Although we only later came to realize its significance in our lives, and for Palestine advocacy generally, February 2017 turned out to be a watershed month for those of us on the frontlines of the Palestine advocacy movement in the UK. That month, amid a wave of cancellations of events critical of Israel, we were attacked in the media, smeared as antisemitic, and simultaneously supported and censored by our universities. The following month was marked by unprecedented censorship of Israel-critical events across the UK. As we have since learned, these events were linked to the UK government’s adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. While many communities and activists were affected by the event cancellations and the many other forms of censorship linked to the IHRA adoption, to our knowledge, we are the first UK-based academics who were directly targeted as a result of written statements relating to Israel. Malaka Shwaikh was then based at the University of Exeter, and completing her PhD on Palestinian hunger strikers at the time of the attack. Rebecca Ruth Gould had recently moved to the University of Bristol, where she was a Reader (Associate Professor) in Translation Studies and Comparative Literature.

Three years after these events, we are, for the first time, telling our stories together. Although we did not know each other at the time we were attacked, we have since become allies, co-authors, and academic partners with a shared interest in and commitment to Palestine.¹ The better we came to know each other, the more struck we were by the elements that brought our stories together. We were attacked by the same organization in the days leading up to Israel Apartheid Week, in both cases for statements we had made about Israeli politics several years earlier. In both cases, too, the media systematically distorted what we had said, and our universities failed spectacularly to support us while we were under attack. The attacks left us...
isolated, and compelled to fend for ourselves in a hostile environment. Few observers at the time recognized the links between what was happening to us, but in retrospect the timing and other parallels suggest a coordinated effort to silence Israel-critical speech. By intertwining our stories in this essay, we hope to shed light on the pervasive institutional complicity in silencing dissent, and to counter the media’s tendency to treat such attacks as mere episodes in the lives of individuals, and for its role in systematically silencing Palestinian voices. This partnership in life writing offers a collaborative narrative belonging to a genre that has been called “dual autobiography” (Couser 222).

This is not, however, the only way in which our stories intersect. Our stories— their simultaneity, their parallels, and their divergences—also provide material for reflection for activists who recognize free speech as the essential condition for their work. Our encounters with censorship reveal the dynamics that the US-based advocacy organization Palestine Legal has termed “the Palestine exception to free speech,” whereby special interest groups “pressure universities, government actors, and other institutions to censor or punish advocacy in support of Palestinian rights” (3). Our stories also show how hate speech wounds within the particular logic of the Palestine exception to free speech. By exploring the intersections of free speech and Palestinian rights in these pages, we uncover the specific pressures that activists face, and reveal how even liberal democracies with robust traditions of supporting free speech fall short when it comes to supporting the rights of activists and academics in their campaigns for Palestinian rights. We further show how a lifewriting framework can shed light on these gaps and help to bring about change.

We narrate our stories consecutively, beginning with Malaka and followed by Rebecca, and then consider the similarities and differences that marked our experiences. Although our stories are presented consecutively, they are not separate from each other, for we came to terms with what happened to ourselves when we were exposed to what happened to the other. Our engagement with each other’s stories helped us to grasp the structural means through which Palestinians and others are oppressed. We conclude by reflecting on how universities and academics can respond to such attacks while respecting the academic freedom of their faculty and students and being attentive to the challenges faced by minority members of the community and by Palestinians who come under attack. The ways we were targeted and attacked were temporally linked but empirically distinct, given our distinct positions within the academy’s hierarchy. In co-authoring both narratives, we move beyond both the isolation we experienced when we first came under attack, and the politics of recrimination that drove these attacks. The experience of co-authorship has helped us to engage with the solidarities that developed from our political targeting. The co-authoring of our narratives thereby becomes a co-authoring of each other’s life story, as well as a means of linking our individual experiences to a broader collective goal. In so doing, we defy the logic of individualized—and often ad hominem—attacks that aim to isolate us and to obscure the wide reach of our struggle.
Malaka’s Story: Guilt by Association

I was targeted first, on the last day of the elections for vice-president of the Exeter Student Guild. The Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA), an organization that subsequently came to dominate much of the conversation in the UK concerning antisemitism within the Labour Party and in university contexts, tagged me in a tweet on February 17, 2017. They complained that antisemitic graffiti, including swastikas, on university residence halls had been ignored by the university. On that day, an exchange took place between CAA and the University of Exeter’s official Twitter account, which showed that the group was seeking to implicate me in these antisemitic events, notwithstanding a total absence of evidence. “As @UniofExeter brushes off antisemitic incidents,” CAA wrote on Twitter, “we reveal that @MalakaMohammed is about to be elected unopposed” (@antisemitism).

The link proposed was spurious; I had no knowledge of the graffiti and was in no way a party to it. But CAA did not bother to examine the data critically. The university uncritically adopted the guilt-by-association tactics employed by CAA, and failed to challenge the unfounded link drawn between the antisemitic incidents and tweets I had made six years before.4 In response to CAA’s tweet complaining about my impending election to the student guild, the university responded, “Hi, you can read a statement on antisemitism from our Vice-Chancellor here” (@UniofExeter). The university reposted the same statement, never once consulting with me concerning its media strategy or appearing to take my interests into consideration. Notably, the statement from the vice-chancellor referred to an entirely different and unrelated series of antisemitic incidents, which were completely unconnected to my controversial tweets.

While both CAA’s and the university’s tweets implied a link between the antisemitic incidents and my Twitter feed, there was no evidence to support this linkage, which appears to have been crafted to intensify the hostility of the attack on me. As the attacks against me were mounting, I won the election. In my victory speech a few days later, I spoke out against all forms of racism, including antisemitism. Then, student leaders invited me to speak at a rally against all forms of racism, during which I said:

I will continue to fight for freedom, justice, and equality of my people in Palestine. I will continue to fight all forms of racism and fascism. And I hope you will join me in this because together we are stronger, together we will win. Together our world will be brighter and more inclusive for all regardless of our difference, where we come from, our religions, or background ethnicities. Because we can still disagree and love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and my people’s oppression, and the denial of their human rights and right to exist. (Shwaikh, Speech)

I was born in Palestine, and my parents were refugees from Jaffa city. I lived most of
my life in the Gaza Strip, where Israeli violence killed people very close to my heart. My family taught me to not be silent in the face of injustice, wherever it might come from. These are the values I was brought up with and which until this day shape the way I live.

The day after the elections, CAA responded to the university on Twitter. “Strong words, @UniofExeter. We just found @ExeterGuild’s new VP is ‘proud to be called terrorist,’” they wrote, again referring to a decontextualized tweet, “What will you do?” (@antisemitism). The university responded: “Any action will be taken as determined by our Disciplinary Procedure” (@UniofExeter). While the controversy raged and CAA circulated inflammatory images of me on multiple social media channels that seemed intended to stoke hatred and fear of Islam—and of Palestinians and women in hijabs—at no point did the university consult with me regarding its exchanges with CAA. Nor did they challenge the guilt-by-association tactics deployed by CAA. To the contrary, the university’s response validated CAA’s smear, treating me as guilty-until-proven-innocent for comments made on my Twitter feed many years before I joined the university. The university never publicly referenced my academic freedom or free speech rights, or to its duty of care toward me.

The attacks on social media were gratuitous and calculated at the same time. They encouraged a torrent of hateful messages, with misogynist rants such as “I present the cutie pie of the week a Nazi in a hijab! . . . Funny she looks familiar to me. Isn’t her name ISIS?” Others played up my immigrant status. “Hate speech=deport her,” one comment read. On Facebook, a woman wrote “Lock her up before she gets to do more than talk!! Or deport her . . . either way!!” “How is hate speech legal?” someone wrote, “Why is she not under arrest?” As with the responses from CAA and the university, my own free speech rights were entirely ignored in media coverage. My Israel-critical speech was conflated with hate speech, which was followed by calls for my deportation.

The online attacks continued for many more months. Controversial media commentator Katie Hopkins joined in, tagging my name in a tweet that she pinned to her profile, stating, “Saudi HAS big plans for your city. STOP THE TAKE-OVER” (@KTHopkins). In this same tweet, Hopkins shared the email address of a member of the Exeter City Council, and encouraged her followers to report me. As before with CAA’s attacks, no one specified what precisely I had done to merit this attack, instead using the technique of guilt-by-association (first in connection with the antisemitic graffiti, and later in connection with my hijab, my visibly Muslim appearance, and my Palestinian identity). A freedom of information request that I later placed with the city council revealed a large number of emails sent to the council immediately following Hopkins’s tweet. Contrary perhaps to Hopkins’s expectation, these emails were mostly supportive of me. Earlier in March, I asked the university to step in and protect me. After several phone conversations, university representatives determined that the responsibility to respond lay with the Student Guild, an entity that was legally autonomous from the university,
notwithstanding their extensive interactions on social media directly with CAA and
and their use of guilt-by-association tactics against me in public contexts, which
resulted in threatening messages and hostile media commentary.

Racist comments proliferated on social media, on the Student Guild’s website,
and in the comments section of news stories about me. I was harassed and threat-
ened with “sacking from office” and “locking up.” The Trump presidency had just
begun, and a “travel ban” was suggested against me. In February, with the harass-
ment reaching an unbearable phase, my Twitter handle was hacked. After my
account was hacked, tweets were sent from it on February 20, 2017. There was even
coverage of the attacks on me in the Israeli media (including the Times of Israel
blog, which subsequently posted sensationalized stories about me on their Face-
book page without reaching out to me for comment). Walking down the streets of
Exeter became unbearable for me. Every time I ventured across campus, I was
followed by two students. I overheard others speaking about me while others
abused me verbally. Although I reported all of these incidents to the relevant
authorities, much time passed before any action was taken. There was incessant
stress and damage being done to my mental health, and the university provided
virtually no support. As this story makes clear, such intimidation tactics frequently
have the effect of suppressing Palestinian perspectives and removing the issue of
Palestine from public debates.

On March 14, 2017, the Student Guild’s Trustee Board issued a statement
clearing me of all allegations (Fones). The day before, on March 13, I made a com-
plaint to the Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO), the independent
regulator of most of the UK’s newspapers and magazines. As a result, by March
2018, more than a year later, most of the media outlets that published the CAA
claims had removed them. Some even added public apologies.

Yet the scars remain. Among the most painful aspects of the university’s
handling of my case was its failure to support me from the beginning, or to recog-
nize the racialized and Islamophobic nature of the attacks against me, including in
particular the guilt-by-association smear tactics deployed by CAA. A video posted
on CAA’s YouTube account splices images of the antisemitic graffiti at Exeter with
images of me in hijab, alongside my tweets from years prior, and to the accompani-
ment of ominous music, calls for my expulsion. No one ever directly alleged that I
was responsible for the antisemitic graffiti; the method of insinuation was rather
guilt-by-association, in particular through visual juxtapositions that could not be
challenged by reasoned discourse and which operated according to the logic of the
image. Yet the media framing of the attack, as well as CAA’s persistent accusations,
in defiance of any evidence, linked my tweets from years past to student groups that
posted antisemitic swastikas on the university campus. Not only was this coverage
irresponsible; it also perpetuated the racist attitudes that continue to shape the
experience of higher education for the Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME)
community throughout the UK.

Just as notable as the systematic racism that encouraged the attacks on me was
the lack of recognition for my free speech rights during the university’s adjudication of the accusations against me. My academic freedom as a PhD student and a scholar of Palestine was never recognized or even noted by anyone involved in assessing my controversial tweets. In this respect, the contrast with the University of Bristol’s response to the attack on Rebecca is striking, and indicative of the differential ways academic freedom is apportioned by the academy. Students and academics on fixed contracts are not seen to merit the protections for academic freedom that are regularly extended to their more senior colleagues, especially those who are white, male, nondisabled, and well-integrated into existing structures of authority and power.

My experience in trying to tell my side of the story following the attack taught me much about the media’s complicity in silencing Palestinian voices. Back in early 2017, CAA was a relatively unknown organization. Many mainstream Jewish communal organizations regarded it with suspicion and criticized its findings in relation to the prevalence of antisemitism within the UK. One of the most peculiar and least studied aspects of the controversy around antisemitism in the Labour Party is how it has been accompanied by CAA’s rise in prominence, and how the media has conferred on this group a legitimacy that it had not previously possessed. Surprisingly to some, traditionally left-of-center media outlets such as The Guardian have played a leading role in legitimating CAA’s defamatory guilt-by-association methods. As the next example shows, even alternative media outlets known for their sympathetic treatment of Palestine-related issues have had their integrity compromised by the antisemitism controversy, and in particular by the pressures that CAA has exerted in the public sphere through threats of lawsuits and defamation.

After the university determined that there was no basis for disciplinary action, I proceeded to draft a narrative about my experience, in which I reflected on the broader challenges that early career BAME academics face when they are attacked. I was approached to share an early version of my story in Mondoweiss (Mohammed), an alternative media outlet that describes itself as “an independent website devoted to informing readers about developments in Israel/Palestine and related US foreign policy.” Middle East Eye (MEE), a London-based online news outlet focusing on the Middle East, also expressed interest in publishing a similar version of this story, commenting that it was an “excellent piece.” However, the publication was halted when MEE reached out to CAA for a response on March 16, 2017. An editor said they had a “strong worded reply back from the CAA,” shared it with their boss, and would run it by lawyers first thing in the morning. When I wrote to MEE to ask them to release its communication with CAA, its response was that it was not obliged, and that it would not be appropriate to provide such correspondence. When contacted later regarding our plans to reflect on this incident in the present essay, the publication said it is not correct to suggest that MEE did not publish our piece because of pressure from CAA, and it would be “wholly improper” to publish such an assertion. MEE also asserted that it took the view that it could not
be confident that my piece would “serve the interest of the public as a whole” and that it “cannot afford to take any risk.”

MEE’s assessment that my story did not “serve the interest of the public” should be considered alongside the fact that it had read and had agreed to publish the piece, prior to being contacted by CAA. While I do not accept MEE’s explanation, I have included it here in order to provide the full context for the attack on me. MEE’s complicity in silencing me and preventing my side of the story from circulating is particularly disappointing coming from a news outlet that has traditionally been on the vanguard of reporting on Palestinian perspectives on Israeli human rights abuses, and which regularly publishes work by other journalists well-known for their support of Palestinian rights such as Ben White and Jonathan Cook.

The scarce commentary that exists on recent developments in antisemitism in the UK by and large lacks a critical orientation. As a result, allegations made against Palestinian activists are regularly taken at face value, while the accusing parties escape critical scrutiny. Once it acquired non-profit status, CAA also acquired new legitimacy in the British sphere, with the media treating its spokespeople as authorities simply due to the organization’s name.

Meanwhile, isolated academics continue to be targeted. Especially when they are early in their careers, members of minority groups, or immigrants, targeted academics lack the resources to fight back and do not have easy access to adequate legal representation. The attacks against me in the spring of 2017 bring into focus the consequences of the media’s biased and uncritical treatment of CAA and other groups that smear Palestine advocates as antisemitic. The mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand on March 29, 2019 show how the combination of xenophobia, racist media coverage, and institutional apathy can lead to serious violence. Even when the result is not physical violence, the passive racism that characterized the attack on me—and the institutional complicity in it—reinforces Islamophobia and other forms of prejudice, while antisemitism remains unaddressed.

Rebecca’s Story: Silencing Critique, Erasing Context

My story begins with an article I wrote in 2011, which was brought to the attention of the media by CAA, the same organization that had initiated the attack against Malaka. I wrote this brief article while I was living in Bethlehem and commuting regularly to Jerusalem as a postdoctoral fellow at the Van Leer Institute Jerusalem, a center for advanced studies in all areas of the humanities. I was a recipient of a five-year Polonsky Fellowship, widely regarded as Israel’s most prestigious humanities fellowship. Although I applied for the fellowship just before receiving my PhD with a project relating to Islamic rhetoric, I was also drawn to the location: I wanted to learn more about relations between Palestine and Israel. As a graduate of Columbia University’s Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures (as it was then called), I was quite familiar with Palestinian advocacy.
movements, but was waiting to commit myself to a specific position in regards to the emerging boycott movement until I had the chance to witness the situation first hand. The Polonsky Fellowship gave me a chance to live in Bethlehem and work in Jerusalem, and thereby to simultaneously experience life under occupation and life within Israel, often both in a single day.

My article “Beyond Anti-Semitism” was published in the leftwing magazine *CounterPunch* in 2011, while I was residing in Bethlehem, in the occupied territories, and commuting regularly across the checkpoints into Jerusalem. The article used as one of its main intertexts Judith Butler’s essay in defense of BDS, “No, it’s not anti-semitic,” which was published eight years earlier. More recently, in a foreword to a volume on antisemitism by Jewish Voice for Peace, Butler addresses how it feels to be accused of antisemitism. Butler writes,

> Those who make use of the accusation [of antisemitism] for the purposes of suppressing criticism actually know that the person accused is not antisemitic, for otherwise the accusation could not hurt as it does. Indeed, it does not matter whether the accusation is true, because the accusation is meant to cause pain, to produce shame, and to reduce the accused to silence. (“Foreword” xii)

I am not Jewish according to any widely accepted definition, but Butler’s words deeply resonated with me. On my father’s side, I am of Jewish descent. My father’s ancestors were born in Lodz, in what was then the Pale of Settlement within the Russian empire and is now a part of Poland. They migrated to Australia in the nineteenth century, in search of new opportunities, before arriving in the US, where they became perfect capitalists, converted to Catholicism, and changed their name from the Jewish Goldstein to the gentile Gould to improve their economic prospects. Such is the extent of my ancestral link to Judaism.

In January 2017, I was informed by the head of Modern Languages at the University of Bristol that I was soon to be accused of antisemitism in the student newspaper by a student of one of my large lectures on literary translation who would deem my 2011 article, which he had located online, antisemitic. He apparently came across it while browsing my profile on the Social Science Research Network, a scholarly repository widely used by political scientists and legal scholars.17 The student condemned my article in the online edition of *Epigram*, the student newspaper, which concealed both his name and my own. He stated that, so long as I did not bring my views concerning Israel “into the classroom,” I had “the right to them, however much they disgust and repel” (Anonymous). Yet, even as he recognized my right to my views—a notable contrast to the categorical and intensely personalized condemnation of Malaka, and the denial of her free speech rights—the student accusing me also insisted that my article was antisemitic, specifically my discussion of the Nazi legacy in the context of a critique of Israel. The student wrote that any such discussion “is officially defined as contemporary anti-Semitism, whether you like it or not.” Interestingly, the student referenced the controversial
definition of antisemitism, under the guise of its earlier label associated with the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), as if to draw strength from the adoption of the IHRA definition earlier that year. A colleague who read the letter pointed to the student’s invocation of the new definition as a sign that I had every reason to be afraid. In those days before the IHRA definition had transformed the UK political landscape, and before the University of Bristol had adopted the definition, the political weight behind this particular set of accusations seemed to be underestimated.

A few weeks passed in awkward silence and nervous negotiations with the university administration (who had been warned of the simmering controversy by the editor of the student newspaper). No one knew how to react, or what the future held. As with the attack on Malaka, the university’s first priority seemed to be to avoid controversy. The University of Bristol had recently attracted significant negative media attention due to a string of student suicides, and at that time the last thing they wanted was more negative media coverage. As with the University of Exeter, Bristol wanted to keep things under wraps, to conceal rather than reveal. Given the intensity of debate around Palestine and Israel, it was inevitable, however, that the story would circulate.

On February 20, 2017, the day of Malaka’s victory speech condemning racism and two weeks before Israel Apartheid Week, a story appeared in The Telegraph repeating the distorted and misleading claim that I had called for the Holocaust to be no longer “privileged” (Turner), when in fact I had simply advocated for the use of the Hebrew word Shoah in place of the Christian term Holocaust. Ironically, given the article’s reception, my goal was to emphasize the singularity of the genocide of the Jewish people and to point to its legacy in the present, not to detract from this atrocity. One of the worst aspects of the distortion of the article by those who attacked it, and by institutions keen to protect their reputation, was the erasure of its Palestinian as well as its Israeli context. “Beyond Anti-Semitism” was an article that could never have been written in any other geography, outside the Israeli parameters that I was living through at the time. To read it in ignorance of when and where it was written was not to read it at all. The Telegraph story was followed by a wave of threatening and harassing emails, as well as lengthy diatribes, some of which were masked as letters of support, from a number of people who appeared to be suffering from various neuroses, including what they glibly termed “Holocaust scepticism.”

The university lawyer requested that I not make public statements concerning the controversy, so I relinquished any attempt to set the record straight. Instead, I confined myself to a sound bite-style defense of anti-Zionism, since the media was unwilling to address the issue in depth. My freedom to speak was immeasurably greater than Malaka’s, yet it was still quite limited. Meanwhile, the student who instigated the incident vocally portrayed himself as a champion of free speech in venues such as The Jewish Chronicle and HuffPost (Doherty; Gray). He gave interviews to these newspapers about why he opposed calls for my dismissal, although
he despised my way of thinking and continued to label me a Holocaust denier. The student explained that he had decided to address the challenge posed by my critique of Israel (which I had never directed to him, or to any student ever, and never referenced in a classroom context) by creating his own “safe space” in the classroom.

Although *The Jewish Chronicle* falsely claimed in its interview with the student that I “did not respond to a request for comment from the *JC*,” I received no emails or phone calls from the newspaper and was given no right of reply. Similarly, *The Telegraph* reporter who “broke” the story about my article refused to run a follow-up story once the inquiry had concluded in my favor, or even to correct the misleading allegations in her original article. My experience echoes Malaka’s with regard to the tendency of the media to only report one side of the story and to ignore the voices of the accused.

Like Malaka, I was pressured to self-censor and remain silent from numerous directions. The head of my school, who was nominally supportive and repeatedly affirmed that she did not perceive any problems in my article, also warned me of the negative consequences of having it posted on a public website. While no one directly demanded that I take the article down, it was made clear to me that this was the option preferred by university administrators. Knowing how reliant I would be on support from the university in the days ahead, I bent to their pressure.

Another uncanny similarity between Malaka’s experience and my own has to do with our treatment by the media. Like Malaka, I felt the urge to tell my side of the story as soon as the attacks began, and I saw my writing distorted and quoted out of context. I therefore contacted an editor at *The Guardian*, who showed an interest in giving me the opportunity to tell my side of the story. The university asked that I wait until the inquiry had concluded to tell my story. Also, for the sake of maintaining a consistent narrative, it seemed better to wait until the university was able to issue a press statement in my defense. They did not release a statement until July 2017, at which point the following text appeared in a relatively obscure corner of the university website:

Earlier this year we received a complaint from the Campaign against Anti-Semitism which raised concerns about an article called ‘Beyond Anti-Semitism’ written by Dr Rebecca Gould, a Reader in Translation Studies and Comparative Literature in the School of Modern Languages, and published in 2011.

The University carefully and extensively reviewed Dr Gould’s article and concluded that the article is not anti-Semitic and does not breach the proper bounds of freedom of speech and academic freedom. We will therefore be taking no further action in relation to this matter.

Both Dr Gould and the Campaign against Anti-Semitism have been informed of our findings. ("University of Bristol Statement")
In contrast to Malaka’s experience, the University of Bristol did refer rhetorically to my academic freedom in its official statements. Whether they upheld it in practice, cleaving to the spirit and not just the letter of this formulation, is another question.

By the time that the university issued its statement, much of the controversy had subsided. Yet I still had a story to tell, and the press office supported my decision to go public with my story. I therefore renewed the conversation with The Guardian editor, who reviewed my piece and made preparations for its publication. The essay would be posted on The Guardian website within days, I was told. Then suddenly, as happened to Malaka, the editor fell silent and publication was stalled. Since this silence coincided with a period of particularly misleading coverage in the mainstream media around the IHRA definition of antisemitism and its controversial status within the Labour Party, it was difficult not to make a connection with The Guardian’s apparent resistance to publishing my piece after they had already agreed to. At any rate, the conversation with The Guardian ended there, following many unanswered messages. I returned to pursuing these questions in the scholarly domain. Whatever their limits, scholarly journals have to date shown a greater willingness to deal with these issues in all their necessary complexity than have media venues. In the years following the attack on me, I have been asked to speak about my experience internationally, I have been contacted by policymakers from as far away as Canada (which recently adopted the IHRA definition), and have had my writings on the subject translated into Arabic for a journal based in Ramallah.

When you are labelled an antisemite, you engage with the world differently. You wonder whether your interlocutors, colleagues, and students suspect you of being the very thing you most despise. If they make no comment on the accusation, you assume that they secretly despise you, consider you beneath contempt, and are treating you as a friend or colleague out of mere politeness. You feel the urge to speak constantly about the accusations made against you, to repeatedly confess the crime you did not commit, to purge yourself of the imputed guilt, the antisemitism you were seen to inherit by virtue of your birth, your politics, or your convictions. If you force yourself to keep silent, you are consumed by guilt. As with someone wrongly accused of a crime, so with Muslim targets of Islamophobia: when one is repeatedly asked to condemn terrorist acts, the accusation begins to haunt one’s consciousness. Projection starts to matter more than reality. Everyone and everything suddenly become sources of insecurity. Women are particularly vulnerable in this position, since they are often inclined to blame themselves when others bear the greatest responsibility.

Context, it is said, is everything. For cultural and political matters, the text matters too. What we make of the text depends heavily on the context within which it is interpreted. Literary texts create their own contexts, independent of the worlds within which they were created. They also create new contexts for new readers, and this is what makes them literary. But not every text transcends its historical provenance. Not every text can continue to signify in the aftermath of its decontextualization. “Beyond Anti-Semitism” is context-bound. It is best understood as an
historical document written from within the occupation. Judged as literature—as a text that speaks for itself—it fails, due to its inability to transcend its time and space. Whether it merits criticism or praise (and I received both in connection with the controversy) seems to miss the point for a text that is, first and foremost, a historical document. The same applies to Malaka’s tweets from when she was living in the Gaza Strip. As to whether the article, the tweets, or their authors are antisemitic, as scholars who believe in the importance of taking all allegations (whether of racism or sexism) seriously, we prefer to let others form their own opinions on the basis of the texts themselves. What we have learned in the process of trying to arrive at answers to these questions is that no definition of antisemitism is likely to obtain a consensus. Similarly, we learned that the erasure of context limits any good faith effort to work towards antisemitism’s eradication.

Techniques of Character Assassination

Our stories attest to a vast apparatus of techniques used to perpetuate aggression against Palestinians and their supporters beyond the bounds of Israel proper. These censorious tactics are becoming increasingly normalized across Europe and North America following shifts in governmental positions regarding Israel and Palestine, as reflected in the UK government’s adoption of the IHRA definition, a move that has been followed by numerous countries, from Greece to Canada. The increase in censorship parallels developments within Israel in recent years, as the Israeli state increasingly punishes speech critical of its human rights violations in Palestine. Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Palestinians have been killed, deported, surveilled, imprisoned, and subjected to intensive campaigns of character assassination. Such attacks systematically silence the voices that most need to be heard.

While there are drastic differences between the suppression of freedom in the occupied territories and the suppression of Israel-critical dissent within the UK and North America, these acts of silencing operate according to parallel strategies, and sometimes exhibit common features. The “evidence” used to smear us was based on old work taken entirely out of context and manipulated to create a false picture. Interconnected tweets by Malaka were published separately, others were mistranslated or decontextualized, and some tweets were hacked. Rebecca’s words were similarly misquoted in ways that construed them as asserting the exact opposite of what they said. Mainstream media reiterated the untruths, giving further weight to the slurs and defamation. Media outlets supposedly sympathetic to free speech and academic freedom initially lent their support to the idea of making our voices heard. However, they soon withdrew their offers, likely fearing adverse legal action from the attacking organizations.

Attempts to defame us as pro-Palestinian activists, and Malaka as a Muslim woman, aimed to silence and exclude us on the basis of our beliefs and identities. That such attempts immediately gained traction in the mainstream media outlets
and were passively assented to by major public institutions demonstrates that racism is not a thing of the past. Its structures permeate the institutions of liberal democracy at all levels, and come into acute focus in connection with attempts to suppress Palestine advocacy.

Why were we targeted for attack? At a time when synagogues and mosques alike are regularly targeted by xenophobic shooters, and when a proper campaign against antisemitism, as against all racism, is urgently needed, Israel advocacy groups like CAA work instead to attack Israel’s critics with false accusations of antisemitism. The use of smear tactics to silence criticism of Israel should be a matter of concern for everyone, regardless of their political allegiances, particularly in a country that espouses values of democracy and freedom of speech. The Palestine exception to free speech and academic freedom widens every day, as attacks against Palestine activists at all levels proliferate, and Israel’s occupation persists.

Our intertwined experiences of being attacked by the media and various Israel advocacy groups reveal as many differences as similarities. Both are instructive. The attacks on Rebecca were less personal and more focused on her professional status. They separated her convictions about Palestine from her (perceived) authority as an academic and university teacher. It was not her opinions that mattered to those who accused her, or the words she used to describe her views; what counted for them was the position she was taken to represent. At the same time, the accusations impacted her personally, for the accusation of antisemitism felt like an attack on her humanity.

Hate-filled social media messages were more voluminous and more personal in Malaka’s case, and certainly more racist. The types of threats made against her were more heinous, threatening not just her future career, but her physical safety. Notwithstanding her reports to the police, no one took concrete action to defend her. In the case of Malaka, it was not just her professional status, but her very identity, as a Palestinian and a Muslim woman, that was under attack. Also, because Rebecca, as an established academic—unlike Malaka who was still a student—had an excellent lawyer to support her and look out for her interests, Rebecca’s university was less able to manipulate her or to dictate her actions. With that said, Rebecca too operated under extreme constraints and was pressured by the university administration to remove her Israel-critical article from the public domain.

Neither of us was ever wholly in control of the narratives that circulated about us while these events transpired, and we only came to see how much we shared many months after we were attacked. The coercive silencing to which we were subjected—often by well-intentioned colleagues—motivated us to tell our stories together, and to show how they relate to each other. We hope that other academics who come under attack will also be able to weave together narratives that will strengthen their networks of solidarity and clarify their struggle.
Forging Solidarities from Intertwined Narratives

Through years of friendship and solidarity—solidarity forged throughout friendship and friendship forged through solidarity—we have come to see how our narratives acquire new meanings when understood in relation to each other. Both of our respective universities chose to protect their reputations rather than to transparently adjudicate the issues pertaining to racism and academic freedom raised by our cases. Risk aversion dominated all institutional decisions. Every ethical consideration was subordinated to perceived reputational damage and negative media exposure. Malaka’s response to the allegations was not sought prior to the university response, and Rebecca was only able to secure such consultation from her university through the mediation of her lawyer. We were denied the right to reply by numerous media sources, and to defend ourselves and our names. Our work in anti-racism was conveniently ignored because it did not fit the narratives used to discredit us. Appearance mattered more than reality, as was evidenced by the fact that the inquiry into Rebecca’s article was only undertaken once there was adverse media coverage and a CAA complaint made such an inquiry politically expedient. Malaka’s old tweets had been publicly available for many years, yet they only incited controversy following an unrelated antisemitic incident at her university and the UK government’s adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism. The institutional handling of our cases can be broadly described as a process of prioritizing outside appearances over our empirical realities.

There were numerous calls to have us removed from our positions. Malaka’s situation was more precarious than Rebecca’s due to the combination of her student status and her Palestinian identity. Yet our status as immigrant women, and outsiders to UK higher education, placed us in a similar position. Although her university determined that Malaka had not brought her institution into disrepute, and she remained a member of the trustee board, and continued to hold the position to which she had been elected, the institutional response was unnecessarily adversarial and oblivious to the racialized nature of the attacks she faced, and to the dangers it posed to her physical safety and well-being. In Rebecca’s case, a university panel comprised of three academics (whose identities were never disclosed to her or her lawyer) determined that there were no grounds for taking disciplinary action. One might ask, what was the need for such a panel to begin with? That an article published four years before she joined the university, and which had not been regarded as requiring a panel to review it prior to The Telegraph story, was suddenly seen to merit an inquiry after attention from the media attests to how the university’s deliberations were held captive by public opinion. This valuing of appearance over reality was equally evident in Malaka’s case.

Academic freedom was invoked in Rebecca’s case—it was entirely absent from the university response to Malaka—but it was by no means honored as fully as it ought to have been. The way our universities handled the attacks on us contrasts with the case of Johnny Eric Williams at Trinity College (in Hartford,
Connecticut), a sociologist who was subjected to death threats and placed on administrative leave by his institution following social media posts that some considered controversial. Williams has criticized the handling of the attack on him by the Trinity College administration (“Academic Freedom Double Standard”). Whatever the flaws of Trinity College’s immediate response, the college issued a report and the Dean of Faculty made recommendations (Cresswell). This response was many steps ahead of the treatment that we received when attacked for alleged antisemitism.20

The most striking difference between Williams’s treatment and our own relates to the central role of academic freedom in the dean’s report and its relative absence from the institutional handling of both of our cases. This difference is linked to the Palestine exception to free speech, which we have broadened out here into a consideration of academic freedom and its limits in the context of Palestine advocacy. Concerning the social media posts that led to death threats against Williams, Trinity Dean Tim Cresswell states that “his extramural utterances are covered by the concept of academic freedom, his responsibility to ‘state the truth’ as he sees it, and his rights as a citizen” (19). Elsewhere in the same report, Cresswell insists that “Professor Williams’ comments are political speech in a public forum on issues of current social concern, and therefore lie at the very heart of the First Amendment and principles of academic freedom” (15). British universities lack a constitutional provision like the First Amendment that academics can invoke when asserting their academic freedom. The relative weakness of legal protections for academic freedom in the UK made it easier for this principle to become a shell of itself when we came under attack.

The growing constraints on academic freedom are not purely a legal problem to be parsed according to the existence or nonexistence of certain laws. Nor is it limited to the UK. The problem runs deeper and touches on the very limits of academic freedom itself, as implemented within the neoliberal academy and as made manifest in connection with Palestine activism. As Steven Salaita has argued, rather than treating academic freedom as an abstract principle that is in itself sufficient to guarantee the flow of ideas within the academy, we are better off understanding it as a “participant in material politics,” with all the compromises such materiality entails.21 Like any material politics, academic freedom cannot function “without tenure, worker solidarity, and an adequate job market, which are all in decline” (Salaita).

Salaita advances a radical proposal. The problem with academic freedom as we conceive of it today, he suggests, is its reliance on an individualistic conception of civil liberties. All too often, academic freedom is apportioned only to privileged, elite academics, while it is denied to their more precariously-situated academic colleagues. In this way, the implementation of academic freedom in the contemporary university mirrors the very hierarchies that activism seeks to contest. As a Palestinian academic whose story of being “de-hired” by the University of Illinois for his Israel-critical tweets has come to symbolize the Palestine exception to free speech,
Salaita knows whereof he speaks. His life is testimony to the limits of academic freedom within the neoliberal academy. The material conditions of academic freedom within the contemporary university mean that Palestinian or pro-Palestinian activists must be prepared to be treated as exceptions to the putatively universal rule that every academic has the right to research, publish, and speak their mind on matters of intellectual concern, without fearing the consequences.

Our experiences show that thus far British universities have failed to take seriously the academic freedom of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian academics and researchers. We can also see universities that have, for the most part, failed to confront the challenges to academic freedom posed by the IHRA definition, which, as noted above, the UK was among the first jurisdictions in the world to adopt. The attacks against us would not have been conceivable apart from this definition, and the power conferred on it through governmental adoption.

**What Is to Be Done?**

While Salaita’s critique of the limits of academic freedom within the neoliberal university should never be forgotten, our experiences of being attacked for our views have revealed a few concrete ways universities can help even within these limits. First, our universities should not have placed their public images above the mental and physical well-being of their community members. Rather than caving to media pressure, universities should attend to the voices of their most direct stakeholders in these attacks and seek to provide them with effective support. Second, university administrators should educate themselves concerning the political climate within which Palestinian advocacy and scholarship is forced to operate. Rather than rushing to judgment, they should evaluate the situation critically, with an awareness of how abusive applications of the IHRA definition have proliferated, and mindful of how antisemitism allegations have been used to silence Israel-critical speech. Third, rather than limiting their benefits to a select class of academics, universities should implement the principles of academic freedom as broadly as possible, and in a fair and even-handed manner. This means extending the protections afforded by academic freedom and freedom of speech equally to professors, early career academics on fixed-term contracts, and students. Alongside arguing for a more collective and systematic implementation of academic freedom within UK universities, we argue that its remit should be extended to encompass students and other stakeholders in the academy. Although Malaka has now received her PhD and is teaching at the University of St Andrews, she was still a PhD student when she was attacked. She was a student, but that is no reason why her words should not have been protected by academic freedom. Finally, students and staff must work together to put pressure on universities to make sure the aforementioned recommendations are implemented.

As Salaita suggests, academic freedom is best understood as a collective rather than an individual good. It is necessary to society in general, and everyone benefits
from it, including those it does not directly protect. Anyone engaged in the enterprise of advancing scholarly knowledge should have their controversial speech protected by the principle of academic freedom. Gradually, the collective dimension of academic freedom is gaining traction within the academy. A recent example is a letter signed by Stuart Laing, president of the British Society of Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), opposing the IHRA definition and recognizing the particular danger that the definition poses to early career academics and students within Middle Eastern Studies. The letter recognizes that, in contexts where the definition is being considered for adoption, “Academics employed on temporary contracts as well as students are particularly susceptible to self-censorship out of fear that any sort of accusations, even if false and malicious, could jeopardize their future ability to obtain permanent employment” (Laing).

If the warning issued by the UK’s leading scholarly association for Middle Eastern Studies has had an effect on the decision-making processes of those in positions of power and authority in UK higher education, this has transpired far from the public gaze. The general public, like most academics, remains by and large ignorant of the damage done by these attempts to silence and suppress Israel-critical speech. The profoundly unequal logic of the Palestine exception has eluded too many observers. As Salaita suggests in critiquing contemporary notions of academic freedom, we must recognize the concept’s limits in order to maximize its strengths. Academics across Europe and North America should come together, in solidarity with Palestinians and other oppressed peoples, to oppose all government policy, including the IHRA definition, and all legislation, such as Prevent, the cornerstone of the UK government’s anti-terrorism strategy, that silences dissent and limits our freedom of inquiry.

Our most direct advice is for our fellow academics who find themselves under attack, targeted for their beliefs and identities, and who may feel isolated as we did during the height of the attacks. To you, we want to say: you do not struggle alone. Others who find themselves in similar situations in the future will benefit from your example. The censorship you face will inform the solidarities you forge, as happened for us, over the long term. The full political meaning of what we experienced was revealed only when—as a result of our friendship, co-authorship, and the solidarities we forged—our separate stories became linked to each other. In the act of co-authorship, we learned to tell together two histories that are often separated from each other: the Palestinian quest for freedom, and the global struggle for academic freedom. To borrow Salaita’s formulation, “defying the logic of recrimination,” we began to show “how the downtrodden have always won.”
Notes

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1. The first major result of our collaboration is a co-authored monograph, currently titled *Prison Hunger Strikes as Civil Resistance in Palestine and Beyond* (forthcoming with the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict).

2. These efforts arguably reached their peak the following year, in the explosive controversy relating to antisemitism within the Labour Party. For further background, see Stern-Weiner.

3. We are indebted to Julie Rak for this formulation.

4. Readers wishing to know more about the tweets should see Shwaikh, “Character Assassination.”

5. The tweet appears to have been deleted.

6. Malaka’s new Twitter account is @MalakaShwaikh. Rebecca can be followed on @rrgould.

7. For example, see Osen.


9. See Bhopal.

10. The Institute for Jewish Policy Research described one of CAA reports on antisemitism within the UK as “littered with flaws, and in the context of a clear need for accurate data on this topic . . . rather irresponsible.”

11. Flaws in *The Guardian’s* coverage of antisemitism within the UK are documented at length in Schlosberg and Laker.

12. Although *MEE* has covered the antisemitism within Labour controversy (see, for example, Cook), apparently CAA’s racist smearing of me was too controversial even for them.

13. For example, Sarah K. Cardaun simply describes CAA as a new organization “aimed at drawing public attention to . . . the new antisemitism” (152).

14. For a recent reflection of the role played by hate speech in perpetrating this massacre, see Moses.

15. The article was published in *CounterPunch* in November 2011 under the title “Beyond Anti-Semitism.” For a detailed account of the circumstances surrounding this adoption, see Gould, “Legal Form and Legal Legitimacy.”
16. My other work based on this period of my residency in Palestine includes “The Materiality of Resistance: Israel’s Apartheid Wall in an Age of Globalization” and “For a Political Theory of the Checkpoint: Settler Coloniality in Palestine and the Former Soviet Union.”

17. I have since relocated the article to ResearchGate, and added numerous supplementary sources for additional context.

18. See “EUMC working definition of antisemitism” for a definition that almost entirely mirrors that of the IHRA definition that the UK government had adopted a month earlier. The student’s letter is no longer archived on Epigram’s website.

19. For free speech in Israel, see Martin.

20. Our aim here is not in any way to defend Trinity College’s handling of his case, but rather to note certain striking features of the dean’s report.

21. The Palestine Exception to free speech has prompted a rich body of work that confronts the question of academic freedom while probing its limits. See, for example, Dawson and Mullen 55–92.

22. Here we urge a revision of Robert Post’s account of academic freedom that excludes students from its remit. See also Simpson and Srinivasan 186–210.

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