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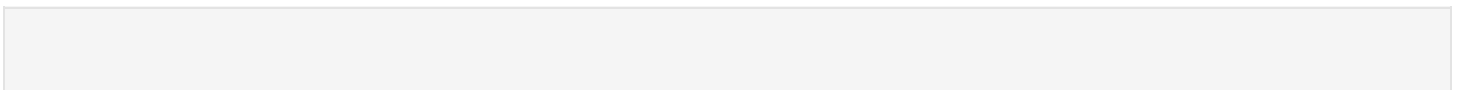
borderlines offers open-access scholarship that experiments with and seeks to forge new connections between area and theory. published by the editors of *cssaame*, it complements the journal by featuring original work in formats that differ from the scholarly articles and forums that are usually featured in the journal. it includes multimedia work, short essays, and interviews. it also offers additional content that enriches individual articles published in the journal, such as visual material, archival documents, and online commentary and discussion

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Authority and the “Civil Contract” of Palestinian Photography

By Meg Young
May 15, 2015

The following is part of a series of short posts on photographic practice in Palestine. In the fall of 2014, Al-Azza’s work was exhibited at Tufts University, an event facilitated by Amahl Bishara and her students, a few of whom are featured here in the series. Though focused on the work of Mohammad Al-Azza, the posts speak to the broader situation of artistic practice in Palestine and its effective censorship under the ongoing occupation, but also to questions of intimacy and the public role of photography in the context of conflict.





A visitor to “From These Streets” enters the URL to listen to an audio caption on the night of the opening, Nov. 6, 2013. Photo credit: Nidal Al-Azraq.

According to Ariella Azoulay’s analysis in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, an important set of connections is formed simply by viewing a photograph. Her concept of a “civil contract” within photographic practice “is an attempt to anchor spectatorship in civic duty toward the photographed persons.” ^[1] She explains the distinctiveness of this relation, thusly:

The relations between the three parties involved in the photographic act—the photographed person, the photographer, and the spectator—are not mediated through a sovereign power and are not limited to the bounds of a nation-state or an economic contract. The users of photography thus reemerge as people who are not totally identified with the power that governs them and who have new means to look at and show *its* deeds, as well, and eventually to address this power and negotiate with it. ^[2]

Indeed, powerful relations are made through photography, and photographs can traverse political boundaries in critical ways. However, for me, it was recording the audio captions that brought this contract to life and gave it tangible results.

Working with the photographer Mohammad Al-Azza, I experienced firsthand the shifts and transformations of authority that occur through the interactions of photographer and spectator. Bringing Al-Azza’s voice, and through him the voices of his subjects, members of his own community in the Aida Refugee Camp, created a shift in authority redefining the criteria for an “authoritative speaker.” While recording the set of audio captions that accompanied the exhibit, (for example about [Mohammad’s](#)

After connecting to the specific narratives and stories of the

childhood nightmare of being arrested by Israeli soldiers and water and land resources in Aida Refugee Camp), I experienced a shift in authority between Mohammad Al-Azza, myself, and another classmate who also assisted with the captions. Over the course of the meeting, the conversation about the photographs became increasingly easy and natural. As Al-Azza described his subjects and the circumstances of each photograph, the three of us were able to weave together a common set of experiences and narratives that connected us despite our different backgrounds and languages. For myself, I felt a strong sense of new authority after our meeting. Before I felt no particular authority to speak about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and little inclination to voice my opinions on it. After connecting to the specific narratives and stories of the photographs and their subjects, I found myself eager to share my views with roommates, classmates, and family members, using my experience with Al-Azza and the exhibition as a point of departure. My newfound connection with al-Azza and the subjects of his photos lent me a different mode of authority than that of the academic or intellectual. That mode was visceral and, as Azoulay describes, loaded with an imperative for action. I suddenly felt that it was not only my right, but, to a certain extent, my duty to discuss these matters. Al-Azza also gained authority and, consequently, a certain ability to speak through this same process. In Palestine, Al-Azza is effectively prohibited from or punished for taking certain pictures (such as those that lead to his assault by an Israeli soldier). Yet, in the process of recording the captions, each image provided him the chance to speak about his experiences and those of his community.

The new modes of authority that Al-Azza and I gained depended on logistical and symbolic networks composed of a variety of individual and institutions. Amahl Bishara helped Al-Azza to inhabit that place of authority by securing funds and other resources for the exhibition and his appearance there. Without her, and many other such “invisible hands” (travel agents who helped organize plane trips, students who helped hang the photos, gallery directors who welcomed the exhibition, professors who shared photography printing facilities, etc.) that brought Al-Azza and his work to the United States, the engagement which produced such new modes of authority would not have occurred. As Azoulay suggests, the civil contract did not exist outside of the bounds of state and economy as these networks were able to work effectively thanks to their privileged location within pre-existing institutions of power.

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Author Bio

Meg Young graduated from Tufts in 2014 with a double major in anthropology and community health. She is about to embark on a nine month adventure in the North East of Brazil, where she will be studying traditional Afro-Brazilian faith healing for mental illness.

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Bibliography

Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books, 2008.

Notes:

1. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 16. ↗
2. *ibid.*, 24. ↗



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