

# To Gather Amongst the Olive Trees: Counterstorytelling through Palestinian Feminist Survivance Rhetorics

Sarah Cathryn Majed Dweik and Bernardita M. Yunis Varas

**Abstract:** We are in unprecedented times as genocide continues across Palestine, including occupied Gaza and the West Bank. Palestinian narratives are systemically targeted and contested historically to deny their visions of reaching a liberated Palestine. Evidenced by the ethnocide and genocide in the 1982 Invasion of Lebanon and today's ongoing, accelerated genocide in Palestine, narratives are paramount to understanding how genocide occurs, how audiences process it, and possibly acted upon by outside actors. This article focuses on our Palestinian counterstories to understand what we can learn from our narratives. We develop Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics as a crucial rhetorical aspect at the intersection of Palestinian Critical Race Theory (PalestinianCRT), Palestinian feminism, transnational feminist literacy, and survivance rhetorics. Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics contain three tenets: infinitive temporalities, feminist collectivity, and counterstory dialogics. Infinitive temporalities explain how Palestinian counterstories disrupt Western time, calling audiences to understand Palestinian narratives differently. Feminist collectivity acknowledges our Palestinian feminist ancestors and broader feminist community and activists as part of our theorizing and embodiment. Counterstory dialogics names how, in dialoguing together, we resist the stock stories that seek to erase us. Palestinian feminism remains critical to understanding how to survive and resist genocide, whether in Palestine or the shatat (diaspora), through how we embody and narrate our experiences in the face of Zionist settler and U.S.-imperial propaganda.

**Tags:** [critical race theory](#), [praxis](#), [decolonial theory](#), [embodiment](#), [survivance](#)

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Contrary to liberal notions of stories as  
depoliticized acts of sharing, we must recognize  
stories as acts of creative rebellion.

Sium and Ritskes, 2013, p. v

*I interview my Tía and Tíos in preparation for my dissertation, and they tell me: “lo llevo en la sangre. Yo tengo 2 corazones—uno Chileno y otro Palestino” (I carry [my Palestinian identity] in my blood. I have two hearts—a Chilean one and another Palestinian one).*

*As a child, I took a strange Catholic pride in being able to say, “My grandfather was born in Belén, igual que Jesús!” And there I was, walking the streets of Bethlehem. I called my dad. Despite stereotypes of Palestine as a backwards society with little access to technology, I connected to Wifi and called my dad on Facetime.*

*“¡Papi, mira! ¡Mira estas vistas!”*

*I see the tears well up in his eyes. The pride. The excitement. The nostalgia. The heartache. He has only ever been to the region under Israeli control, not on our own terms like I am today with Palestinians at the helm, narrating our own journey, sharing the truths of our existence and struggle.*

*He tells me that Abuelito’s house used to be so close to the Church of the Nativity that you could see it from his house. As I rush through our tour and walking through these streets, stopping at a shop to buy all the Bethlehem Olive tree wooden pieces I can to share with my family back in Miami and Chile, I try to take in the views, and imagine my Abuelito at 7 or 8 years old, running through these busy streets with his siblings.*

*I am truly from here. This land birthed me, too.*

*In my journals, I write: We are not visiting. We are coming home.*

*We are the lost cousin, sisters...Coming together.*

*Coming home.*

*Bernardita*

*I grew up hearing the stories of my great-grandmother, Nadhmiyyah el-Hirbawi, when she lived in Al-Khalil. She would dress up as a man to listen to poetry at coffee shops and argue with men about philosophy and politics. She fled with her children to Gaza in 1953 and later had to restart their lives in Mecca. Her strength is what I have always aspired to be, and my family and I will Return<sup>1</sup> in her name. I am Palestinian Because of her steadfast courage and unfaltering stubbornness.*

sarah

What do we do when genocide occurs in Palestine, our homeland? As the genocide in Palestine continues, we wrote this article. As the genocide in Palestine continues, we are teaching, grading, shopping for groceries, caring for our families, and attending protests, never forgetting our people who cannot do the same. As the genocide in Palestine continues, we are here, watching our kin in the homeland be starved, bombed, and slaughtered. As the genocide in Palestine continues, we witness the same decimation spread to Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria.

Since October 2023, we have entered a new era of Palestinian-experienced violence as the most documented genocide in history unfolds through news and Palestinian accounts on X (formerly Twitter) tweets, Instagram posts and reels, and TikTok videos. Each displays Palestinians trapped under the rubble, struggling to find food and water, and bombs dropping across the entirety of occupied Gaza. In the occupied West Bank, we witness refugee camps bombed, residents abducted, city roads blocked, and more settlements built on stolen Palestinian land. To be Palestinian is to contend with the ongoing destruction of our homeland, culture, and people while imagining our collective Palestinian liberation. We hold all our grief along with our hope to demonstrate our *sumud* –steadfastness– as our ancestors and land show us while experiencing ongoing genocide.

This is not the first time Palestinians experienced genocide at the hands of a Zionist settler colonial state while global powers deny it. Writing about the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Edward Said detailed Israel's genocide and ethnocide against Palestinian refugees and the Lebanese in South Lebanon (28). Just like today, reports and first-hand accounts were not enough to stop this ongoing violence against Palestinians and those living in the broader Southwest Asia and Northwest Africa (SWANA) region. "Facts," Said writes, "require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them" (34). Yet, Zionist settler colonialism and imperialism alter Palestinian facts of the past and present (Tawil). Rather than understanding Palestinian narratives as part of a more extended archive of trauma, Zionist settler colonialism characterizes these narratives as the cause of violence upon Palestinians and others. This framing of Palestinian-experienced trauma as a justification for violence against them *is* the socially acceptable narrative (read: *nightmare*) that we experience.

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1 We capitalize Return as a recognition of the right to return for all Palestinians. Due to Return looking different for Palestinians based on their location, familial history, and experiences with ongoing Zionist settler colonization, we recognize that this term has various meanings for Palestinians

These socially acceptable narratives continue today to justify genocide and target Palestinians and allies across the globe who fight against it. For example, Palestine Legal, a nonprofit organization defending the civil and constitutional rights of those who speak out for Palestinian freedom in the United States, reports a surge in cases of those receiving negative consequences for posting in solidarity with Palestine on social media during the 2023-2025 genocide in Gaza (Saba). (One of our authors was doxxed and received harassment online, calling for her firing and removal merely for calling for an end to this genocide). To discredit such narratives when, as early as October 13, 2023, leading scholars in genocide studies called what is occurring a “textbook case of genocide” (Segal), in January 2024, the International Court of Justice ruled that it is highly probable that Israel violated the Genocide Convention (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, “Gaza: ICJ Ruling”), and in November 2024, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant for “for crimes against humanity and war crimes” (International Criminal Court) demonstrates how power sidelines crucial narratives in the service of maintaining its privilege to oppress.

To combat these colonial yet socially acceptable narratives, we employ a “transnational feminist literacy practice” (Dingo 535) to challenge powers that endorse genocide and ongoing Zionist settler colonization. Scholars (Dingo et al.; Nish) call for research that can, as Dingo writes, “push readers to unveil the[...] macro-level power structures and better understand the multiple scales that cause women’s oppression” (Dingo 535). Nish’s work on representing precarity reminds us of the critical importance of shifting our representative foci, so we do not further enact the “systems of imperialist violence” that already organize our lives (365). By utilizing this framing, we notice how systems of violence require naming and critique as part of combating them.

In light of this, we look at narrative’s role in an ongoing genocide. How do rhetorical studies offer particularly crucial tools to address the immediacy of ongoing, accelerated violence and genocide? In response to these questions and calls from transnational feminist rhetorical scholars, we offer Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics as a rhetorical tool to classify how Palestinian narratives fighting against this ongoing, accelerated genocide.<sup>2</sup> Survivance, as Vizenor (vii) terms it, recognizes the duality of Indigenous survival and resistance that occurs under continuing genocide facilitated by settler colonialism. For Palestinians, survivance as a concept describes our fight against the continued murder of our people in Palestine, land grabbing, resource deprivation, dispossession, and violence against all Palestinians in the homeland and exile.

We argue that, especially in this moment of ongoing, accelerated genocide, Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics is a critical methodological praxis framed within Palestinian Critical Race Theory (PalestinianCRT), which relies upon survivance rhetorics and Palestinian feminism. Due to the precarity and urgency surrounding ongoing Zionist settler colonization and genocide, we contend that counterstories as a methodology highlight our survivance rhetorics to name and describe Palestinian experiences. By linking these seemingly disparate concepts together, we recognize the importance embodied narratives play in

2 We utilize the term, ongoing, accelerated genocide and ongoing Zionist settler colonization to highlight that these violences have not ended against Palestinians. Additionally, as Wolfe (2006) identifies, settler colonialism is a structure, so by terming genocide and Zionist settler colonialism as such, we note its systemic nature as something that occurs to Palestinians and others across the globe.

processing and acting against violence that occurs globally, including ongoing Zionist settler colonization. In this piece, we frame our counterstories as a methodological act of refusal to the genocide and ongoing Zionist settler colonization of Palestine.

Through our writing, we show how Palestinian narratives are part and parcel of a Palestinian vision of a fully liberated Palestine because these are denied, targeted, and censored in the United States and the West since our counterstories contend with the Western-sponsored settler narrative. To do so, we first connect transnational feminist rhetorical theory, PalestinianCRT, survivance rhetorics, and Palestinian feminism to demonstrate rhetoric as a throughline between these concepts. Second, we illustrate the connection between survivance rhetorics and PalestinianCRT through embodiment, illuminating how we contend with ongoing Zionist settler colonialism through our testimonies as Palestinian women. Third, we develop three tenets of Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics: infinitive temporalities, feminist collectivity, and counterstory dialogics. Through our counterstories, we uncover the importance of Palestinian feminist ethics, guiding how we perform our survival and resistance amidst a genocide targeting our Palestinian kin in occupied Palestine, including Gaza and the West Bank. We conclude by reflecting on how rhetorical studies must address ongoing violences across the globe, including ongoing Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine. If we believe that rhetoric has material impacts, we must believe in its transformative power and ability to change realities. Therefore, it is imperative for us as rhetoricians to speak on this to first name a genocide in order to end it.

## Past

*I don't think I have been able to sleep a full night since October 7, 2023. I have nightmares of settlers stealing my childhood home, being denied entry into Palestine after an arduous interrogation at the jisir (Arabic for bridge; this is the colloquial name for the King Hussein Bridge to enter the occupied West Bank), and family members interrogated and beaten at checkpoints. These nightmares manifested through these concurrent experiences of the past and present are a collective Palestinian experience. All of us are stuck in time, carrying our ancestors' trauma in the present as we see more land and life stolen from us every day. Each Palestinian murdered in this genocide is my uncle, brother, sister, cousin, and grandparent. Every day that unfolds in this genocide, I see a distance grow between myself and my homeland that I hoped to travel back to. What if I am now never able to return to Palestine, just like my teenage grandfather? None of us knew that when we said goodbye, it would be permanent. None of us knew our last time would be that - the last.*

sarah

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*I am so exhausted. I keep having the same conversations. I keep posting the same posts. Sharing Bisan's stories and the Daily Updates from LetsTalkPalestine. And we're seeing our starving children, their lifeless bodies as parents weep for them. The numbers continue to grow every day. Now we see their tanks proudly rolling over Gaza's entrance in Rafah... but the Hollywood elite paid \$75,000 dollars to get spruced up for the Met Gala, on the day of Holocaust Remembrance, as Netanyahu proudly embarks on this ground invasion and the onslaught*

*of Rafah.*

*I am tired.*

*Bernardita*

## Transnationalizing Palestinian Feminist Rhetorics

Communication studies and rhetorical studies have a responsibility to fight the censoring, silencing, and erasure of our Palestinian identities and enabling this genocide (Muhtaseb 4; Editor's Collective 1). This is especially imperative since multiple individuals from the National Communication Association (NCA) office, on November 18, 2023, censored and banned a Palestinian professor, Dr. Ahlam Muhtaseb, from delivering her invited speech at the NCA Presidential Address due to it containing "references to genocide and 'free Palestine' in the speech" (Muhtaseb 3). Matar contends that Palestine is communication, necessitating an investigation of how discursive means invite audiences into understanding and advocating for Palestine (2). To understand Palestine as communication, especially rhetorically, calls for scholars to approach writing and studying about Palestine in a way that reflects the lived experience of Palestinians in Palestine and the *shatat* (diaspora), and advocates for material land back and Return.

In genocide, Palestinians living in Palestine and the *shatat* narrate their experiences, showing the world their reality for the past 470+ days and 76 years.<sup>3</sup> In this colonial torture, we are told to keep our grief, pain, disappointment, and anguish to ourselves. While we may feel fear, we also understand what is at stake, and what we must do for Palestine and our people. Alternatively, we employ a Palestine analytic to articulate Palestinian experiences (Qutami and Zahzah 84). Through this framing, we bring Palestine into rhetorical studies with a transnational focus on how concepts such as feminism, survivance, and Palestinian-ness transcend borders, definitions, and experiences.

Transnational rhetorical scholars, feminist or otherwise, note the crucial nature of tracing global rhetorics. Transnational rhetorics can foster public coalitions (Yam 2) and relationality across borders (Yam 4). Transnational feminist research complements this by noticing how these rhetorics can identify solidarity and coalition-building across shared struggles (Yam 4). While we, as Palestinians, cannot be in solidarity with ourselves, as Nada Elia (144) reminds us as Palestinian feminists, we must continue to uncover layers of joint-struggle against all oppressions, where we see the Palestinian cause intertwined within.

Tracking transnational rhetorics and how they build communities of joint-struggle requires us to trace how ideas travel, morph, change, and develop within networks (Yam 5) through constant dialogue to create rhetorical foundations of shared and different struggles (Yam 21). Mais Al-Khateeb (12) reaffirms this notion by encouraging glocal (simultaneous global and local) perspectives on how rhetoric travels to critique

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<sup>3</sup> We name time to situate this violence and our writing kairotically. We recognize that these numbers may be incorrect as time passes, as we are unsure when this ongoing genocide and Zionist settler colonialism will cease and Palestine will be liberated.

systemic violences and provide future possibilities through culturally-relevant meaning-making practices. This “geopolitics of knowledge production” (Al-Khateeb 15) reaffirms the critical value of our Palestinian epistemologies that we share through our counterstories and Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics. As two Palestinians who were raised across different borders yet share a national identity, we utilize transnational rhetorics to understand ourselves through English, Spanish, and Arabic when writing, chatting, and processing. At the same time, our counterstories add to the network of Palestinian perspectives that call *out* power and call *in* our people to create holistic and coherent narratives about who we are and what Palestine is to us.

As we build these joint-struggle coalitions through our transnational feminist rhetorics, we engage in networks that Dingo describes as a metaphor for feminist rhetoricians to interrogate transnational policies tied to transnational systems of power (492). While we recognize the importance of metaphorical networks to map power and policies, our transformative networks move beyond metaphor. Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics materially challenge transnational policies and systems of power, whether it is colonial feminism, Zionist settler colonization, US imperialism, the military-industrial complex, or Orientalist complacency. Through counterstories, we hold all actors ultimately responsible for this ongoing genocide, following the lead of organizations such as the Columbia University Apartheid and Divest’s (CUAD) pamphlet of political economy maps shared at their encampment (Tooze). CUAD’s pamphlet maps how Columbia University’s Board of Trustees, war profiteers, the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF), the New York Police Department, Zionist cultural organizations, and Columbia University’s investments are all interconnected.<sup>4</sup> Identifying these networks, whether as a graphic or in counterstories, elaborates on how we uplift voices who experience repression by calling out manufactured militarized and Zionist settler colonial violence.

## **PalestinianCRT to Enact Our Survivance**

*I don't know if I can hold all this catastrophe within me. It's so hard to speak; what else do I say? How did my great-grandmother hold all this during the 1948 Nakba and wake up the following day?*

*sarah*

*Everyone should be f\*cking outraged. How is everyone not talking about Palestine all the time? Every day, a new nightmare is unfolding. And we're all just living every day as if normal? What is even happening? How are we supposed to keep going? How am I supposed to shut up about this?*

*Bernardita*

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Anti-colonial approaches to research and rhetorical theory are praxis-driven. Rather than developing

<sup>4</sup> We name the Israeli “Defense” Forces the Israeli Occupation Forces, following the lead of activists and Palestinians living in the homeland. This rhetorical move calls out the Zionist military only functions to uphold occupation rather than defend.

theory and imprinting it onto communities, a colonial endeavor by rhetoricians, praxis-driven theory begins with community knowledge as an anchor and referent for how theory, method, and study in rhetorical studies can be done (Lechuga 384). Additionally, Palestinian knowledge is systemically erased and not neatly categorized disciplinarily (Dutta et al. 61-62), making praxis-driven theory paramount for research on Palestine. We turn to highlight our Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics that uplift our community knowledge and oppose the methods and rhetoric of the oppressors. The need to shake free of the *ghassa*, or lump in one's throat preventing speech, displays our refusal of complacency in this genocide (Ihmoud, "Ghassa") and drives our praxis in this piece.

As we do this work on building Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics, we name the importance of this work as a rhetorical praxis of PalestinianCRT. To do this, we highlight how PalestinianCRT and counter-story enact survivance rhetorics and connect our work with how Wieskamp and Smith delineate survivance rhetorics at play in Indigenous rhetorics (74-75). Their analysis offers instructive ways for us to delineate how Palestinian CRT's counterstory methodologies enact survivance rhetorics that fight the erasure of our people. Specifically, we connect with CRT through PalestinianCRT as a "race-based epistemology" that allows us to critically situate conversations about colonialism, migration, diaspora, and Palestine (Harris et al. 21). By emphasizing PalestinianCRT's origins within the tenets of CRT, we start with understanding the rhetorical racialization of Palestinians by ongoing Zionist settler colonialism and that our work is a direct challenge to this violence upon our people. Our counterstories are meaningful interventions that tackle the broader systems of violence that organize our societies (Ladson-Billings), precisely a world society that chooses to accept a Zionist settler occupation state and deny the existence of a people.

It is in the face of this denial of our existence that Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics function to challenge violences and erasures. Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics act in response and as a direct confrontation to the Zionist settler-colonial occupation. A PalestinianCRT framework allows us to see the Zionist entity mobilizing dominant narratives through white supremacy and colonialism (Yunis Varas and Tanksley 133) supported through the current genocide, "sophicide," and "scholasticide" brutally carried out by Israel in Gaza (Palestinian Feminist Collective, "A Feminist Praxis For Academic Freedom"). Additionally, PalestinianCRT is grounded in Palestinian feminist epistemologies, is intersectional, and "gives us a vision for Palestinian survivance, healing, and liberation that dismantles the cisheteropatriarchal violences" (Yunis Varas and Tanksley 132-133). Why else is the Zionist settler state so intent on destroying all forms of our existence if not because it understands the power of our culture and heritage to challenge its dominance over our lands? Our community cultural wealth, a foundational framework of CRT, enacts itself through cultural traditions and celebrations, and in our survivance rhetorics and *hakawati* (storytelling), both in the homeland and throughout the *shatat*. Continuing to *live* and *speak* and exist as we do in the face of an ongoing genocide is how we disrupt the violent Zionist narratives through counterstories that dismantle the idea "that position us Palestinians as racially and culturally inferior and thus deserving of colonial erasure and extermination" (Yunis Varas and Tanksley 133). We speak and share our stories and challenge the colonial lies of our limited worth and value.

Through our counterstories here and our writing and existence everywhere (but especially in the homeland), we demonstrate the centrality of experiential knowledge that CRT names not only as legitimate but “critical to understanding racial subordination” (Yunis Varas and Tanksley 133). These engagements demonstrate why PalestinianCRT is foundational for developing Palestinian survivance rhetorics that extend the work of transnational feminist rhetorical theory. Baniya and Chen discuss the importance of storytelling within transnational and transcultural contexts because of the work it does to create an “antenarrative.” This recognizes, reveals, and rejects “various forms of oppression and replacing them with socially just practices that account for the complexities and nuances of global crises” (75). Our Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics through counterstorying extends Baniya and Chen’s work on critical storytelling. We also understand how critical storytelling “provides space to share stories of personal experiences, observations, critical reflections, and interrogations to challenge injustices,” allowing us to “offer political awareness and contextualize injustices” through our rhetorics (Baniya and Chen 79). Yes, we counterstorytell to amplify the voices of people not represented in mainstream media (Baniya and Chen 79) and to reveal communication’s importance in calling out inequities and injustice (Baniya and Chen 80). We extend this work by showing how our counterstorying enacts our survivance as we resist our annihilation.

These embodied methods of counterstory through narrative and storytelling are rhetorical ways that we, as Palestinians, enact our survivance. Not only does PalestinianCRT embrace these embodied praxes of transformational resistance, but in the face of brutal, genocidal violence and the intentional targeting of journalists and other storytellers native to Palestine, as we have seen in the last 15 months, we also more intimately understand this as resistance to death, murder, erasure, and historical amnesia. It is more evident now, as social media broadcasts a genocide before our very eyes, that Palestinian storytelling and narratives *are* transformational counterstories that directly challenge the Zionist settler colonial state. We understand our existence is a threat. We have seen the Zionist settler colonial project before and after 1948 spew their narrative-myth of Palestine as being “a barren land” until they arrived (Pappé 6; Sharif 18, 22-23). We experience violence when we dare to speak of the truth of our existence that our ancestries go back hundreds if not thousands of years in Palestine to contest this Zionist myth. And we also know that if we do not speak on our terms, we allow their violence to succeed in erasing us.

Our engagement with these transnational feminist theories and PalestinianCRT in developing this praxis works as a form of social justice, putting to work our “decolonial praxis and anticolonial project to dismantle the racialized violence of the [Zionist] settler colonial state and its genocidal efforts to erase and remove Palestinians from existence and history” (Yunis Varas and Tanksley 133). As Palestinians, we know the work of liberation demands constant vigilance against the subtle and pervasive ways in which the ongoing Zionist settler-colonial project takes more power and land, further enacting violence and erasure of our people. We understand then that our voices provide direct challenges to the racism that is built into the fabric of the Zionist settler state. As we witness the genocide live on our phones, speak on it, and receive repercussions for our advocacy, we realize and understand that the silencing we are facing is evidence that what we have to say—our Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics—challenge the US policy and narrative that excuses

Zionist settler colonial violence.

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*Students are being harassed and attacked, treated as comfortable college brats who are attending to the latest fad instead of righteously enraged that we are waging this violent genocide on a people an ocean away. Megyn Kelly literally made a segment to say that they're all ugly, and that's why they are protesting. What is happening? How is this reality? How do people feel ok saying these things? Have none of them read any history? Hind's Hall was not an accidental choice. That place carries histories of protest. And they named it for her because the violence she endured was a psychological terror as well as brutal assault on her, her family, and the rescuers attempting to get to her for 24 hours. All murdered.*

*The students have given us hope. They are telling us they see what is happening, and mainstream media and elderly politicians' extreme gaslighting propaganda is not working on them.*

*There is hope.*

*Una esperanza que no pensé que podría sentir. Y siguen.*

*We read and learned in school of the Civil Rights Movement. Of the Vietnam War protests. We learned all of this, no? Columbia brags of having learned its lessons. What lessons did they learn? They are repressing student activists again, like they did in 1968.*

*Biden speaks of student encampments and protesters as anti-Semitic, yet again violently conflating critiques of the violent Zionist settler state of Israel with critiques of Jews. Yet we see our Jewish siblings also being beaten by our police state, our Jewish faculty and heads of department thrown to the floor for pointing at the violence, arrested, and fired.*

*Instead, it is Zionist sympathizers at the pro-Israel counterprotests doing the very same physical and psychological torture that the IOF enact in Palestine—they throw firecrackers into encampments, beat students with wooden planks, play sounds of roosters in the middle of the night, or worst yet, children crying, just as the IOF did to lure Palestinians out of their homes to then bomb them.*

*They are now doing it here, in our so-called Land of the Free.*

*What is happening? What kind of dystopia are we in?*

*Bernardita*

## Present

*We are all exhausted, unable to afford the time to cry, mourn, process, or be with our families because it feels like we are the only ones who are against this genocide. The world watches, but we work. In between grading, I read lists of new martyrs to see if family members, loved ones, or families of my friends experienced a new loss. Before I teach, I take a deep breath to focus on what I must do for the next hour. Before I go to bed, I pray that this genocide ends the moment my eyes close. But this is nothing - absolutely nothing - in comparison to my siblings in Gaza. If I constantly feel this ghassa grow larger every day, unable to process this horror, what are they going through? This is why we work around the clock - we can sleep when Palestine is free.*

sarah

## Embodying Palestinian Feminism's Survivance Rhetorics

*My message to all women and feminists is to just keep posting about Palestine and Palestinians, and to spread the truth, to spread the news as much as they can, to keep talking about us. We are not numbers. Tell the world that we are not only under bombing as every time before, but that this time we are under a genocide. Tell the women and feminists that huge numbers of mothers lost their children and huge numbers of children will complete their lives without their mothers. Keep posting and posting and posting about us ... keep us in your prayers. – Mona (Ihmoud, "Love in a Time of Genocide" 88).*

The quote from Mona, a Palestinian woman from Gaza and a student of feminism, illustrates the exigencies of survivance in an ongoing genocide. As of January 6, 2025, over 17,492 children have been murdered by indiscriminate Zionist settler state bombings (AJLabs), pregnant women in Gaza are malnourished and without proper prenatal care (Nadworny), and infections and curable diseases run rampant amongst babies and children (Husain). As the genocide continues, we witness the survivance of Palestinian mothers who make diapers out of scraps from tents, go to sleep hungry to ensure their children's bellies are full, and give birth without medication or anesthetics. Palestinian feminism "offers an expansive vision of Palestinian survivance" (Ihmoud, "Palestinian Feminism" 1), providing embodied ways to understand the world, our actions, and our place when advocating for the decolonization and liberation of Palestine. In this section, we connect survivance with Palestinian feminism to illustrate the importance of embodiment within counter-story. Through this, we counter colonial feminist framings of Palestinian women as passive and defenseless beings needing to be saved (Ihmoud, "Love In A Time of Genocide" 88). Additionally, we build upon how PalestinianCRT and survivance are crucial within a Palestinian feminist orientation.

A Palestinian feminist analytical frame focuses on anti-colonial and decolonial resistance to the elimination of all Palestinian people and land and recognizes the importance of embodiment in feminist

rhetorics. Johnson et al. declare that feminist rhetorics require the body to be recontextualized to understand experiences and meaning-making through rhetorical and signifying power (39). For example, classifications of Palestinian women's bodies as security threats under a lens of colonial feminism (Palestinian Feminist Collective, "Shut Down Colonial Feminism") call on rhetoricians to understand embodiments of experience narrated to contest racist, Orientalist, and colonial stereotypes. Rightfully so, embodied methodologies, such as counterstory, help contest hegemonic rhetorics that seek to dismiss Palestinian women's bodies as determined targets by the Zionist entity aiming to eliminate future generations. Indeed, these methodologies allow us to accurately contextualize how, fifteen months into the genocide, women and children make up a majority of those murdered (Motamedi and Chughtai).

At the same time, Palestinian feminism contends that Palestinian bodies, despite gender and sexuality, are under threat by Zionism. Bodies carry signifying power (Johnson et al. 40), and Palestinian bodies are no different. The intersections of racialization and sexualization of Palestinian bodies and embodiment explain the sexual violence against Palestinian men, stripped, blindfolded, and assaulted, while at the same time recognizing the rampant, systemic sexual violence against Palestinian women and girls perpetrated by IOF soldiers in occupied Gaza and the occupied West Bank (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, "UN Experts Appalled"). Embodied grammars of Palestinian feminism function through Palestinians' continued ability to survive genocide and resist the erasure of violence through sharing testimonies and calling audiences to bear witness to their daily violence (Ihmoud, "Palestinian Feminism" 3). Palestinian feminism acknowledges the continued creation of new generations, songs, laughter, food, and investment in our communities as embodied actions of Palestinian feminism. Each of these exists to contest ongoing Zionist settler colonialism, carried in our voice and bodies to share with our kin and the world. The necessity of the body and voice in understanding Palestinian survivance exhibits how embodiment simultaneously encompasses Palestinian history, memories, and visions of the future. Concurrently, we witness the embodiment of power to narrate as we hear Bisan Owda, a Palestinian *hakawatiyeh* (storyteller) turned journalist after the start of the genocide, begin her daily updates in Gaza by instructing her audience that she is still alive.

Power structures, such as ongoing Zionist settler colonization, also affect how narratives are shared. As discussed in our introduction, Palestinian narratives of massacres, ongoing Zionist settler colonization, and genocide are systemically censored and ignored. Digital apartheid, coined by Omar Zahzah in 2021, continues during this genocide through censorship and shadowbanning many popular social media accounts on platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (Khan). Palestinians and allies experience account restrictions, content removal, and accusations of hate speech on social media platforms. In contrast, other accounts of hate speech, such as the one million classified cases of hate speech against Palestinians between October 2023 and November 2023 on various social media platforms, remain (7amleh). A focus on embodiment to battle such power (Johnson et al. 39) allows Palestinians to speak directly to audiences to whom they are systemically denied access by other means. Palestinian feminism and survivance rhetorics, connected through embracing and analyzing embodiments of experience, remain within and carried by our bodies. In developing Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics, we note the importance of embodiment as a central

aspect of survivance rhetorics, Palestinian or otherwise.

As part of our praxes, we are deeply imbued with and birthed from Palestinian feminism, a political project (Ihmoud, “Palestinian Feminism” 1). Thus, Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics discursively and materially affect how we communicate about ongoing genocide and ongoing Zionist settler colonization of Palestine. Dually, it allows audiences to understand Palestinian narratives through a lens that embodies infinitive temporalities, feminist collectivity, and counterstory dialogics, the tenets we define as Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics. In the following pages, we perform and define the building blocks of our Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics, solidifying the bridges we build across disciplines, across countries and oceans, across violence and death.

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*Despite this brutality on all fronts, our sisterhood is strong. We connect, we console, we encourage each other. Maybe we need to get punching bags to let out some of this rage. Because, unlike how the mainstream media paints us (I’m looking at you, Dana Bash, Mika Brzezinski, CNN, MSNBC, and the rest of you all who are peddling a propaganda so egregious most people can see it as you spew it)--our beautiful community of students are not the violent ones.*

*We gather. We create signs. We sing and dance. We organize donation drives to have food and other resources for student encampments, even as we continue to fundraise to pay private Egyptian travel coordination firms to get our people out of Gaza.*

*We come together. In group chats. At protests. To support our students. To remind each other we are not losing our minds, and everything that is happening is completely f\*cked. And it is all happening. We see it with our own eyes. Our people text us and write to us, post to social media, and share these realities. We see it. We know it is truth. And we know it is wrong.*

We will continue to come together, to hold each other through this moment, to get us through, and to fight for all of our liberation from this irrational colonial violence—here in our police state, and in Palestine.

*Bernardita*

## *Future*

*How else do I persuade (I can’t believe I have to persuade...) people to understand that genocide is happening? How else do I shake people out of their ignorance? How else can we amplify our voices as the House of Representatives votes on declaring the phrase “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” as anti-Jewish? You may not see it, but we are broken, burned, and hurt. We maintain our principled values as we fight from within the belly of the beast. Gaza’s job is to survive. Our job is to amplify our voices, signs, disruptions, encamp-*

*ments, and collective action to burst out of the belly and expose the beast's innards full of mass graves, murdered children, war crimes, human rights violations, and decimated environments. Once the beast is killed, we are all free. It is on the horizon, I promise I see the sun rising.*

*sarah*

## **Enactments of Palestinian Feminist Survivance Rhetorics**

Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics provide new heuristics to understand how survivance rhetorics, PalestinianCRT, and Palestinian feminism merge through our counterstories. Counterstories help communities pursue epistemic justice against settler colonialism and disenfranchisement to create a community for those who narrate pain, hope, and violence (Atallah et al. 684). Utilizing counterstory within transformative healing also assists in uplifting “women leaders collectively reflecting and sharing narratives and knowledges about strategies that challenge these hierarchies, patriarchies, geographies, and multiple entry points for resisting intersecting oppressions in daily life...” (Atallah et al. 685). As Palestinians, our counterstories travel across borders, time, and experiences to detail a broader Palestinian political national narrative since the Nabka in 1948, which altered time, history, and memory for Palestinians. Against the backdrop of genocide, our counterstories respond to an urgent exigence to stop the ongoing Zionist settler colonial violence happening in Palestine and across the SWANA region, and all violence across the globe. This section introduces three tenets of Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics: Palestinian infinitive temporalities, feminist collectivity, and counterstory dialogics that we discovered through our process of writing and counterstorying. These tenets add to the map of Palestinian feminism that Ihmoud outlines in her article, identifying key rhetorical elements enveloped within Palestinian feminism.

Our counterstories find Palestinian infinitive temporalities as a tenet of Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics. Infinitive temporalities challenge the movement of time in a linear fashion, a characteristic of settler colonialism. Instead of linearity, “survivance enables the past, present, and future to circulate freely and embraces the role of one’s past to influence one’s present and future” (Wieskamp and Smith 81). Additionally, infinitive temporalities in storytelling promote collective agency and healing while concurrently providing structural critiques (Wieskamp and Smith 85). Through this, Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics identify the importance time holds in how we understand and process the ongoing genocide in Palestine today and open up space to imagine futures absent violence and oppression. As we stated at the beginning of this piece, witnessing an unfolding genocide is not enough for those in power to halt the violence, nor has it in the past, such as in 1948, 1967, 1982, or today.

With infinitive temporalities, we highlight the importance of our orientation towards time. We understand the root of ongoing Zionist settler colonial violence began during the 1948 Nakba and continued throughout the decades to the siege on Gaza starting in 2007. Yet all these moments collapse together—we carry this moment of genocide and Zionist settler colonial occupation while holding trauma from pre-1948,

at the turn of the century under Ottoman rule, and beyond. Students have in the past and continue to protest today the genocide, settler colonial, and imperial violences such as in South Africa, Vietnam, and Palestine. Our counterstories are critical because, with this understanding of all histories and current moments, we can contest Biden's accusations of the Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza faking death tolls (Harb), that this new "conflict" began on October 7, 2023, or that student activists are terrorists on their campuses (Korte). As Within Our Lifetime, a grassroots organization based in New York City, writes in their statement about the encampments that grew across the nation and world in the Spring 2024 semester, "We have been marching, chanting, engaging in mass protest and direct action for decades, trying to show the world that our people in Gaza are worthy of life as they bear witness to 75 years of genocide" (Within Our Lifetime). This specific disruption to common understandings of genocide is crucial—genocide has persisted as long as Palestinians are subject to Zionist settler colonialism. As our counterstories disrupt time itself, Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics provide new possibilities for alternative ways of understanding Palestinian existence, resistance, and Return. Our grief and loss do not stand alone but instead, influence new Palestinian futures that collapse time upon ongoing Zionist settler colonialism and open new decolonial opportunities for the future. This future, though, is not just for us as individuals but for our entire Palestinian community spread across the globe.

In writing these counterstories and this article, we discover our feminist collectivity as pertinent to Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics. Feminist collectivity describes an ethic and understanding of how Palestinian feminism circulates and grows with community, not absent one (Ihmoud, "Palestinian Feminism" 2). It relies upon our Palestinian feminist ancestors, who each elevated how we embody and showcase Palestinian feminism today. Palestinian feminism is a collective liberatory praxis that is labored and built by us all, so within our Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics, we recognize the shoulders we stand on. As we, Sarah and Bernardita, sit on Zoom and in our shared Google document, writing, processing, thinking, editing, and affirming each other and our realities, we enact the praxis we write about—our Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics. This notices the pluralities of Palestinian feminism within us, guided by our own life experiences and others who surround us. For example, we collectively found our Palestinian survivance rhetorics through our research, interactions, and processing of our experiences. We share gratitude for our Palestinian feminist inspirations who brought us to this moment to co-write this article. Together, we grieve, we recoup and replenish, and we come together to restrengthen and keep fighting for a liberated Palestine.

This piece grew in community from beginning to end, not absent from it. Feminist collectivity acknowledges how these rhetorics circulate, finding similarities among our experiences. Due to our collective trauma of ongoing Zionist settler colonization, including the genocide happening to our people in Palestine currently, feminist collectivity defines the importance community holds in sharing and uplifting ideas that we co-create together. It is naive to say that this article is absent from our organizing, interpersonal, and social lives, which influence how we process, understand, and theorize information. Returning to praxis-driven theory, Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics emerge from our feminist collectivity, with commitments to movement building to ensure all of our kin are free.

Finally, we ground our Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics in this counterstory dialogic, a process of counterstorying in dialogue together, constantly challenging stock stories. Martinez reminds us that “[s]tock stories feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for social inequality” or, more insidiously, the violences that they perpetuate (Martinez 34). We enact our counterstory dialogics in our writing as we co-write, co-think, and co-feel our pain and anger. We live it as we gather to write and spend large parts of our meetings discussing the latest *hasbara* from both the Zionist settler state and its significant upholder, the US imperial power.<sup>5</sup> We rage discussing Hillary Clinton’s latest assault on our mobilized youth and student movements as ignorant of history merely because they fight against the stock story that she and others in this imperial government peddle for their benefit and maintenance of power. We understand our imperative: our counterstories are necessary because the propaganda machine maintains its power in our silence. At this moment, we are facing the profound necessity of contending with these—now clearly evidently—violent stock stories that relegate us to ignorance or, worse yet, terrorism and evil.

Thus, engaging in our counterstory dialogics is a critical part of our survivance. Dialoguing our experiences with this psychological warfare to gaslight our understanding of the realities we clearly see is vital. Palestinians and those now fighting in the trenches of this ideological propaganda war are doing so because, daily, we must contend with the constant denial of our realities. We write, come together, and speak because we know that will liberate us. As we know, “[c]ounterstory as methodology serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (Martinez 34). In our embodied dialogues, as Palestinians in academia, in rhetorical studies, constantly in precarity, we are always embattled in this fight for our survivance.

As a recalibration of rhetorical engagement and theory, this article begins with and is informed by Palestine to develop our understanding of Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics. Counterstory “interrupts the status quo of rhetoric and writing studies theory to drive home the necessity for, and viability of, creative, narrative modes of analysis” (Maraj 199). Our disruptions to scholarship-as-usual challenge how contemporary rhetorical theory does not position itself to respond to our experiences and people while genocide ensues in Palestine as part of more prolonged Zionist settler colonization. Instead, we focus on the transformative networks that shed light on how Palestinian feminism and survivance rhetorics intertwine to challenge the powers that extend this genocide. This is why defining and expanding Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics is fundamental to recognizing the rhetorical power of Palestinian counterstories.

We return to our claim at the beginning of this article – that rhetoric materially affects the world around us. Choices of how we narrate our experiences, whether audiences accept or deny invitations to that worldview, map how hegemonic narratives continue and are disrupted. Palestinian feminist survivance

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5 Hasbara is a Hebrew word for “explaining,” and is now popularly used for Israeli propaganda. As described in Al-Shabaka brief, “Rooted in pre-existing concepts of state-sponsored propaganda, agitprop, and information warfare, hasbara aims to shape the very parameters of acceptable discourse. This involves a coordinated effort by both state institutions and NGOs to bolster Israeli domestic unity, secure support of allies, and influence how media, intellectuals, and influencers discuss Israel” (Kenney-Shawa).

rhetorics through counterstories create fissures in this hegemony. As this genocide continues, there is not a lack of response to the brutal murder of Palestinians in occupied Gaza and the occupied West Bank. The National March on Washington was the largest protest for Palestine in US history on November 4, 2023 (H.). We see the global student movement demand divestment from Zionist institutions and war profiteers at their colleges and universities. In response, the militarization, policing, and surveillance of students on campuses called by university presidents and boards of trustees resulted in over two thousand students, professors, and community members arrested to date. Global protests, such as on Tax Day (April 15, 2024) and May Day (May 1, 2024), called on unions, the working class, and citizens to block economic pathways across the nation. An uncommitted vote campaign grew in strength against sitting president, “Genocide” Joe Biden, one of many complicit actors enabling this genocide to continue. Each of these modes of protest centers on Palestinians in occupied Gaza.

As brave students across the nation in encampments faced Zionist, police, and university repression, they remind us that the violence they experience is minimal to what those in Gaza do (Kestler-D’Amours). It is for this reason that these same students liberated buildings by renaming them Intifada Hall at California Polytechnic University - Humboldt, Hind’s Hall at Columbia University, Diana Amari Sabbagh Library at New York University, Fathi Ghaben Place at the Rhode Island School of Design, and Refaat Alareer Memorial Library at Portland State University, and more. These examples are one way that we see Palestine’s martyrs’ narratives and lives re-centered as hegemonic powers deny them; in fact, these efforts directly counter these gaslighting narratives that erase us by placing our martyrs front and center to be un-denied. More broadly, grassroots movements in the United States and globally showcase what it means to resist an ongoing genocide. We follow this lead.

We all can make changes, whether it is following the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaigns against companies directly profiting off of Palestinian genocide and land theft, protesting on the streets, speaking out in meetings and the classroom, or blocking celebrities complicit or silent about the ongoing genocide. Despite what we can do, all of these actions rely on people listening to and believing Palestinian counterstories, which prompt the globe into action. This is why we write and name these frameworks and methodological praxis—because we see how our counterstories shatter the master narratives of white supremacy and the Zionist settler state. The socially acceptable narrative is changing in front of our eyes as genocide persists. We are no longer accepting the lies we have been fed, and we are listening to ourselves, to each other, and to Palestinians. With Palestinian feminist survivance rhetorics, we can speak our truths into existence. In response, the world is accepting our invitations to a Palestinian analytic to create a world where we are all free. And so, we continue to call out, unafraid: From the river to the sea, Palestine will be Free!

## Fighting for *Jannah* (Heaven)

*Bernardita*: Do you ever feel afraid, sarah?

*sarah*: I don't know anymore. All the fear I experienced in my life doesn't even compare with what I see coming out of Gaza. Am I allowed to be afraid anymore? Or maybe a better question, what is fear really?

*Bernardita*: Right? How can we feel afraid? I feel afraid for my daughter. I don't want her life at risk. But if I am afraid for her, and I see all the bloodied babies with shrapnel and concrete dust on their faces, and know the thousands of *people*, real human lives—mothers, fathers, children, brothers, sisters, tatas... I have to keep fighting for them. What example would I be giving my baby if I don't fight for all the families?

*sarah*: I am scared of being afraid - what if it consumes me and I can't do anything to combat it? I guess I am afraid of being afraid. But then I see videos of Palestinians in Gaza singing *Jannah*, a Palestinian folk song, during Ramadan, when they didn't even have food or water to break their fast with. While I know my feelings are valid, I don't think fear is the right word to characterize what's in my body. It's anger, frustration, a pit of unknowingness. But as our people sing outside their tents being multiply-displaced, "Palestine in heaven." We are fighting for heaven itself.

*Bernardita*: I have a sticker on my laptop that reads, "They used to say Palestinians fight like heroes. Now they say heroes fight like Palestinians." I understand it so much more deeply now. There's something about living through this moment, witnessing our fight, our resistance, our spirit, our *hope* enacted in this way. Our joy. Yes. We are fighting for heaven itself. How can we not have hope? When we see what our people have survived already, and lived through, and keep enduring. They are the strength. They are why we keep going.

*sarah*: I cannot stand it when people try to just characterize us as weak and helpless. They don't understand our strength and love in our hearts and souls. We never inherited these false narratives, just the hope that we will Return and the struggle to fight against our oppression. My dad always told me that we are from the land of giants - I see us tower over the world as we demonstrate what real freedom is. I wonder if the world sees that, too.

*Bernardita*: Beautiful. I believe it. I believe things are changing. We are being seen. The youth sees us, and are mobilizing. Their power is beautiful and inspires me, because after having been afraid for so long, to have to be scared of how people in this country might receive my identity as Palestinian because of so much ignorance, hate, and anti-Arab and Palestinian racism, people see us now as living, breathing humans. Their narrative about us is failing. Like Ahlam told us back in November, Palestine will liberate the world. Yeah, part of me feels a sinking fear right before I am propelled by our strength and bravery. We are unafraid because we have to—to honor our ancestors, to honor our people in the homeland now.

*sarah*: I really think that our ancestors and people are with us, always pushing us forward. And we are with them until we can all sit amongst the olive trees in a free Palestine.

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