further their integration into the Israeli job market (Lavie et al., 2018; Zimran, 2019). Despite the stated benevolent and reformist goals of economic equality and prosperity for all in the city of Jerusalem, Israeli scholars have

revealed that the plan's political goal is to tighten Israeli control over the Palestinian eastern side of the city (Korach & Choshen, 2020; Lavie et al., 2018; Shtern, 2022)—or, as Qadah (2024) called it, the “Israelization” of OEJ, using education to shape the consciousness of younger generations of Palestinians (Lavie et al., 2018; Qadah, 2024).

Through the Homesh Plan, Palestinian students were recruited from OEJ to study at Israeli higher education institutions with funded academic programs and grants, such as Al Bashaer, an academic program for outstanding high school Palestinian students from East Jerusalem (Dean of Students Office, n.d.). The Homesh Plan funds a preparatory program at HU that prepares the Palestinian Jerusalemite youth to study at Israeli higher education institutions, including teaching Hebrew language and other topics. (Palestinian students are Arabic native speakers, and to enroll in Israeli higher educational institutions they must acquire Hebrew, the formal language of higher education in Israel.<sup>2</sup>) Simultaneously, the Ministry of Education imposed severe restrictions on students enrolled in Palestinian universities and colleges across the West Bank, including refusing to recognize credentials (Diab, 2024; Qadah, 2024). While Al Bashaer offers Palestinian Jerusalemite students a full package of support (personal, social, communal, and economic aid) and assistance integrating into the Israeli job market (Dean of Students Office, n.d.), Lavie et al. (2018) have argued that the expectation of this support is political neutralization. Hence, while the Homesh Plan offers support to receive an education at an Israeli institution, coupled with support to enter the Israeli job market, the assumption is that such integration will bring “economic peace” that will “neutralize” any future OEJ Palestinian national resistance against normalizing Palestinian relations with Israel, furthering Israelization of Jerusalem (Lavie et al., 2018, p. 11).<sup>3</sup> The Homesh Plan is thus a textbook example of what Dimitrov (2020) and later Collie and Alcantara (2024) have described as “decoy politics”: the settler-colonial state's creation of formal structures of response to Indigenous narrations that seem to engage Indigenous concerns but only perpetuate the status quo (Collie & Alcantara, 2024)—or in this instance, further the settler-colonial state's consolidation of power. However, Lavie et al. (2018) also insisted that Jerusalemite Palestinians' cooperation with Israeli governance in OEJ to improve the socio-economic situation of their community “does not at all indicate their willingness to give up their national Palestinian identity or their commitment to their national cause” (p. 11).

### Diversity and Inclusion at Higher Education

According to the university, HU's diversity and inclusion (DI) policy strives to nurture and embrace diversity among the student community by welcoming and protecting all students, helping them to thrive academically, personally, and socially—particularly those from marginalized groups in Israeli society (Hebrew University, n.d.a). In doing so, HU's DI unit initiates various “multicultural” activities and workshops to engage Palestinian students with Israeli students (Hebrew University, n.d.b). These platforms create mixed student groups that exchange languages (Hebrew, Arabic) and discuss religion, culture, and politics. In return, participating students get academic credit, grants, and certificates. Such activities raise the following question: how can Palestinian students exchange

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<sup>2</sup> An article addressing the issue of Palestinian students learning Hebrew for higher education is forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> Normalization in the Israeli-Palestinian context means perceiving Israeli settler-colonial violence, dispossession, and structures of oppression as normal and ordinary. Under normalization, relations and cooperation with Israeli people, institutions, and state become natural, consolidating Israeli's occupation, instead of a site of struggle to challenge and end settler-colonialism (BDS National Committee, 2022).

language and discuss culture, religion, and politics with Israeli students in the context of settler-colonial genocide?

The DI unit's website hosts multiple videos that reflect diversity among HU students (Hebrew University, n.d.c). In these videos, Palestinian women students talk about their academic and career ambitions and how their studies at HU assist them in achieving their goals. Interestingly, these Palestinian Jerusalemites also share their experience of meeting Israelis—sometimes for the first time—as university colleagues rather than as check-point soldiers. They reveal how studying with Israelis has given them a different perspective on the Israeli community, sometimes creating friendly and collegial relationships. Included with these videos is one of former Israeli president Reuven Rivlin giving “the Israeli hope” speech (Rivlin, 2018), also known as the “Four Tribes Speech.” In the video, Rivlin explains the sociodemographic transformation of Israeli society, through which former minorities—Palestinians and Ultra-Orthodox Jews—are becoming major communities. The new demographic reality and subsequent cultural, religious, political, and identity rifts between various communities pose a threat to Israel's Zionist ethos, national security, and resilience (Steiner, 2016). Thus, Rivlin called for creating a “new Israeli order,” replacing the usual majority-minority with partnership (Steiner, 2016). This new policy aims to enhance inclusion and equality among the emerging “four tribes” of Israeli society (secular Jews, national religious Jews, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Palestinians/Arabs), and Rivlin suggests activating and maintaining this shared “Israeli-ness” through education and employment that fosters a new “Israeli character” (Steiner, 2016, p. 3).

Rivlin's speech sparked widespread public debate among Israeli higher education institutions and informed various educational programs, including the “new hope for the Israeli Academy” at HU and other institutions. The program seeks to promote shared academic space for all groups while asserting that academia should serve diversity and promote it as an advantage (Hebrew University, n.d.d). Meital (2017) has asked whether the Israeli academy can become the site for the formation of an Israeli national identity (particularly for those who don't serve in the Israeli army) and questioned whether it can replace the Israeli army as the “melting pot.” Based on the experience of Palestinian-Bedouins from southern Al-Naqab studying in Israeli academia, however, he rejected this possibility, emphasizing that academia should not be a platform for political conspiracies. His conclusion also raises the question whether DI policies also count as decoy politics. Steiner (2016) has argued that Rivlin's initiative is an effective “antidote” and a “major spearhead” to combat the international delegitimization of Israel as an illegal racist colonial state (p. 4, 1). Steiner further claimed that it could make “Israel's process” “admirable” among other western countries struggling with questions of demographics and identity. As he saw it, the “Israeli hope” initiatives increase the socio-economic integration of the more excluded tribes, mainly Arabs and Ultra-Orthodox Jews, in a way that enhances Israel's soft power (Steiner, 2016, p. 5). Steiner's analysis reveals how Israeli academia is complicit in producing technologies to control Palestinian minds/bodies via “benevolent,” “reformist,” and “inclusive” policies. However, Harney and Moten (2013) argue that reform policies will never fix oppressive systems and that abolition requires understanding the oppressive structures very well in order, simultaneously, to dismantle oppressive structures and to create new ways of being and living. The question remains what are the experiences of students facing such policies?

### Politics of Zero Tolerance

A few days after the October 7 attack, the Israeli State Attorney's Office announced a "zero tolerance for incitement" policy that included easing criteria for detaining suspects on suspicion of incitement to terrorism and violence (Danziger, 2024). The zero tolerance policy was demanded widely by politicians and powerful public service actors like the minister of national security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, as well as the police commissioner (Danziger, 2024). Simultaneously, Israeli institutions of higher education declared "zero tolerance" for any student or staff expression of support for or identification with "terrorist organizations" or "incitement to terrorism," and it initiated immediate disciplinary proceedings against those who were accused with incitement to terror or violence (Adalah, 2024; Mansour, 2024). Some institutions quoted the Minister of Education's endorsement of the policy and his demand that schools file complaints against accused students with the police when they initiate their own proceedings. In addition, the Israeli National Students' Union established a special taskforce for reporting on student and staff publications. Mansour (2024) has documented that most university hearings are conducted quickly and in violation of due process rights, sometimes in parallel with equally inadequate criminal proceedings. Indeed, institutions used the intensity of the political context to justify the Israeli discourse of "fighting terrorism" (Rabaia & Habash, 2024), and the definition of "incitement" is loose to the degree that criticism of Israel or even empathy for Palestinian suffering has triggered incitement charges (Danziger, 2024).

HU's declaration of zero tolerance appeared in a social media post and asked its community to turn in students who "incite to terrorism" (Hebrew University, 2023). The same post declared that HU will "do anything" to help student-soldiers called up to join the Israeli army, and many HU posts on social media and emails to its community repeated messages of support for student-soldiers serving at the war front and for Israelis impacted by the Hamas attack. Two months later, on the first day of the semester, and throughout the academic year, Palestinian students found imposing numbers of Israeli flags all over campuses and posters related to Israeli casualties of the October 7, 2023, attack and Israeli hostages in Gaza. Palestinian students were particularly overwhelmed by the significant presence of armed Israeli students, faculty, and staff. In addition to Israeli war digital slogans, for example, the image of the Israeli flag with the statement "Together we will win!" was attached to many HU administration and faculty emails. Additionally, research by aChord (2024), an HU social-academic organization for social psychology, indicated that administrative disciplinary measures have caused feelings of silencing, threat, alienation, policing, persecution, censorship, and discrimination for Palestinians at HU, particularly when they express perspectives critical of hegemonic viewpoints.

Significantly, HU's zero tolerance is contingent upon identity, enforced mainly against Palestinians. It targeted a Palestinian professor in October 2023 for signing a petition calling for the end of the Gazan genocide against children and demanding an immediate ceasefire. In March 2024, HU suspended the professor from teaching, following a podcast in which she explained that as a feminist scholar she rejects the state's weaponization of women's and children's bodies to justify the genocidal war on Gaza. Declaring itself a Zionist institution, HU disavowed the professor's claims and her call to abolish Zionism. In contrast, HU has not taken action against non-Palestinian faculty for clear violations. It took no action against a Jewish-Israeli professor, despite their social media posts arguing that Israel is committing a genocide in Gaza (Goldberg, 2024; Mordechai, 2024; Rifai, 2024; Sahara, 2024; Segal & Daniele, 2024). In November 2024, it refused to apply its policy to an Israeli-Jewish-American professor accused of attacking and wounding a Palestinian in the

West Bank until *after* the police investigations. Later, HU suspended him for the whole winter semester, with the intent to reexamine its decision later. These cases illustrate what Fúnez-Flores (2024) and Tatour (2024) have separately described as the “the Palestine exception to academic freedom” and free speech (Fúnez-Flores, 2024, p. 3; Tatour, 2024, p. 108).

## FINDINGS

This section presents the main themes in the voices of the Jerusalemite Palestinian students, revealing the realities of carcerality and the need for abolition while studying at HU and witnessing a genocide. The first two parts unpack students' experiences of the university's carceral technologies. The third part discusses the ways Palestinian students defy those same carceral technologies embedded in Israeli academia.

### Higher Education Quicksand

Students' narrations revealed multiple forms of carcerality in/through higher education. Joud explains:

The messages that we [Palestinian students] received from HU in the beginning of the genocide were very tough, like when I received the email of zero tolerance, I was stressed...because I felt threatened. It's a threat for all of us [Palestinian students] but not for the other side [Israeli students].

Samah, another Palestinian student shared:

The university's post of zero tolerance was disgusting...I was shocked...I felt like, what's the point of going back to study at a university that defines defending my people's life and refusing their killing as incitement...It is for silencing me, while Israeli students' words who call for violence against me and my people will never be defined as incitement...they bargain with us over futures: it's either you keep quiet or lose...absurdity.

All the Palestinian students we interviewed understood the university's call for zero tolerance as a threat to them and their future. For Palestinian students, the zero tolerance policy was to silence any narrative that did not agree with the hegemonic Israeli narrative and to incarcerate Palestinian voices of dissent. The zero tolerance policy caused students stress and fear of losing their futures by being expelled from the university, arrested, and/or losing a job, and these fears made students silence themselves in some situations. Silencing, as Fine (1987) has argued, “signif[ies] a terror of words, a fear of talk” (p. 157). Through silencing, the settler-colonial academy suppresses and exports undesirable talk, although the academy is supposedly a platform for mobility and criticism (Fine, 1987). Otake (2019), Sayigh (2015), and P. Smith (2012) have argued that forced concealment of one's political experience and opinion is a form of oppression that exacerbates suffering (Otake, 2019).

Indeed, silencing their voices increased Palestinian students' psychosocial burden, as Wesam explains:

We are deprived of all means to express ourselves...I cannot say a word. I deleted social media accounts because they are no longer useful...Why have an Instagram account if I am forbidden to sympathize with my people in Gaza?...I developed a deep sense of suppression and rage...the Israeli flags were everywhere on campus, it provokes me...They [Israeli students and academics] managed to express themselves in any way they wished. Even when...someone came and cursed me [as a Palestinian] and I was unable to respond...my anger paralyzed me...to the point that I was no longer able to sit in class.

Sayigh (2015) has argued that Palestinians live through ongoing pain as a result of silencing their suffering and loss, and Leão and Goto (2025) have shown that institutional silencing intensifies students' psychic suffering and isolation, depriving them of ways to express and share their experience. Likewise, Wesam reveals the paralyzing psychological rage of the institution excluding and suppressing his voice and narration, even when he is provoked.

More students revealed additional psychological burdens as a result of silencing: "*El hasrah* [الحسرة (anguish/bitterness)] is eating my heart and it increases every day...seeing what happens to kids in Gaza and the feeling of guilt for not being able to do a thing eats me... 'Keep your mouth shut' is all I hear." A second student adds, "This is our reality, a life of pain, *ihaneh* [إهانة (humiliation)], *dhull* [ذُل (abasement)], and you cannot say a word. All doors are locked, and our jail is becoming narrower." A third student also shares: "I feel like there is a knife on my neck, I fear to speak because as Palestinian I am defenseless." Wafa, another student, insists that living through colonial intolerance of her narration is like "living on quicksand, where you are always in a defensive mode...because you are always accused and always condemned." The four students point to the war on narrative, a type of psychological warfare that leads to an immense affective suffocation of students' voices. This operative matrix of asphyxiation on campus via violent aesthetics and politics raises the question: How does this asphyxiation infiltrate the psyche and mind, and what are its psycho-political implications?

Long before the genocide in Gaza, scholars demonstrated the psychosocial debilitation that Palestinian students face as a result of the Israeli academy silencing their narratives (Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019; Golan-Agnon, 2020; Halabi, 2016, 2023; Sa'di-Ibraheem & Furani, 2022). Reflecting on the affective impacts of "keeping their mouth shut" during an ongoing genocide, students revealed that silencing in this reality operates deep: it tortures and eats at their insides, as well as their dignity, self-respect, morality, and humanity. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2024) argued that "necrological affective violence" operates on the living who witness the incomprehensibility of monstrous genocidal violence. Yet, students' narrations here expose additional layers of torture: torture lies not just in witnessing genocidal violence against their people but in their inability to do or say anything during their daily encounters with the violent colonizer, even while enduring provocation and condemnation. This reality locks students into a structurally embedded matrix of psychological torture, embedded in humiliation, indignity, agony, guilt, rage, and orphanhood. These psychological states intensify the torturous war machine of colonial higher education, a war on narrative, a war on the mind, voice, and beyond. Wafa describes such unbreathable reality as being trapped in quicksand—sometimes to the point of being swallowed. Likewise, Nella Larsen, in her novel *Quicksand*, uses the metaphor of quicksand to illustrate the recurring sense of entrapment and sinking into racial hierarchies, gender and social inequalities, where one is chained and unable to escape (Jones, 2020; Syamchand & Selvaraj, 2018).

Nour explains that, for him, being trapped in Israeli academic carceral quicksand carries additional meaning: “Before the war I was arguing that my studies at HU is not a form of normalization as long as I defy and speak back, but today, with my silencing, I ask myself, ‘Am I a traitor?’ because with my silence I became impartial. My studies at HU become my decoy.” Telling his story as the colonized, Nour says, saves him psychologically and morally while studying inside the colonizer’s quicksand. However, when he cannot speak back, he feels like he is swallowed by settler-colonial normalization. Nour is pointing out that such normalizing through academia constitutes a decoy politics. Accordingly, Fine (1987) asked, who does silencing the colonized protect?

### **Carceral Expansion**

As Ayman’s narration reveals, the decoy politics of higher education embrace the settler state’s ideology of supremacy and elimination:

We are chained, and they [Israelis] tighten it [the chain] *habeh habeh* [bit by bit]. In my case, I am afraid to lose my academic degree, I fear for my future. This is how they slowly impose on us what to say and what not to say and turn us into obedient bodies and entities.

Dugassa (2011) argued that, in settler-colonial contexts, education is a tool for conquering the colonized mind by suffocating Indigenous voices, knowledge, and identity to promote obedience. Sa’di (2012) has further demonstrated how settler-colonial higher education promotes “character building,” imparting colonial knowledge and skills to the colonized in order to cultivate a governable, obedient individual capable of self-mastery and self-surveillance. Here Ayman, like Nour, articulates how his degree, and thus the Homesh plan, as decoy politics drag them bit by bit into quicksand that silences their voices and disciplines their bodies and minds, turning higher education from a means of liberation (Freire, 2000) to a form of neo-slavery (Zembylas, 2021) and a colonial machinery of domination (Luke & Heynen, 2021; D. Rodríguez, 2012).

As Nour and Ayman acknowledge, complicity with settler ideology erases Palestinians and their national quest for liberation and narration. In line with Foucault’s (1995) theory of the prison, the state’s mechanisms of power and discipline create a “carceral network” that spreads throughout society (p. 298). Likewise, Mustafa illustrates how DI practices play a part in swallowing Palestinian students into the quicksand:

Once I totally refused the idea to participate in dialog groups because it has no impact, but then when I reached HU and started to get all these emails announcing new groups, I started to think about it, then I started to ask about it, then I become more curious and considering to join it...but now I realize that all these programs are fake, the only aim is to be in the normalization circle...All these circles are for them [Israelis], so they can explain themselves, and that’s it. It doesn’t take you anywhere. Maybe if the war didn’t start, then maybe I participated, but the war has turned all tables.

The professional field of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) emerged in the early 2000s in multicultural affairs departments in academia (Stokas, 2023). Universities encouraged the presence of “difference” to legitimize their belief that the institution itself was egalitarian, meritorious, and

just (Stokas, 2023, p. 17). Other scholars like Nakamura & Edelman (2018) have criticized academia's DEI policies as neoliberal metrics, a symbol of antiracist efforts to protect themselves against accusations of discrimination while actually upholding racial and class hierarchies (Stokas, 2023), and Ahmed (2012) has shown the gap between what diversity work does and what it says it does. As Mustafa recognizes, HU's DI dialog groups of Palestinian and Israeli students do not decrease his suffering as a colonized student in the colonizer academy, and he emphasizes how the dialog group entraps the colonized in settler-colonial racial hierarchies, normalizing the relation between the colonized and the colonizer and removing it from the context of settler-colonial violence. The voices of Nour, Ayman, and Mustafa reveal that the settler-colonial state extends its "carceral networks," as argued by Foucault, through the Homesh Plan, DI activities, and the terrorizing of zero tolerance policy. Such carceral expansions are employed through civic institutions—here, through the realm of higher education—to enforce obedience.

One course, "Spring in the Desert" couples Israeli and Palestinian students to discuss religious, social, and political issues. Mona, her Indigenous identity under assault during a genocidal war, shares her hardship encountering the colonizer in this course:

I believe these courses aim at mixing the Palestinians in the Israeli society...During the war there were a lot of racist incidents with my Israeli partner. Once she asked me, "Why you don't serve in the Israeli military?" and I was afraid to say that I am Palestinian, so I said I don't have an Israeli citizenship...we fear to share, to encounter, and to challenge so we play the role...I only wanted the course's two credits.

Mona shares the fear she feels when her identity as an Indigenous student is about to be exposed to her settler colleague during a genocide, hiding it by playing a different role. Her instinctive protective reaction made her decide to disappear momentarily as a Palestinian, to survive DEI programs of inclusion, only to get her course credits. Ahmed (2012) borrows bell hooks' (1992) description of "eating the other" to explain that diversity policies in higher education make the other digestible. Within the context of settler colonialism, as Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Sheehi (2023) have argued, the settler-colonial violence of inclusion/exclusion does not swallow, as hooks and Ahmed pointed out, but rather aims at erasing the colonized and their narrative. Mona's voice tells us that she is not only aware of the settler-colonial ideology: she recognized and named it and took the decision "to disappear." Her strategic disappearance played against the carceral politics of the settler colony.

Omar, a graduate student, describes how he used to play his role before the war in his everyday work and studies:

I work with Israeli colleagues on joint research, and I took a scholarship. Before the war we had a good relationship, and I fitted myself in, but after the genocidal war on Gaza, I was shocked by their racism and dehumanization towards us, and I started asking myself, what I am doing here? And whom do I serve when I study and work at HU?...The genocide dropped all the masks.

Omar confirms that colonialism is a structure that reproduces complicity in oppression, and he speaks to how the war makes visible such complicity, releasing him from the mask he wore. His experience reveals that the university's diversity reality is part of a soft power that silences,

excludes, and incarcerates colonized identity, voice, and narration. Further, Omar's experience of living, working, and studying through the colonizer's DI vision shows how the colonized are capital for legitimizing settler academic institutions and thus maintaining racial hierarchies within the carceral quicksand higher education. Ahlam illustrates how carcerality invades beyond higher education into her mundane life:

Once I was a free person. I used to say whatever I wanted. Now I've changed. I fear to speak, to look, to move. This is the Jerusalemites' prison, we are imprisoned in our fear, they incarcerated us with their sneaky legal and administrative ways, they locked us with our words, our jobs, degrees, livelihoods [لقمة عيشنا]...I used to share [on social media] my thoughts, initiate many activities, but not anymore. My manager at work warned me [that] she doesn't want to lose me, so she asked me to stop sharing posts, so now I don't share political things anymore...This suffocates, it hurts me, eating me from the inside.

As Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Sheehi (2023) have argued, settler-colonial governance relies on carcerality as a state logic, and in Palestine that carcerality extends beyond the prison system to include other racialized systems of elimination in daily life. As Ahlam and the other students illustrate, they are trapped in academic shackles made of course credits and requirements, fellowships, collaborative efforts, DI activities, and jobs. A system of "decoy politics," or as Wafa names it, a quicksand, seizes the colonized with one hand and with the other hand swallows, masks, and normalizes him into the settler community.

### ***Sumud, Refusal, and Ribaat: Abolishing Carceral Higher Education***

Many students reveal how studying in Israeli academies fails to indoctrinate their awareness and identity, and this section explores Palestinian students' experiences in challenging the academic quicksand of Israeli carceral entrapment. Saleh explains:

Thank God that every time I change, something takes me back to my original [Palestinian Indigenous] route...Like when we learn together with the Israelis or work with them all the time...this is normalization, because meeting and interacting with them on individual base makes you see the personal. But then something happens like the war on Gaza, and you realize that they [Israelis] were only performing...acting. This genocide revealed their real intentions: supremacy, hatred, and violence...They want us out, to disappear.

Saleh's study and work in the Israeli academy attempts to normalize Palestinians' daily and domestic encounters with Israelis, creating a trap of academic racial space under the guise of normalization. Indeed, as the late Palestinian prisoner and novelist Walid Daqqa (2010) explained in *Searing Consciousness: Or on Redefining Torture*, Israeli violence systematically targets Palestinians to "melt" their consciousness (p. 26). Additionally, Abu-Saad (2019) has explored how Israeli educational systems serve the Zionist settler state's vision, establishing an educational hegemony by promoting Israeli values and loyalty to the Zionist state and subordinating and alienating Palestinian students. Consequently, Palestinian students consciously and unconsciously suppress their national identity. However, Saleh's voice, alongside the other students' testimonies, expose both the immense violence of normalization in higher education *and* its failure to

indoctrinate their consciousness. They *know* how violence and racism embed in the academy as they do in settler-colonial systems of elimination (Wolfe, 2006). According to Saleh, the violence and racism of the settler-colonial system unmasks academic-carceral tactics. For Saleh, as for the majority of our respondents, DEI camouflages Israel's psychological warfare against Palestinians as help and support, but students' ability to see through and read beyond the carceral tactics of the colonial academy defies the psychological warfare. They are aware of its *modus operandi*, how it aims to sear their consciousness and erase their narrations, and they variously resist through the abolition strategies of *sumud*, refusal, and *ribaat*.

**Sumud.** Yasmeen explains how she protected her consciousness:

People think that if I study with Israelis, then my values and beliefs will change...But the opposite is true: I feel that my beliefs, values, and who I am [as Palestinian] became stronger...When studying with them, I get to know them better, and I get the chance to understand who they are. It never crosses my mind that I want to be like them, so I insist that we are the best and we are the strongest...I come here [HU] to learn but not to change,...to remain *samedah* [steadfast] under any circumstances and I didn't [change].

Yasmeen asserts that her Palestinian identity is strong despite her daily encounters with Israelis, that her studying will not change it. To learn but not to change for Yasmeen is *sumud*, defying settler-colonial distortion of her Indigenous values and identity. *Sumud* [صمود] roughly translates to *steadfastness* in English, but Meari (2014) has argued that *sumud* has no fixed meaning because it incorporates a variety of practices and illustrations. Hammad and Tribe (2021), defining its various meanings as argued by other scholars, have concluded that:

the essence of *sumud* is endurance and perseverance in an anticolonial struggle, opposing and resisting the occupation and the pervasive impact it has on everyday life. It is both a value and an action that manifests via individual and collective action to protect family and community survival, wellbeing, dignity, Palestinian identity and culture, and to remain on the land. (p. 136)

Yasmeen endures, defying settler-colonial invasion into and manipulation of her Indigenous beliefs, identity, and consciousness during her university education. She manages to defy settler colonial domination by exposing its decoy politics and psychological warfare. She is steadfast in her Indigenous identity, abolishing the power of the carceral academy. All the tactics and policies of the colonial academy to erase her Palestinianness—be it the manipulations of DI, the constant threats of zero tolerance, the omnipresence of weapons and flags—root her further in her identity and culture. She teaches us that, through her steadfast sense of belonging and awareness, she can abolish the power of the settler-colonial academy and its carceral politics.

Her critical position and stand, her *sumud*, constitute a Palestinian relational political-psychosocial affective subjectivity, and she demonstrates how, under dire conditions of oppression, revolutionary thinking and becoming are her cornerstones. Yasmeen and the majority of respondents shared their ways of opening up new possibilities of *sumud*, new alternate modes of being “for an ethical-political relational selfhood” (Meari, 2014, p. 549), even when facing the swallowing of carceral

quicksand. As Otman and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2023) have tracked, Palestinians foster abolitionist pedagogical and psychosocial “technologies of refusal and defiance” “by any means necessary” to challenge carceral notions and practices of the settler colonial state (p. 262). The narration of Yasmeen and Saleh confirms what Harney and Moten (2013) argue that abolition requires understanding the oppressive structures very well in order to dismantle oppression structures and create new ways of being and living.

**Refusal.** While Yasmeen rejects academic carcerality by being present and rooted, Basem shares absence as his way of refusal:

I didn't participate in the graduation ceremony because for me it shows [Israeli and Palestinian] togetherness. It's like that we learn and graduate together under their policies and all is fine...in the graduation party [university administrators] put up the Israeli flag, they sing [Israel's national anthem]...so some Palestinian students left the hall when the Israelis start singing, but I felt that I cannot participate at all. I can't go sit there as if everything is cool and celebrate with them while my people are going through a genocide. I can't celebrate with them because their family members are soldiers in Gaza, so I asked them to send the certificate by mail.

Immersed in the sensory aesthetics of violence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017), Basem's voice reveals that the Israeli academy's graduation ceremony is another swallowing experience. Tomkins (2015) argues that the experience of oppression fuels the commitment to struggle and generates abolition because the individual is not entirely helpless in dealing with a given situation. Likewise, Basem refuses to be helpless in the face of genocide, insisting on expressing his revolt against the carcerality of the graduation ceremony by not attending. He refuses to be swallowed into the settler-colonial quicksand and finds his way to abolish it.

**Ribaat.** While some students maintain *sumud*, others embrace *riba* as a strategy of resistance, like Zenah's commitment to her academic degree as an Indigenous strategy of continuity:

I am not here [at HU] to liberate Palestine. I am here to study and obtain a degree...because there is nothing else I can do. Life goes on, [and] the most important thing I can do is to keep going, studying, working, paying my taxes, to stay in this *balad* [homeland]. What other options I have? Stop working? Drop my studies? Leave the *balad*? No, I have to stay here [in OEJ], this is *riba*. I know the [political] situation becoming more tough and I know what I am getting into...This is a *riba* for me.

According to Lecoquierre (2023), *riba* [رباط] has historical and religious meaning connected to defense of the land, and in Palestine *riba* represents an everyday practice of resistance imbued with a fundamental territorial dimension of protecting and defending the holy places of Al-Aqsa, Jerusalem, and Palestine. Not only is *riba* a way to guard the land, it opposes the expanding borders of Israeli colonization and the dissolution of Palestine. Schmitt (2016) argues that *riba* is about “protecting what is being aggressed upon” (p. 27), and one strategy has been simply to be physically present. Ihmoud (2019) has analyzed Palestinian women's *riba*, what she calls the

“politics of staying in place,” to reveal the psychosocial and bodily hardships the *murabitat* [Palestinian women who do *ribaah*] endure while protecting the Al-Aqsa Mosque from the violence, invasion, and dispossession of Israeli settler-colonialism. In doing *ribaah*—despite having their bodies, families, spaces, and lands under attack—these women preserve their dignity and regain a sense of control and power in the everyday when other pathways to a dignified life have been foreclosed.

Here, Zenah transforms her staying/continuing her studies at HU from a tool of normalization, invasion, and carcerality into a tool of remaining and defending her existence from Israeli settler-colonial erasure, carceralities, and dispossession. Conscious of the consequences and insisting on staying and being rooted to the place, enduring its psychosocial and economic hardships, Zenah turns Israeli higher education from a distorting quicksand that swallows the colonized into a space to practice *ribaah*, a place to practice existence. In doing so, she not only circumvents the entrapment of settler-colonial higher education but she transforms its swallowing nature into a “politics of staying” and rootedness in place, disrupting the spirality (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010) and the swallowing of the academic quicksand. Abourahme (2024) has argued that the Palestinian refusal to disappear is a fundamental disruption of the Israeli state’s *raison d’être*. Listening carefully, Yasmeen’s *sumud*, Basem’s and Saleh’s refusal, and Zenah’s *ribaah* are all Palestinian tenacious ways to abolish academic carceralities.

## CONCLUSION

Investigating the colonial academy revealed how the Israeli university, its educational climate, and its production of knowledge maintained a carceral suffocating atmosphere (see also Cabral, 2024; Harding & Taylor, 2001; Johnson & Dizon, 2021; Oparah, 2014; Watkins, 2020). While students exposed the university’s decoy politics that aimed at silencing Palestinian students and shared the intense psycho-educational warfare at play during the Gaza genocide, they insisted on exposing colonial relation and defining the carceral *modus operandi* of the colonial academy as a quicksand, while inventing pedagogies of refusal towards decolonial actions (Y. Rodríguez, 2019)

For students, the quicksand and its related decoy politics produced new modes of slow torture that swallowed their affects and voices of dissent while demonizing and dehumanizing them. Unpacking the quicksand policy exposed the affective contours that create a sense of suffocation, making their mere narration and sharing unthinkable and punishable. Colonial obedience, as they explained, lures the colonized softly through course credits, awards, dialogue groups, and the promise of degrees, and it aims at invading the colonized’s livelihood, mind, identity, tongue, and body, swallowing them into the settler community while demanding the colonized wear a mask of settler-colonial identity in an unending circle of normalization. In line with Foucault’s (1995) carceral network analysis, the students’ voices suggest that the carceral quicksand of colonial academia attempts to lock colonized students into obedient bodies, but as our data showed, it resulted in advancing the creation of a new liberatory network and the production of new pedagogies of refusal (Y. Rodríguez, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

We conclude by suggesting that students’ awareness of the Israeli academy’s carceral quicksand politics—aimed at erasing Palestinian humanity, keeping them as decoration for “diversity and inclusion” when “the master needs”—failed. Students explained how the quicksand carcerality, with all its educational and mental tools manifesting colonial power and domination, did not deter some

students from creating pedagogies of refusal, disrupting colonial violence, and inventing abolitionist possibilities of decoloniality in the colonial academy amidst an ongoing genocide. Our analysis reveals how students staged their *sumud* in land and life, what they called *ribaata*, as a decolonial pedagogy that transformed their higher education. Students' *ribaata* created a pedagogical scape that delegitimized that which was gained by force (see Y. Rodríguez, 2019), producing an abolitionist embodied liberatory strategy, a tenacious mode of livability. *Ribaata* created new possibilities of life and continuity, established their sense of ontological power, and produced psycho-educational energies that detected new orders in life. Their *ribaata*, nurtured by their *sumud*, was deeply affective in its creation of new intimacies and desires to cultivate an ethos of tenacious continuity amidst a genocide. We found *ribaata* and *sumud*'s affective engagement with the ongoing Nakba and genocide to be an affirmative moral principle, rooted in student's national, cultural, and religious rights and beliefs to abolish their carcerality and to enact new possibilities of life.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Moving the work of abolition from theory to praxis—as this study shows—social workers must first listen carefully to students affected by quicksand colonial politics; they must unpack and comprehend the unethical use of the system of higher education as a tool of colonial domination, dispossession, oppression, and annihilation. Second, social workers must expose systematically the foundational structures of racism and recognize colonial history and its power-politics—including its soft power—embedded in the processes of higher education. Third, social workers, as Harney and Moten (2013) argue, must refrain from easy remedies that sustain settler-colonial elimination; rather, they must challenge carceral expansion in the academy and beyond, refuse genocide, abolish decoy politics and their normalization, and foster decolonial *sumud* and *ribaata* “by any means necessary” (Otman and Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023, p. 262) to affectively disinvest in colonial relations and to build revolutionary modes of thinking otherwise, when and while always interrupting the mutilation of the body, the mind, and the collective.

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