

Response to Cary Nelson

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

By Bill V. Mullen

Cary Nelson's response to essays published in the *Journal of Academic Freedom* which support the boycott of Israeli universities reproduces the settler-colonial logic contributors to the issue identify as reasons for supporting the boycott in the first place.

For example, in response to my argument that "the casual fetishization of academic freedom" is part of a "liberal hegemony that provides ideological cover for brutal acts of intellectual and political terror by Israel," Nelson writes, "But no one argues that academic freedom covers military action or justifies political terror." Yet Nelson does just this: making undocumented claims for "academic freedom" in Israeli universities the basis both for opposing the academic boycott and ignoring the overwhelming evidence provided in essays by Omar Barghouti, Malini Schueller, David Lloyd, Sami Hermez, Mayssun Sukarieh and Rima Kapitan that Israeli universities **directly and indirectly** support the illegal military occupation of Palestine. He does this without a **single mention** of the detrimental effects on academic freedom for Palestinian scholars cited throughout the special issue. This is precisely the logic of "exceptionalism" brilliantly critiqued by contributors to the *Journal*.

This exceptionalism is underscored by Nelson's accusations of "opportunism" against supporters of the boycott. As the contributors to the special issue make clear, their support for the academic boycott of Israeli universities is in response to a call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) initiated by Palestinian civil society in 2004, a call which has now won supporters in countries across the world, including from the South African National Congress. Nelson avoids mention of South African support for BDS in his response, because it is the former South African apartheid which the world now knows most closely resembles the conditions under which Palestinians live today: formal and legal segregation; second-class citizenship; crippling economic exploitation and subordination; racist violence. These conditions inspired South African Bishop Desmond Tutu in 2002 to condemn Israeli apartheid, and to call just yesterday for the release of Palestinian political prisoner Marwan Barghouti. Nelson also avoids South Africa because the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) was inspired directly by the South Africa boycott campaign. What Nelson deigns to call "opportunism" in support for the academic boycott is in fact international humanitarian outrage against the last apartheid state in the world.

Nelson also uses the most clichéd and time-tested rhetorical tricks and bombs in his response in defense of Israeli apartheid. He invokes Nazi Germany as a "litmus test" for deciding the question of academic boycotts; says a single state solution would usher in an era of "massive bloodshed," and invokes the Holocaust while paying no mind to the 700,000 Palestinians displaced or expelled in the making of the Israeli state. His use of 'square quotes' is especially telling: Nelson writes: "*Bill Mullen introduces the section of essays about academic boycotts by declaring that Israel was created through "ethnic cleansing"....He is opposed not just to the occupation of the West Bank but to the very existence of the Israeli state.*" Ethnic cleansing is the process of murder, displacement and dispossession against Palestinians during the *Nakba* brilliantly documented and described by Israeli historian Ilan Pappé in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. In 2011, UN official Richard Falk used the term "ethnic cleansing" to describe the continued construction and expansion of Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and eviction of Palestinians. Just three months ago, British MP Bob Russell described as "ethnic cleansing" Israel's planned eviction of 30,000 Bedouins from the Negev desert. *As a scholar,*

as a citizen of the world, as a humanitarian, I am opposed to state-sponsored ethnic cleansing and to settler colonial regimes everywhere in the world. That is why I support the academic boycott of Israel universities which are complicit in these processes. If Nelson is not opposed to ethnic cleansing and settler colonialism, he should just come out and say it, or tell us why he thinks so many scholars and democratically elected officials around the world use it to describe Israeli state policy.

Finally, Nelson's reported assertions that *JAF* should publish essays opposing the academic boycott of Israeli universities in the name of "balance" is of a piece with his expulsion of Palestinians from his conception of academic freedom. Nelson equates his personal opposition to the academic boycott with scholarly objectivity. In so doing, he has helped to incite a slander campaign against the editor appointed by AAUP to manage the affairs of the *Journal of Academic Freedom*. This is shameful. Ashley Dawson is to be commended for spotlighting in *JAF* an issue that as Joan Scott's makes clear has been at the center of discussion within AAUP for some time.