


BOOK REVIEWS

Crossing a Line: Laws, Violence, and Roadblocks to Palestinian Political Expression

Amahl Bishara (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022). Pp. 376. \$90.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503632097

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Crossing a Line charts a new path in the study of contemporary Palestinian life, making a vital contribution to the ethnographic and anthropological literature on power, the state, settler colonialism, and contentious politics. While the book illuminates the structural nature of settler colonialism and its bearing on everyday life, it gives main place to Palestinian voices, agency, and political activism. Moreover, rather than take the categories of the Israeli state as implicit signs of group boundaries, the book takes classification as a social process and looks beyond practices of state apprehension to understand how real people respond to and possibly transcend imposed social closure in their daily lives.

Comprised of chapters on various quotidian experiences and phenomena, and particular events and protests, the book outlines how it is that Palestinians—specifically, within the 1948 territory, the 1967 occupied Palestinian territories (especially the West Bank), and the diaspora generally—are fragmented by physical and symbolic barriers as well as the various ways in which they strive to overcome coercive forms of distinction and differentiation. Bishara looks to embodied knowledge, the phenomenological realm, the lived, and the materiality of political formations rather than what we typically examine in the context of Palestine—the state and its actions, elites, warfare, archives, and macro-level transformations. Her assessment of “popular knowledge” brings us closer to how Palestinians navigate their lives and make sense of them, and how their actions are inevitably tied up in social forces. This is her fundamental anthropological orientation: not only to identify how subjects are situated in structures, but to express the affective dimensions of their quotidian experience from a micro-level; how Palestinian identity is practiced, rather than just articulated as a national ideology, and “the tensions and the discomfort around identity and naming” (p. 13).

Crossing a Line is among the first social scientific efforts to take a holistic approach to understanding how the variety of Palestinians interact with each other and with a settler-colonial state apparatus that, although treats each group differently, still relegates all. The book connects the 1948, 1967, and more contemporary temporalities in a way that brings back material conditions to their origin. Bishara does the analytic work of connecting groups or populations without assuming that unity is natural. Rather, the “partial connections” noted are outcomes to be explained, given the expectation of spatial and symbolic separation. Her book is among the very first works to integrate Palestinians across the Green Line, drawing on thick description to put forward the groups’ experiences in one manuscript, turning this book into an archive of the Palestinian struggle and experience.

Bishara takes the *permission to connect* (to paraphrase Edward Said’s “permission to narrate”), that is, to re-conceptualize contemporary Palestinian unity. The book includes Palestinian citizens in Israel, who are often either excluded or separated as a distinct population lacking any commensurability with other Palestinian communities. I felt a personal

affinity to the phenomena described in such vivid detail, as I have personally experienced and witnessed much of what is described. And they are included not only as a facet of Israeli society, but as a fundamental part of the Palestinian Question. Bishara demonstrates how, despite classificatory mechanisms, Palestinians overcome social distinctions in everyday practice and “people” themselves to those to whom they identify as of the same ethnos.

Notably, as Bishara herself points out, Gaza’s enclosure renders social ties much more difficult to sustain. Gaza does make numerous appearances in the book, demonstrating how Palestinians unite around the cause despite the frequent lack of direct lines of communication. If anything, the absence of Gaza reflects the tragic reality of siege.

Anthropology’s ethnography is a useful tool to expose just this. But whereas classical anthropology looked outward to the colony from the metropole, Bishara attempts a reparative, decolonial ethnography, with important analytic consequences for her findings. For instance, her protest ethnography models a form of participant observation that is vital and exigent, and that grants one analytical leverage. She is there, on the front lines, at once an insider and an outsider. And the auto-ethnographic vignettes reflected in the “Passages” sections expertly use Geertzian thick description to movingly and vividly depict Bishara’s own experience as an ethnographer and Palestinian moving through space. These break down the fourth wall and give us insight into the woman performing the participant observation and analysis. Bishara breaks from the traditional dispassionate social scientist model and brings in inter-subjectivity, thereby legitimizing ethnography as a decolonial methodological option, offering young Palestinian anthropologists, and indigenous Palestinian scholars, a different possibility of how to speak truth to power. This is similar to the way oral history became a methodology for the subordinated, opening the field for indigenous voices and history. The thick description best resembles the texture of everyday life—not solely life under suppression but also daily joys and struggles, and the parallels between and among different Palestinians.

Bishara situates herself among her interlocutors in generative ways. While positionality disclosures may no longer be uncommon, although less so in the Palestinian case, it is nonetheless important to first comprehend Bishara’s own status: her social location as a Palestinian-American woman, fluent in Arabic, a daughter of Palestinians from 1948 Palestine, married to a West Bank Palestinian refugee. Her own position encapsulates, or embodies, the messiness through which Palestinian families find themselves navigating bureaucracy and belonging. Bishara opens with a comical anecdote about when she received her Israeli identity documents and her West Bank father-in-law proclaimed, “Congratulations! You’ve become Palestinian” (p. xvi). While this story reflects the complexities of citizenship and belonging in colonized and occupied places, it also reflects Bishara’s standing. In sociology we often discuss how the term “identity” is not a stable, natural, given thing-in-itself. Rather, we prefer the term identification or self-understanding, which highlights the social processes that go into identity as an ever-shifting practice. To be a Palestinian is not just an identity one simply inherits, but also a kind of social practice. Bishara’s choice, for instance, to obtain Israeli identity documents reminded me of the great labor that 1948 Palestinians and Internally Displaced Persons (*muhjareen*) went through in the aftermath of the Nakba, where, even if the state failed to attain legitimacy in their eyes, they sought citizenship as a mechanism to safeguard their permanence in the home/land.

Bishara’s emphasis on the micro-level resembles sociologist Dorothy Smith’s feminist orientation:

A sociology for women preserves the presence of subjects as knowers and as actors. It does not transform subjects into the objects of study or make use of conceptual devices for eliminating the active presence of subjects. Its methods of thinking and its analytic procedures must preserve the presence of the active and experiencing subject.¹

¹ Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 105.

Bishara adopts this feminist pursuit to enliven her subjects as agents of history. At times, these agents may be constrained, by technologies of apartheid, by violent state institutions and actors like police and military, by surveillance, by carcerality, and by the restrictions of limited and hierarchized citizenship, but they are never completely devoid of choice. They display consciousness, creativity, and pragmatism. Elsewhere I termed this same capacity the “*habitus of sumud* (steadfastness)”—by which I mean to identify cultivated dispositions, skills, habits, and embodied understandings for navigating the violences of colonization, wherein Palestinians phenomenologically encounter and refine ways of being amid violence. Bishara’s ethnography brings us closer to understanding how and why this *habitus* emerges across contexts, what are its strengths and limitations.

Take her thought-provoking piece on driving—particularly so for ‘48 Palestinians with yellow Israeli license plates who frequently drive back and forth to cities like Ramallah, Nablus, and Jenin. This chapter shows how knowledge is not disembodied and dispassionate, but always situated in political and historical contexts. The “political ontology” paints a vivid picture of how political formations shape lived experiences and encounters. She brings in so much context: infrastructure, mobility and immobility, closure and enclosure, separation, citizenship and hierarchy, and the *habitus* of navigating convoluted spatialities disrupted by political imaginations. While Bishara could have told us just about citizenship and legal classifications, instead she shows us what it means to live out the consequences in a society in which citizenship determines one’s mobility.

Readers will appreciate the compound and sensitive analysis of, and critical lenses through which, *Crossing a Line* approaches questions of culture and connections to politics and nationalism:

Kinship systems can reaffirm patriarchy and reinstate hierarchies, but kin can also be sources of solidarity and love. Sometimes the line between repressive and liberatory forms of love, or between traditional forms of love and radical new ones, is not entirely clear. For Palestinians, extended kin networks of aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, and more (second) cousins are an integral form of social organization. Even beyond the family, a language of kinship is a dominant mode for Palestinians to think about relationality, and it is engrained in Palestinian nationalism (p. 233).

Another important through line of the book is the implicit social critique of the PA as an oppressive and repressive system, one that works hand-in-hand with Israeli settler colonialism, rooted in the lived experiences of Palestinians.

The final chapter on political prisoners and children and women prisoners, where Bishara delicately tells the stories of Palestinians whose dissent was repressed through the carceral state, is especially illuminating. Bishara, adding further layers to the important anthropological work of Lena Meari and Esmail Nashif on political prisoners, shows us how, despite the ways imprisonment controls all forms of interaction, bonds and relations of care have emerged. Fascinating connections and cohesion between Palestinians otherwise separated geographically are rendered possible, particularly in the “security” wing of Israeli prisons. Ironically it is, “Inside prison, [where] gender roles and the established relationship between Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinian subjects of military occupation are both disrupted” (p. 34).

Crossing the Line offers a glimpse into the activism that buttresses political prisoners and preserves a force of Palestinian unity. For instance, Bishara writes,

At a demonstration in solidarity with hunger striking political prisoners in Haifa earlier in 2014, a speaker from Jerusalem explained to the audience, “We should not use the word solidarity to talk about prisoners from the West Bank because we are one people.” In a similar vein of asserting unity rather than solidarity, the banner at the top of the

Facebook invitation included the statement “We are all Gaza,” and a key slogan from the protest was, “An injury to you, Gaza, is an injury to us” (p. 77).

Here, as in many places, we see how Palestinians can preserve a political sociality of unity.

One slight tension surfaces in the book: in the introduction, Bishara writes, “I do not want to naturalize unity. To do so might be to presume or advocate for nationalism that can also become a structure of oppression” (p. 14). While the idea of nationalism presents serious concerns (around militarism, gendered hierarchy, elitism, and exclusion, to name a few), readers are left wondering: what alternative practices to collective organization exist, or could exist, in place of a deleterious or oppressive nationalism? The book seems to offer an invitation to envision a different manner of unity or sociality not predicated on the exclusivity of ethno-nationalism. However, as the book shows well, the way Palestinians “people” themselves, whether through solidarity, trauma, or shared plight, is through national [oft-anti-colonial] practices. Moreover, there is no singular nationalism. While Zionist nationalism is a colonial nationalism organized around an ethnos, one can argue for a Palestinian anti-colonial nationalism devoid of ethnic exclusion, inclusive of a liberatory project for Arabs and Jews, inspired by their cohabitation prior to Zionist incursion. Despite the possible destructive features of nationalism, and given the existing international order of states, we may look at other forms of Palestinian nation-ness; for instance, the form proffered by Palestinian citizens of Israel based on their phenomenology of relations with Jewish-Israeli society, which illuminates a different vision of collectivity.

One other query arises by the end: after the Unity (or Dignity) Intifada of May 2021, which Bishara briefly mentions in the conclusion, have the contemporary causes around which Palestinians in the world unite changed? And is the current state of partial connection, particularly in the digitally-connected age, more of a social force than past forms?

Throughout the chapters, we gain an understanding of fundamental social processes: boundary-making and social closure. It is now common knowledge among scholars of Israel/Palestine that the “Green Line” has, in certain ways, been effectively erased. This is stated in reference to the ways the Israeli settler-colonial state and its Jewish settler-citizens tend not to differentiate between the two geographies. State resources, infrastructure, legislation, and laws flow over, ostensibly seamlessly. What we often forget in such conversations is that the Green Line is only permeable to some. Bishara shows us the ways the salience of political boundaries, and their enforcement through coercion and violence, unevenly affect Palestinians. Still, Palestinians have found ways to diminish the salience of political boundaries, even at great risk. This book is a testament to the political force of social ties.

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Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State

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Syria’s catastrophic conflict has displaced more than half of the population since 2011. This tragedy has given rise to a diverse scholarship interested in the conditions of displacement, the politics of care and protection, host country settlement regimes, and the