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BOOK REVIEW

Bishara, Amahl. *Crossing a Line: Laws, Violence and Roadblocks to Palestinian Political Expression*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023.

376 pages. Paperback \$30.00

Reviewed by Marina Calculli

In recent decades, a strand of critical scholars has endeavored to illuminate the complicit entanglement of violence and the law in the making of the Israeli state – a settler-colonial project, whose full-fledged realization essentially depends on the irreversible fragmentation and dispersion of the Palestinian people, geographically socially, politically, and culturally. Amahl Bishara's *Crossing a Line: Laws, Violence and Roadblocks to Palestinian Political Expression* contributes to this larger intellectual endeavor from a unique perspective. Through a careful ethnography and rigorous comparative method, Bishara takes the reader across different physical and legal barriers that not only divide Palestinians among themselves, but also determine and shape the forms of political expression they can afford. Being a Palestinian-American, with an Israeli passport and the uncommon privilege to access both the West Bank and Israel (a privilege denied even to her Palestinian husband), she puts her social and legal status at the service of an ambitious project: reconstructing the political meaning – or rather *meanings* – of Palestine, through diverse voices that express themselves at distinct receiving ends of Israeli sovereignty.

The author's analysis concentrates on two *loci*: Israel (as defined by its 1948 borders), where Palestinians are *citizens* of a supposedly liberal democratic state; and the West Bank, where Palestinians – almost one third of them refugees – live under what Bishara calls Israel's "sleight of hand sovereignty" (16). This is the result of 56 years of military occupation of the West Bank, whereby Israel collects the benefits of sovereignty, while outsourcing its responsibilities to international donors and agencies, such as UNWRA. Across the book, echoes of other Palestinians – Gazans and refugees in other Arab countries or the diaspora – resonate cyclically to remind the reader of the many legal categories Israel, with the complicity of the international community, has construed to confine Palestinians into disconnected spaces and render them alien to one another.

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The empirical evidence is organized into six chapters, interluded with “Passages,” where the personal, lived experience, and the ethnographic observation coalesce, to convey the incommensurable rigidity of Israeli barriers, but also the ways in which Palestinians politically challenge these barriers, both physically and imaginatively. The first chapter sets the tone of the conversation Bishara is having with her readers and defines the contours of a book which is not simply an academic journey, but also the result of the author’s activist experience. While she contextualizes the fragmentation of Palestinian voices against the backdrop of Israeli borders, and the history of Western colonialism and imperialism which has supported Israel’s creation and territorial expansion, she also offers multiple vistas on how to overcome these legal–spatial divides. Beyond the overarching idea of Palestine as an independent, sovereign nation-state, projected somewhere in the future, Palestine is also a site of struggle among different imaginaries: reactionary, oppressive, classist, and sectarian; or emancipatory, irreverent, and universalist. Here we catch a glimpse of a possible Palestine that transcends its aspirational borders to becoming a utopian project – one in which national unity is pursued only as a vehicle to strengthen bonds with other struggles for equality of rights and freedom, such as the US “Black Lives Matter” movement.

Chapters 2 and 3 present an ethnographic account of protests against the occupation and commemorations of the Nakba in different locations in Israel and the West Bank. Through these forms of political expression, solidarity among distant groups takes a central stage: cohesion (*talahum*) and commitment to national unity are the key drivers of gathering in the public space. The same sense of unity, however, falters when Palestinians from both sides of the Green Line (the border between Israel and the West Bank) participate in photography workshops, the theme of Chapter 4. While sharing pictures, participants realize that what unites them is essentially what separates them (168): the “occupation” (*al-ihlāl*). However, different experiences of “the other” lead to imagining a common Palestinian future, beyond the lost historic unity and the present state of fragmentation. Chapter 5 focuses on mourning in physical places and on social media, while Chapter 6 compares groups of young people who are subject to different regimes of carcerality across the Green Line. What emerges is a picture of complex fragmentation defined by Israeli colonial policies but also stems from other factors, such as class and gender, among others. Simultaneously, we learn that physical distance is not an obstacle to the emergence of “intimacies” – something that originated less from a sense of national belonging than from the sharing of concern and desire to overcome the historic injustice.

It is here that solidarity among Palestinians has the potential to become truly universal in its scope, rather than merely national. It is in this spirit that the author recalls how Palestinians over the last decade have learned tactics of protesting and

confronting police brutality, especially from the US “Black Lives Matter” movement. But this is only the last bit of a much longer story. During the Cold War, Palestinians strengthened bonds with leftist groups around the globe, as well as with indigenous people in the Americas, who had traveled to the Middle East to aid Palestinians in refugee camps, learn from them, and support their struggle. What unites these movements – then as now – is an inherent commitment to full equality of rights and self-determination. These connections make popular struggles with strong universalist aspirations so irritating to liberal elites around the globe, those who defend the principles of equality of rights and freedom both at home and in international institutions, but fundamentally deny them to certain groups of people.

It is against this backdrop that we can understand not only the emancipatory potential of Palestine as a truly global project, but also the logic of violence displayed against it, both physical and legal. This is because Palestine epitomizes more than anything else the contradictions between the promises of liberal democracy and its reality, especially as misperceived by Israel and the United States. In these countries, freedom and self-determination are exclusive and not universal, where the law is either suspended or manifests itself in *ad hoc* measures, to suppress those very voices that demand the state to live up to the normative standards it has itself espoused.

Crossing a Line would appeal to students and scholars in anthropology, legal studies, Middle East studies, political science, and global studies.