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Exploring the imperative of "relational documentary": Process, power, and unruly collaboration in media production on Palestine

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Abstract

Becoming an anthropologist of Palestine during the War on Terror meant that the specter of violence and exclusion always loomed over my research; yet I had become an anthropologist out of a commitment to presence in and engagement with people from the Middle East. I investigate the ways in which Faye Ginsburg's approach to studying polarizing issues, her analysis of Indigenous media, and her commitment to ethical collaboration has shaped my written and video work. In the first part of the paper, I discuss how reflexivity and positionality propelled me forward in an ethnographic study of journalistic production. In the second half, I reflect on collaborative film projects that illuminated themes of risk and positionality that are at the heart of politics and media production in Palestine. The model of "relational documentary" analyzed by Ginsburg that considers ethics and politics both on and off screen informs my approach to the obligations of long-running partnerships. Just as much, Ginsburg's commitment to play and creativity allowed me to imagine unexpected explorations of mobility, voice, and place to ask what we can do, working across lines of difference, to be able to hear each other and make space for each other to be heard.

KEYWORDS
collaboration, documentary, imprisonment, Palestine, violence

This article has been in the pipeline for a long time. The pipeline is long in part because this is a reflection on multimodal ethnographic work over two decades. Also, after having written it before October 2023, I am revising it during a settler colonial war of elimination that is the deadliest time for journalists worldwide since the Committee to Protect Journalists began keeping records in 1992 (CPJ, 2024b). Palestinian scholars like me are always writing with a sense that our voices could be misrepresented or that we could be subject to personal attacks because of what we write. Now we are writing with the knowledge that those Palestinian journalists on the frontlines of knowledge production about Palestine could be attacked by the Israeli military at any moment and lose their families (Gordon, 2024; McGreal, 2023), their offices (Peruchon, 2024), their freedom (CPJ, 2024a), or their lives (Abreu et al., 2024). At this humbling and painful time, it is important to consider what it means to collaborate across lines of difference in service of knowledge production, decolonization, and care. For more than two decades, I have learned about a collaborative, creative, and engaged approach to anthropology from Faye Ginsburg.

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As an aspiring scholar who knew I wanted to write about Palestine, I chose anthropology as a discipline for several reasons. I was attracted to the demands that the anthropology I aspired to made for long-term presence in field sites and for political engagement alongside those in the field. It also seemed to offer a lens for me to think about political possibilities beyond the international politics that I had heard about in the news my entire life. Media anthropology opened routes I had not imagined for public communication. Landing at New York University's Anthropology Department with its flagship program in Culture and Media allowed me to pursue ethnography of media and media production in ways that invited creative involvement with Palestinian politics, broadly conceived. Faye Ginsburg's writing and teaching on media processes, Indigenous media, and play as a mode of collaboration have helped me to ask some of the most important questions of my scholarship and politics. Twenty years after I began my research during the US declaration of what it called a "War on Terror," and now in the midst of what the International Court of Justice (2024) has found based on diligent examination of evidence could plausibly be a genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza, I know that these themes will continue to motivate me for the coming decades. In this article, I investigate the ways in which thinking about media processes and collaboratively producing media have deepened my commitment to ethnographic practices that honor Palestinian voices in struggle. I anchor this conversation around three films and two book projects, reflexively investigating their interrelation and their place in the shifting worlds of media anthropology and the anthropology of Palestine.

Ethnography has always been, for me, about disrupting spectacles of politics by attending to process and listening for multivocality. Today, as we must say again and again, all our eyes are on Gaza. The spectacles of killing we witness—spectacles we hold in our hands via our phones, relayed through earphones as though directly into our brains—are unending. Being able to see and hear these catastrophes of an ongoing Nakba is the result of a terrible kind of accomplishment: Palestinians' near-impossible work of documentation in Gaza disrupts Israel's attempts at silencing, fragmenting, and burying. Still, the siege on Gaza—limiting movement and even everyday acts of staying in communication—makes it difficult to get beyond spectacle. How can we build on ethnography that stands firmly on the side of human survival and thriving?

REFLEXIVITY DURING THE "WAR ON TERROR"

At the start of my second year of graduate school in the fall of 2000, the second Intifada began in the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza. US mainstream media consistently decontextualize Palestinian struggle. While the first Intifada of the late 1980s raised the profile of Palestinian popular protest, this time, the world came to see Palestinian politics as characterized only by violence. Like other Palestinians in the academy, I was left reeling from the magnitude of Israeli occupation violence, and I also felt I needed to be ready to respond to renewed attacks in the United States that reduced our politics to terrorism. A year later, New York University closed for a week after the destruction of the Twin Towers by Al-Qaeda operatives. US President Bush had declared an ill-defined "War on Terror."

These events shaped my sense of what it meant to be an anthropologist of Palestine more than I realized at the time. If anti-colonial writing about the Southwest Asian and North African region had long meant confronting stereotypes about Muslim violence and what were regarded as the pathologies of Arab politics (Said, 1997), these issues once again became extremely current. I took inspiration from my professors: from Robert Stam who screened *Battle of Algiers* in mid-September 2001 because it was on the syllabus for the week that New York University re-opened after the 9/11 attack a few miles away, from Lila Abu-Lughod for her decades of work on the fullness of the expressive lives of Bedouin and urban women in Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 1986, 2005).

I learned how anthropology could address topics that were more often treated as headline news rather than subjects for ethnography when I encountered Ginsburg's early work on abortion. *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in An American Community* is an ethnography of Fargo, North Dakota centered around an abortion clinic that opened in the decade after Roe v. Wade guaranteed the right to legal abortions (Ginsburg, 1989). It explored controversial issues in ways that did not sidestep difficult questions but that nevertheless avoided polarization. The book felt like a secret message to me that difficult fieldwork was not only possible but also rewarding.

I admired Ginsburg's awareness of how her social location shaped her research in unlikely ways. It opened the possibility of considering how my social location as a US-born child of a Palestinian father intersected my research. There was a time when "native" and "halfie" anthropology had to be defended (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Narayan, 1993)—which may be hard to believe these days, when some cast aspersions on research that is *not* related to one's biography. With my personal background, I embraced the concept of a "halfie" anthropologist and the peculiar mixture of belonging and estrangement that this category allowed me to explore as a graduate student. By the time I was in the field, I realized it was not only my shared identity as Palestinian that would shape my relationship with my interlocutors, but also the ways in which my experiences differed from theirs. I learned from Ginsburg's own reflections on how she made her way in the field:

> Much to my surprise the fact that I was in many ways 'culturally strange' to Fargo occasionally served to my advantage. Interviews frequently ended with curious questions regarding Jewish holidays, customs, and ceremonies. Had I been a member of a Christian denomination, I would have had to negotiate my way through the numerous inter-and intra-church conflicts in town and my questions about religion and frequent 'church hopping' would have been viewed with some suspicion. As a single woman, my queries and interest in people's feelings about marriage, birth control, motherhood and the like were treated as natural curiosity; responses were often framed as if I were being counseled for my own future conjugal happiness.
>
> (Ginsburg, 1989, 5)

She wrote that being a New Yorker but someone with roots in Chicago helped put her Midwestern interlocutors at ease. I took from these reflections—and from contemporary ethnographies of Palestine that saw relationship to the field as forged not through bloodline but through time spent in dedicated and difficult relation (e.g., Swedenburg, 1995, xv–xix)—that ethnography was never a simple question of "insider" or "outsider" status, or even being "half" an insider. Rather, our biographies can provide many entry points of inquiry for us and our interlocutors. Ethnography is often at its best a dialogical process across complex patterns of difference and connection, being "among—not with" (Swedenburg, 1995, xxv, citing Jean Genet 1989, 3). Even when I felt I was—and desired to be—"with" one group or another (journalists, activists, women preparing food together) in the field, remembering the generative possibility of difference was both vital and energizing.

MEDIA PRODUCTION AS POLITICAL PRACTICE IN A SETTLER COLONY

Faye Ginsburg's groundbreaking work on Indigenous media gave me a language to think about reflexivity in new ways by considering media as political practice. Her work also pushed me to think about Palestinians in terms of indigeneity, at a time when this was not a move many scholars were making. News, I thought, was the primary mode of representing Palestinians abroad, just as ethnographic documentary has been a prime way of representing Indigenous people of the Americas and Oceania. This was a way of placing genres and forms of knowledge in relation to one another to uncover the assumptions of each. Here, too, I drew from one of Ginsburg's key arguments that incorporating both Indigenous media and more conventional ethnographic media "demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging multiple points of view in both the creation and reception of screen representations of culture. In this way, ethnographic film can offer an exemplary model for social theory that increasingly argues for the contested nature of cultural production" (Ginsburg, 1995, 65).

Thinking about the genre of news as quite distinct from ethnography or documentary guided me to my first research project on US news and Palestinian politics. What does it mean that news is the way that non-Palestinians learn about Palestinians? How does this limit the possibilities for non-Palestinians conceiving Palestinian lives from a distance? For those in the United States, who see Palestinians through a lens of journalism, their attention is focused on state policies and international diplomacy. This is quite a different lens than that generally portrayed through ethnographic documentary, with its tendency to focus on people's experiences, their traditions, their relationship to land, their sense of what they need to survive and build a new generation—or even their modes of struggle and resistance that do not make global headlines. Might this dominance of news limit even Palestinians' own imagination of justice? And what does it mean that Palestinians had to risk their lives to help to produce this news?

How could we trouble the binaries whereby "news" covered Palestinians and their "politics" while "documentary" recorded other Indigenous people and their "cultures" and instead think about how Indigenous claims demanded a different kind of politics altogether? I remember this as a time of exploring "emergent indigeneities" (Fortun et al., 2010)—ways of thinking about indigeneity in global and comparative scales that emphasized alterity and structural relationships to colonialism. So I wondered: if documentary was often conceived as a primary means of representing "Indigenous cultures," what could genre itself mean for understandings of social categories like indigeneity? More comparative and capacious perspectives on Palestinians and indigeneity have opened possibilities for analysis (Barakat, 2018). This could move beyond a longstanding vision of indigeneity as rooted in "traditional cultures." Imagining wider understandings of liberation begins with troubling that distinction between "politics" and "culture," by thinking about how both are shot through with power and shaped by history and tradition.

Ginsburg's writing about Indigenous media at sites of struggle also highlighted the richness and complexity that ethnographic perspectives could bring to events that are often sensationalized as headline news. Ginsburg co-wrote with Audra Simpson about Alanis Obomsawin's four-part documentary series about the Oka Crisis on Mohawk land in the early 1990s. They contrast Obomsawin's ethnographic sensibility with that of popular media:

> For the popular media, the 'Oka Crisis' was, as Guy Debord would have it, a 'spectacle' on a grand scale. In Obomsawin's films the spectacle is interrupted, as we see the means of its production, not necessarily the machinery of mediation, but the escalation of the land grievance itself, as if to remind us, 'this is not just a heavily saturated image, this is how it is produced,' and perhaps more importantly, 'this is *why* it was produced.' Such analyses rarely punctuated the evening news.
>
> (Ginsburg & Simpson, 2008, 23)

After decades of watching news about Palestinians, it was this possibility of interrupting spectacle by looking at process that drew me to ethnography.

Before I made it to the field, the field essentially arrived to me in New York—highlighting the need for troubling staid conceptions of "field" and "home" as colonialism and war shape both these spaces. In 2001, I made a documentary through NYU about Mazen Dana, a Reuters cameraperson working in the West Bank, and his visit to New York City to receive an International Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalism (CPJ). In *Across Oceans, Among Colleagues* (Bishara, 2002), I showcased CPJ's reporting on the reporters—like Mazen Dana and others—to draw attention to the violence against Palestinian journalists in images that were difficult to witness, such as scenes of legs bloodied by Israeli rubber bullets and settler children kicking camerapeople. This was the kind of violence Dana experienced as he covered his hometown of Hebron day after day. Upon receiving an award at CPJ's annual Waldorf Astoria banquet, Dana said, *Words and images are a public trust and for this reason I will continue with my work regardless of the hardships and even if it costs me my life*. A few months later, Israeli forces besieged Palestinian cities, and Mazen and his colleagues braved the front lines again. The camaraderie and sense of global collegiality and friendship between CPJ Middle East director Joel Campagna and Mazen Dana during his visit to New York to accept his award (Figures 1 and 2) continued to motivate CPJ's work and advocacy on behalf of Palestinian journalists at a time of grave threat.

On August 17, 2003, less than 2 years after Mazen Dana spoke in New York, a US soldier killed Dana as he reported outside of Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Iraq. Shocked, and now grieving a man I had only known in person for a few days but with whose image and voice I had spent hours in an editing room, I was humbled by how true his words had been about the interconnectedness of our worlds of knowledge, and how dependent we are on intrepid reporting for the information that should inform our political work linking Israeli and US forms of violence and power. Months later, the news broke about horrific abuse at Abu Ghraib prison. If such chaos and violence were going on inside the walls, it was less of a surprise that soldiers would shoot a journalist outside of them.

HIDDEN COLLABORATIONS

One way I found to interrupt the spectacle of Palestinian politics was to turn the camera back toward the Palestinian producers of news themselves. I sought to demonstrate the imbrication of their embodied and intellectual skills, their deep knowledge, and their willingness to sacrifice that they brought to their work. Approaching media as process rather than as text—a theme across Ginsburg's work—was formative. Rather than analyzing final texts, I focused on the processes surrounding media production and reception using a wide lens.

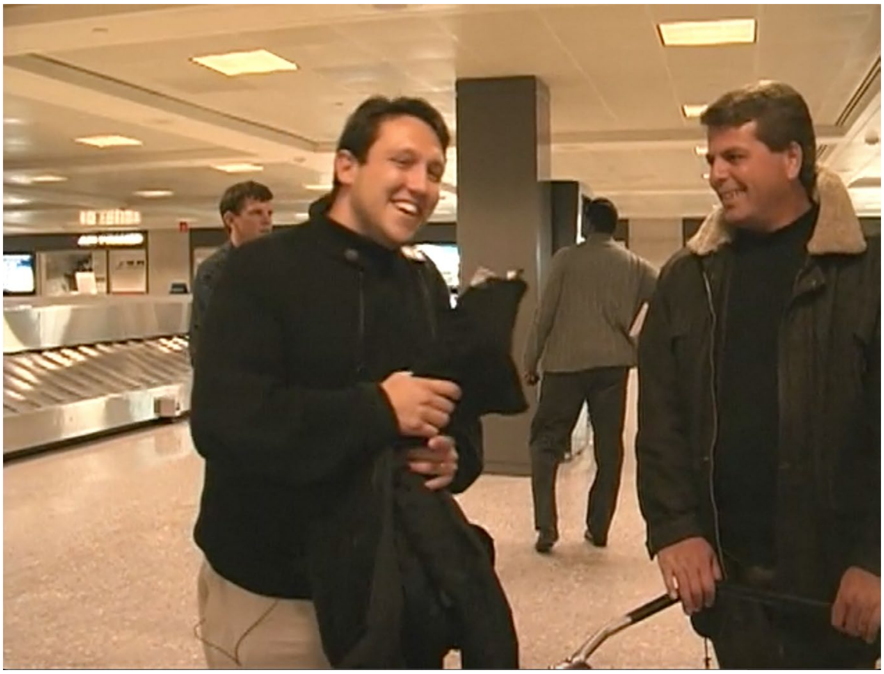

FIGURE 1 Video still, *Across Oceans, Among Colleagues*, Author, New York City, 2001.

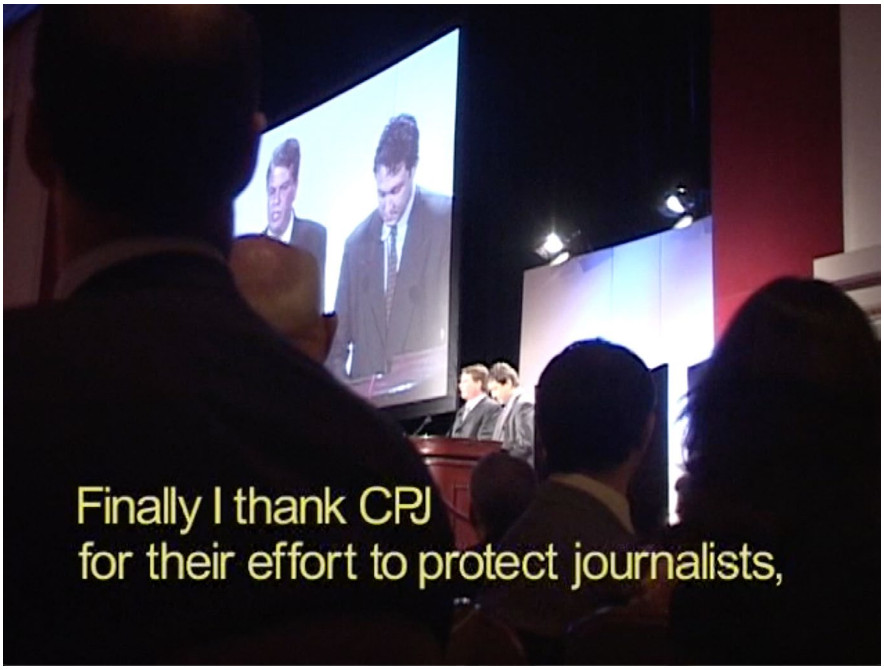
Finally I thank CPJ
for their effort to protect journalists,

FIGURE 2 Video still, *Across Oceans, Among Colleagues*, Author, New York City, 2001.

As Ginsburg wrote with Brian Larkin and Lila Abu-Lughod, "Media reception occurs 'beyond the living room' and media production 'beyond the studio'" (Ginsburg et al., 2002, 1), and anthropologies of media production "make clear the impossibility of separating ideas of the audience from the process of production" (Ginsburg et al., 2002, 17). I began to ask questions about how making media is a crucial cultural practice constituted in society, rather than isolated from it.

In conducting my fieldwork in the occupied West Bank during the second Intifada, I came to think about journalistic practices as encompassing not only US foreign correspondents who receive bylines and appear with microphones on television screens, but also Palestinian journalists and even Palestinian activists and others who wrangle to be a part of the story. Unlike in a situation where media producers are essentially part of the audiences that they imagine, here Palestinian journalists and activists imagined foreign audiences distant from them—especially in North America and Europe. This implicit catering to a specific kind of foreign audience is an element of empire, so pervasive as to often go unstated. I examined how Palestinians organized protests in ways that balanced local priorities and their understandings of North American and European ones. This was one modality of a "double consciousness" that Palestinians maintain in a variety of locations (Du Bois, 2004). I also watched Palestinians take events into their own hands when they refused to engage in the political performances preferred by their leaders in the Palestinian Authority. Standing on a rooftop as mourners took control of a staged funeral for longtime Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, I watched crowds surge toward Arafat's coffin, filling every empty space around it and above it. Rather than staying outside of the official space of the funeral that was also the seat of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, Palestinian mourners were making the day meaningful to them, grieving their flawed leader in crowds firing shots in the air in a ritual expression of intense emotion. They punctuated the stale news narratives about Palestinian violence and refused an easy dichotomy between violence and nonviolence (Bishara, 2013). Standing on those roofs, people correctly anticipated that they would be judged, as they told me during and after the event. They knew they would be viewed as being chaotic and improperly political with their mourning practices, predicting the tropes of US television coverage from the Palestinian street. Here, what Francis Cody (2023) thinks of as a news event that works through feedback loops among street actors, journalists, and others began before the foreign correspondents even contacted their editors with a draft of an article.

Ethnographies of media practice give us a sense of how power operates at every step of media production. Most anglophone scholars writing about US news institutions and the Palestinian Intifada had done so by evaluating or analyzing bias. The roles of Palestinian journalists hardly had a place in the analysis. Even a newsroom ethnography would have minimized the roles of Palestinian fixers, camerapeople, and activists by keeping a focus on those credited as journalists and who had access to the Jerusalem bureaus. But guided by the concept of "media worlds" (Ginsburg et al., 2002), it was possible for me to see how Palestinians on its apparent periphery conceived of media production as a crucial Palestinian practice. I saw that collaboration can meaningfully happen across many forms of difference and across hierarchies of citizenship, education, gender, and more. At a time in the second Intifada when Palestinians were so focused on their representation in North America and Europe, thinking about newsmaking as a practice that extended far beyond the newsroom, beyond the journalists and the spokespeople, illuminated something quite important about Palestinian society. As Palestinians produced US news in the midst of an uprising, both national formations and transnational imaginaries were in play.

In those years, I also saw glimpses of the respect and camaraderie that grew among US and Palestinian journalists as they dealt with the violence of Israeli occupation, maneuvered around its checkpoints, and coped with interviews with grieving people. These friendships among journalists in the West Bank threw into relief a major gap in the news-making scene: Foreign journalists so seldom went to Gaza. This further isolated Palestinian journalists in Gaza over many years. Foreign journalists' limited experience in the Gaza Strip skewed how the rest of the world saw the different parts of the occupied Palestinian territories. Now, we see even more clearly the dangers of closure and blockade: The isolation of Palestinian journalists in Gaza has made them distinctly vulnerable to rhetorical attack and outright killing.

DOCUMENTARY COLLABORATION AS PART OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROCESSES ON TWO CONTINENTS

In the same years that I was working on the scholarship regarding journalism, I also engaged in media production that followed the lead of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank. Friends of a friend asked me to film their youth initiative to raise awareness about young Palestinians' risks of incarceration and intimidation by Israeli soldiers or their Palestinian collaborators. Through a local community-based organization, Lajee Center, the group wrote and performed a play. It was designed to train youth about Israeli interrogation techniques, and how to resist forced confessions when they are arrested. It focused on the role of Palestinian collaborators that Israeli prison authorities deploy to trick prisoners. I showed up with my camera and, pointing it in the direction of the action of the play, chronicled the facility with which youth performed the roles of both prisoners and interrogators (Figure 3).

Later, they suggested we make a video about prison and its effect on youth and community in Aida Refugee Camp, on the edge of Bethlehem in the West Bank. I was the one with the video camera and the access to US audiences. I knew little about political prison, but it was an issue that they cared deeply about. So I decided to follow their lead. I worked in collaboration with Nidal Al-Azraq, whose brother had been in prison for nearly two decades at the time, and who was a mentor to teenagers and boys at risk of incarceration at Lajee Center (Al-Azraq & Bishara, 2010). Our film *Degrees of Incarceration* signals how imprisonment impacts those inside and outside of prison under military occupation.

Violence chased this film too, but this time we had more time and tools to incorporate it into the video. Several of the youth who had participated in the play were arrested. We waited until they were released and interviewed them about their experiences of interrogation. One young man laughed as he remembered chuckling during interrogation because he had been recalling the play (Figure 4). The community leaders who had written and directed the play had, in a way, accompanied him to prison after all. We also interviewed former men

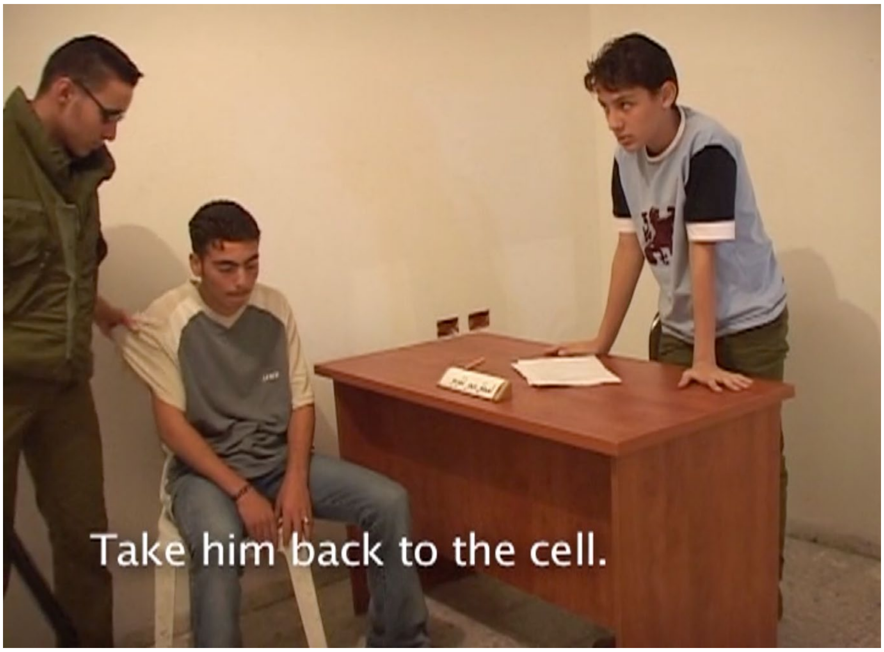
Take him back to the cell.

FIGURE 3 Video still, *Degrees of Incarceration*, Author and Nidal Al-Azraq, Palestine, 2010.

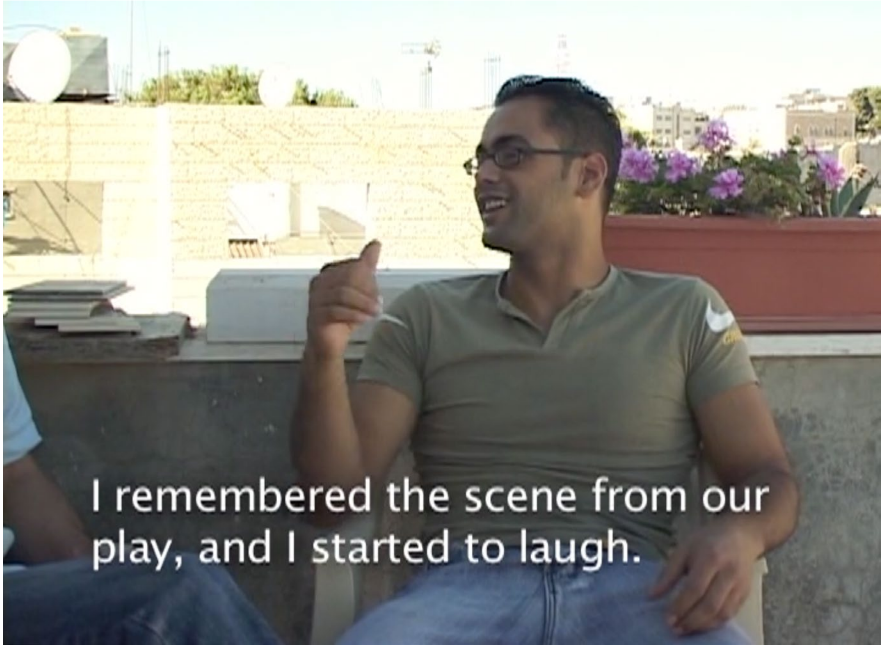
I remembered the scene from our play, and I started to laugh.

FIGURE 4 Video still, *Degrees of Incarceration*, Author and Nidal Al-Azraq, Palestine, 2010.

and women prisoners and mothers of prisoners for their analysis of the politics of prison. The conversations were extensions of the visits expressing concern and respect that Lajee Center—and Nidal himself—periodically made to families of prisoners.

Collaboratively producing the film and listening to these community activists and thinkers was integral to my learning about this crucial issue. This documentary has become an important record of the time for the youth and organization involved with it, and it has prompted discussions across dozens of screenings in the United States, as well. US viewers learn about how sisters and brothers support each other across years of struggle, and about how friends remember each other across gulfs created by confinement. Drawing connections to US mass incarceration, we talk about how all prisons are political and about ongoing forms of resistance in Israeli prisons today.

Over more than a decade of screenings, the film is an ongoing record of how imprisonment affects people. Several of the boys and young men featured in the film have been in administrative detention—detention with no charges, for renewable terms—multiple times over these years; one was released a few months ago, emaciated from the most recent stint in prison. Lajee Center screened the documentary again in August 2024 to a group of volunteers from abroad. In a discussion that followed, we examined how prison is a structuring fact for so many people's lives in Aida—as well as a part of the system of Israel's racialized and strategic vilification of Palestinian lives.

UNRULY COLLABORATION

If *Degrees of Incarceration* has worked to foster conversations both in Aida and in the United States, the next projects I pursued valued conversation as central to the projects' creation. Honoring contestation and process in the ethnography of media helps de-emphasize questions of identity that can otherwise become oversimplified and flat. This approach can push us to value conversation and difference. This is a crucial orientation of my second book, which is about the barriers to political expression and communication for Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians in the West Bank (Bishara, 2022). Palestinians are differently ostracized and endangered depending on their political status as citizens of Israel or subjects of military occupation within the 1967 occupied territories. Each group also has uncomfortable privileges: Palestinian citizens of Israel enjoy certain aspects of Israeli citizenship (like easier travel and a basic social service net) even as they are systematically discriminated against within Israeli society (Jabareen & Bishara, 2019; Rouhana, 2017; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2022). Palestinians in the West Bank are at the stultifying center of a failed state project of the Palestinian Authority, but even this provides some cultural capital and buffering from a minoritizing and racializing project within Israel. Both have vast privileges of movement compared to Palestinians in Gaza who had lived under Israeli blockade for 16 years even before the current genocide began. As I conducted this research based in the West Bank, I was regularly coming and going from a place where I, as a Palestinian American, had so many more legal privileges than virtually everyone else around me. Each time I left, it felt like a small betrayal of those not in the car, simply because I could move, and they could not.

Some days felt worse than others. One day I was in the far north of Israel's 1948 territories, at a commemoration of the *Nakba*, the Arabic word for the catastrophe of expulsion and dispossession that Palestinians experienced in 1948. At such events, Palestinian citizens of Israel gathered each year to commemorate the *Nakba* at a different site of a destroyed Palestinian village. I suddenly saw at the commemoration many of the photojournalists that I usually encountered in the West Bank. But of course, it was only the foreign journalists—Americans and Europeans—who could come to this event. The Palestinian photojournalists from the West Bank could not enter. In Israel's system, permits are required for work, medical treatment, accompanying a patient, and more. It is designed not to facilitate but to hinder Palestinian daily life (Berda, 2017). Israel had rescinded press passes for Palestinian journalists in the West Bank during the second Intifada, and certainly no permit existed for attending protests. I called up my friend Mohammad Al-Azza, a young Palestinian photographer from Aida Refugee Camp, in frustration. *I'm at the March of Return*, I said, *and I'm angry!* Why, he asked me patiently, was I angry? *I'm angry because you're not here. I'm at the March of Return, and all the foreign photojournalists I usually see in Bethlehem are here, and you're not!* I told him. *True it's our country*, he replied. *But they have more rights. They go where they want. Don't worry about it*. He paused, and then said: *Listen, you take pictures for me* (Figure 5).

Throughout the day, his remark—meant as a joke, I knew—stuck with me. I knew from my own research that Palestinian journalists had many reasons to do their work. They wanted to tell Palestinian stories, and they valued being at the sites of meaningful political action. But they also wanted to hone their craft, advance their careers, and provide for their families (Bishara, 2013). My friend could not pursue his journalism career for a host of structural reasons, including Israel's closure policies that prevented him from leaving the West Bank, as

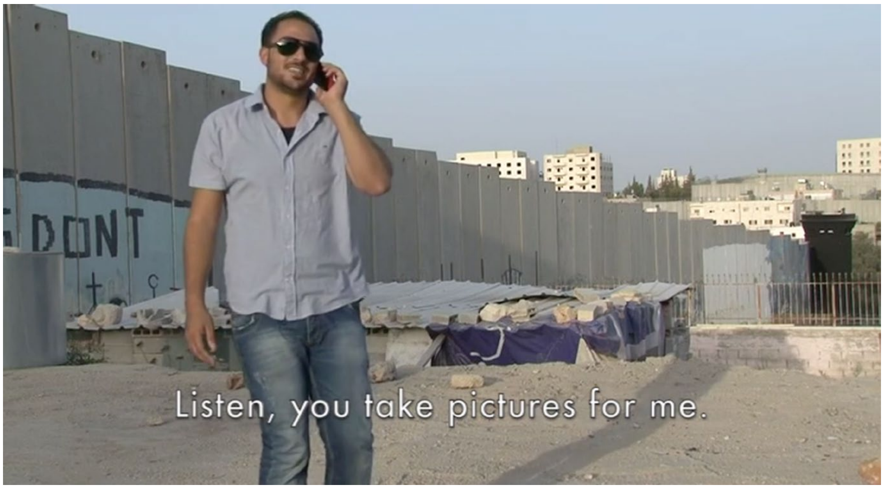
DONT
Listen, you take pictures for me.

FIGURE 5 Video still *Take My Pictures for Me*, Author and Mohammad Al-Azza, Palestine, 2016.

well as the depressed socio-economic conditions of Palestinians in the occupied territories which left many without access to formal education. How was a young person to get ahead with so many constraints?

But his off-hand comment stayed with me. I wondered, how I could deign to take pictures *for* him? He was a Palestinian refugee who had lived his life in the shadow of an Israeli military base. In 2013, a year before our filming, he had been shot in the cheekbone by Israeli soldiers while taking photographs of an ordinary army incursion, and a few months later, he had been arrested and beaten. He was younger than I was, and a man; he was also a trained photographer, while my strengths clearly lay at the keyboard. His sight had been impacted by the shattering of the bone beneath his eye. For all these reasons, we did not have the same perspective, even if we shared many opinions. How could I retrieve and record images and events happening in his country that he was forbidden from accessing?

This situation pushed me toward what I now think of in terms of "relational documentary." In Ginsburg's formulation, "relational documentary" is a practice that "take[s] seriously the accountability that, ideally, accompanies the privilege of making films about other peoples' lives" (Ginsburg, 2018, 42). She encourages us to think beyond formal experimentation to an "aesthetics of accountability." Ginsburg's model of relational documentary considers ethics and politics both on and off screen. It has special resonance for me. Because of the fragmentation imposed upon Palestinians by Israeli settler colonialism and the system of nation-states that normalizes division by political status, I feel compelled to address the fragmentation through a focus on relationships that attempt to overcome this fragmentation. I have had to deal with the fact that this fragmentation affords some of us with more space to speak than others, and those unequal rights entail a certain kind of obligation. This idea also resonates because of my sense of accountability as a friend to Mohammad for many years. This commitment framed our collaborative documentary project.

Together, Mohammad and I came up with a plan to explore the strange idea that I could take his photographs for him. The project included photographs and filming. I would go about my fieldwork as usual, just taking a few extra pictures. I would share the pictures with him, and he would tell me what he might have done differently. Then, he would send me off to a different location inside Israel's 1948 territories to take more pictures.

We filmed our conversations in the West Bank. The audience, like Mohammad, would not accompany me inside Israel's 1948 territories. We wanted to center the Palestinian experience of place and confinement under military occupation, so we conversed in locations around the refugee camp. During the shoots, perhaps because we had no immediate audience other than ourselves, we could open ourselves up to unusual challenges and difficult feelings that went beyond staid nationalism or human rights narratives. For example: I showed him pictures of a solidarity protest with hunger striking prisoners held outside the Tel Aviv hospital where they were being detained. After looking at them, he directed me to go to the hospital where he had been taken while under arrest after soldiers beat him. I felt vaguely uncomfortable in the hospital, snapping pictures of signs and gardens and hallways as people went about their business. But no one looked at me. When I showed Mohammad the photographs, he was unimpressed. The photographs captured nothing of what he had seen or experienced there. Here, certainly, I could not take pictures for him. I did not generate the same reactions from the Israelis around me. He had been in a prisoner's jumpsuit, in cuffs, bloodied. He had drawn hateful looks from others in the hospital. I had the luxury of being invisible.

We talked about these images in front of a military gate. It was here that soldiers who had shot and arrested him the previous year had entered the refugee camp. A roaring military vehicle was the background noise to part of our conversation. I knew the truck noise would be a problem, but part of me had geared up for the shoot so much that rethinking it was more than I could manage. The truck noise was annoying—something I regretted for hours as I edited and later screened the documentary—but perhaps it was another materialization of the pervasive violence. It represented the thick, ugly barriers to communication imposed by military occupation. There was no avoiding or hiding the violence that permeated Mohammad's life. That day, the Israeli army stayed behind the gate, but during another one of our shoots, dozens of soldiers ran down the hill from the military base toward the camp in the middle of a calm afternoon. We grabbed a camera and video camera and went to record.

The resulting film, *Take My Pictures For Me*, was rough around the edges but playful, illuminating but painful (Al-Azza & Bishara, 2016). It should not be surprising that I could not take pictures for him. One of the only things we knew as we started the project was that I would need to fail. (How delicious it was to play an academic game where my failure itself would be a success!) My eyes could not take the place of his. Why was failure so satisfying? Failure can be an engagement in "low theory," an illuminating experience that reflects and contests power (Halberstam, 2011). This project refused the demands of academia to make something clean, intelligible, knowing, and beautiful. But I think failure was also satisfying because generations after Mohammad's family lost their lands and their safety, Palestinians like me living with the privilege of safety feel that we especially have been failing, over and over again, to make progress toward liberation, or even toward basic security for Palestinians, even as those more profoundly dispossessed have persisted in struggle. My failing was a performative act of honesty.

And perhaps it is for a complementary reason that Mohammad enjoyed telling me, toward the end of the documentary, that I had in fact failed at taking the right pictures in his home village of Beit Jibreen, from which his family had been dispossessed in 1948 (Figures 6 and 7). I'd captured an image of the moon over a shrine. I had taken a snapshot of the school where his grandmother had learned to read—but I didn't know the names of any of the wells. I did not know which houses belonged to whom. I was distracted by ancient ruins and missed another more important site. The photographs I took were snapshots rather than meaningful

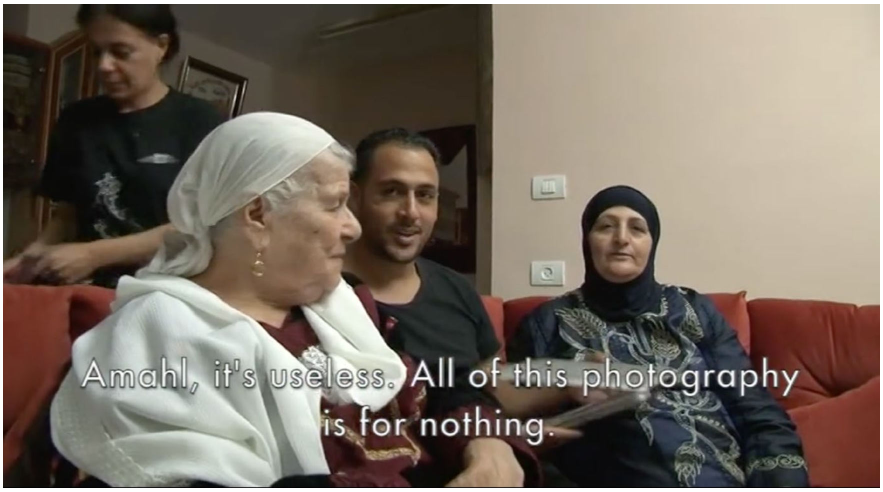
Amahl, it's useless. All of this photography
is for nothing.

FIGURE 6 Video still *Take My Pictures for Me*, Author and Mohammad Al-Azza, Palestine, 2016.

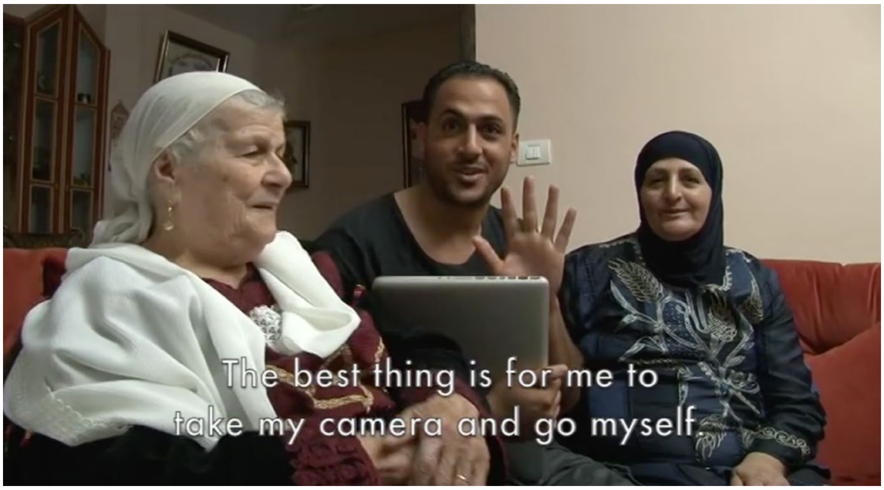
The best thing is for me to
take my camera and go myself.

FIGURE 7 Video still *Take My Pictures for Me*, Author and Mohammad Al-Azza, Palestine, 2016.

documents of place. My failure testified to the importance of his family memories, embodied knowledge, and perspective.

There was also another failure that is slightly less clear to viewers. It was difficult for Mohammad to think of how he would take better pictures than I had. This was unexpected. He could criticize my angle and my composition, but in the end, he didn't know precisely what pictures he would have taken, because he had not been on the scene to experience what might have caught his eye. As he commented in the film, *The problem is, even if someone said, "come take pictures in Haifa," I wouldn't know what to take! Without a taxi maybe I wouldn't even get there!* In some ways, the closures had succeeded in limiting his perspective.

CONCLUSIONS

I never would have imagined undertaking a documentary like this if not for Faye Ginsburg and her formative teaching. (Nor would I have been able to imagine such a film without someone with the quick wit, political confidence, and sense of play of Mohammad Al-Azza—but that is another story.) With Ginsburg, we learned with and through Jean Rouch, strengthened through Steven Feld's presence at NYU and his own work with Rouch (Rouch & Feld, 2003). Ginsburg also taught with and wrote about Indigenous documentary filmmakers whose incisive critiques were expressed through play and performance (Ginsburg, 2002). This year, working from within the United States, doing ethnography through play seems far off. Still, during brief trips to Palestine in 2024, I saw how moments of creativity and play in the midst of all of the horrors were necessary.

In my last visit to Palestine in July 2024, I interviewed Al-Azza and other community members for a collaborative oral history project with Lajee Center, an organization that Al-Azza now directs. For now, we have moved away from producing video to focus on voice. The voice signifies so much in Palestinian society about conviction, social location, and emotion, too. Al-Azza told me how they managed programming for the summer in the midst of a genocide. Holding a summer camp did not seem appropriate given that Israel had killed thousands and thousands of children in Gaza.[1] Times are tough in Aida as well, in ways that are directly connected to Gaza because Israel's settler colonial project operates on all Palestinians. Children have seen dozens of their community members arrested. Israeli soldiers killed a teenager, Mohammad Ali Aziyya, early one morning in Aida as he was studying for his high school examinations (Lajee Center, 2024). Al-Azza commented, *When I saw some of the videos that are coming out of Gaza in the shadow of the genocide, of people stealing moments of joy despite all of the difficulties they face, it encouraged me.*[2] *Why shouldn't we also continue? And frankly, I started thinking like this: if now we can do things for the children and for people in* *general, we should, because maybe after 1 day, or maybe after 1 half hour from this activity, everything could change, and we will be in the same situation as those in Gaza. So let's take advantage of the opportunity to work on these programs, these activities that could help to strengthen the steadfastness of people in the camp. Because what is happening here already is also not something simple*. So they held the summer camp. At the end, children performed a play that included a dramatization of one journalist covering another journalist's killing. The play dramatized how journalists are both Palestinian heroes and how they also could be anyone who loses their life to Israel's violence. And as one journalist leaned over a fallen colleague in the play, we felt that there is always someone else there to continue to document, witness, and grieve.

What does documentary accountability mean between me and Palestinian interlocutors living at the front lines of Israeli military violence? Ginsburg's newest work is on disability worlds. She and Rayna Rapp recognize how disability worlds draw in kin, caregivers, and friends of disabled individuals. They write about how the world of disability arts can involve "performance of heightened interdependency" that draw attention to how we are interconnected across many forms of difference (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2024, 158). They write about caregiving as an act of resistance to structures and societies that disparage the lives of disabled people (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2024, 185). Their own work is done through love and commitments that start with kin and expand outward, as they offer accounts of the remarkable creativity of disabled people who are opening pathways into both disability justice and disability futures. Their work on disability worlds helps me see once again how questions raised for me in conversation with Al-Azza are not limited to Palestine. Finding ways to celebrate the creativity necessary to carry out conversations across difference can generate new insights and political possibilities. Carrying those conversations out on film places a special kind of accountability onto participants. Each time I see any of these documentaries I made, I tally who is in prison, who has been injured, who has been lost. How do we balance collective and individual forms of accountability? What models of relationality do we need to build toward more democratic and inclusive collectivities in which creative and liberatory ideas and practices can come to the fore? What can we do, working across lines of difference, how can we experiment, so that we may be able to hear each other and make space for each other to be heard? How can we think about media making as a rigorous kind of care, even as it is also about truth-making?

Revising this article now, I am almost stopped in my tracks, almost unable to make anything of these small experiences: after Israel has killed at least 116 journalists (CPJ, 2024b) and perhaps as many as 170, according to the Gaza Government Media Office (Al Mayadeen English, 2024), after it has again prevented foreign journalists from seeing anything of what is going on in Gaza (except while embedded and standing next to Israeli soldiers who control the scene), as the politics of prison have grown more and more vicious (Amnesty International, 2024; Chotiner, 2024). Comments Shuruq As'ad of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, "Their goal is to make civil society impossible in Palestine, and journalism is a big part of that" (Younes, 2024). These times make new demands upon us as anthropologists and media makers. If there is any bright point, it may be that the transnational imaginaries of justice and evidence are shifting, as with the South African-led International Court of Justice case charging Israel with genocide (International Court of Justice, 2024). How can we use creative methods to make these connections across place more visible so as to overturn North Americans' and Europeans' assumptions that they are the arbiters of narrative on the world stage—and, indeed, expose the brutality of US support for Israel that has armed, justified, and funded this genocide? How can we stand with our friends after decades of learning from each other? How also can we stand with those Gazan journalists that most of us have never met? How can we recognize the fullness of their lives, experiences, and stories? Many activists today speak of how our liberations—as Palestinians and others—are interconnected. How do we highlight the specificity of our voices even as we explore those interconnections? I hope that through long relationships of media making and conversation and also by looking for new routes of expression and collaboration, we can strive toward these goals.

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ENDNOTES

[1] An article in *The Lancet* acknowledged that by June 19, 2024, 37,396 people had been killed by Israeli invasion according to the Gaza Ministry of Health, numbers widely accepted including by the United Nations, and also that there are estimates that 10,000 bodies may be in the rubble; authors argued based on these numbers that counting indirect deaths might raise the toll to 186,000 as of mid-summer 2024 (Khatib et al., 2024).

[2] See for example "Children of Gaza Spread Joy for Ramadan" (UN News, 2024).

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