

Response to Cary Nelson and Ernst Benjamin

A Response to the [AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom, Volume 4](#)

By Malini Johar Schueller

I am troubled by the circumstances surrounding the publication of Cary Nelson's and Ernst Benjamin's responses to the collection of essays supporting the academic boycott of Israeli universities published in the recent issue of *Journal of Academic Freedom*. JAF is an online peer reviewed, scholarly journal with an editorial board and a current editor chosen after a process of formal interviewing and academic and professional vetting. The editor of a scholarly journal consults with the editorial board about topics for journal issues and then has the autonomy to select submissions after they have gone through a peer review process.

Ashley Dawson was chosen as the editor of *JAF* following the formal interview process and he agreed to serve for a year. He solicited "scholarly articles relating to the topic of academic freedom and globalization," and the CFP gave potential contributors adequate time to submit their essays. Members of the editorial board, including Cary Nelson and Ernst Benjamin were well aware of the CFP but chose not to submit essays. On appearance of the essays, six of which supported the boycott, Nelson and Benjamin decided to intervene. As the October 22 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported, influential members within the editorial board—Cary Nelson, founding editor of *JAF* and former AAUP president and Ernst Benjamin, former AAUP general secretary—"persuaded" Ashley Dawson to publish responses defending the AAUP's opposition to the boycott. Apparently, Cary Nelson was unhappy at not being invited to submit a piece in the first place despite the fact that the editor, Ashley Dawson, did not solicit invitations from anybody. Ernst Benjamin questions the judgment of the editor to publish the only pieces he received and which went through peer review. This kind of intimidation of an editor of a scholarly journal flies in the face of the academic freedom that Nelson and Benjamin espouse. However, it is part of a depressingly familiar tactic of normalization in which criticism of settler colonialism must be normalized through the logic of "balance" and rerouted as an issue of conflict and debate.

I will not venture here to critique Cary Nelson's support of "the religious character of the Jewish state" and all that might imply for the rights of non-Jewish populations in Israel/Palestine or his appallingly cynical dismissal of Palestinians' "right of return" because "the adults who lived in Arab-owned homes in what became the state of Israel are now almost all dead." His reduction of several 1948 refugees I met in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut last year all of whom are walking, talking, and telling their stories, to the "almost dead" or Agamben's bare life, speaks volumes about the exceptionalism Israel has been granted.

Ernst Benjamin asks why the Asian American Studies Association, which recently endorsed the academic boycott of Israel, doesn't boycott China because of Tiananmen Square or Tibet. I will repeat that the boycott of Israeli universities is in response to over a hundred Palestinian civil society organizations that have asked for the boycott in response to the violence of settler colonialism and the denial of academic and other freedoms to Palestinians. When there is a similar request from other civil society organizations in a country that is the recipient of major US funds, and when a boycott has a reasonable chance of having an effect on a government, such boycotts will not be ruled out.