

Dreams Deferred:

An Alternative Narrative of Nonviolence Activism and Advocacy

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During a December 2011 interview with the Jewish Channel, then Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich said, “I think we have an invented Palestinian people who are, in fact, Arabs and historically part of the Arab community, and they had the chance to go many places.” Gingrich then defended this statement during the December 10 Republican debate, arguing, “Somebody ought to have the courage to tell the truth. These people are terrorists.” While Gingrich’s comments were met with audience applause during the debate and later praised by some in right-wing circles, they also drew plenty of negative criticism—and not just from Palestinians. The outcry came from both conservative and liberal Americans, while many in the international community, including Jews and Arabs, also took umbrage at Gingrich’s statements.

Despite the outrage generated by Gingrich’s take on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,

it is, nonetheless, a re-presentation of a familiar narrative: the Palestinians as terrorists and the Israelis as victims. This narrative has long played itself out in America's public eye, resulting in largely unwavering support for Israel's defense and security priorities. From the 1948 Arab-Israeli War to the Munich Massacre during the 1972 Olympics to the First (1987-1993) and Second (2000-2005) Intifadas, the world has witnessed Israel's ongoing struggle to live in peace with its Palestinian neighbors.

There is, however, another narrative—a narrative of oppression, displacement, violence, and occupation. This is the story of the Palestinians as told in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, for example, and in the documentary *Budrus*. In this representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinians are the victims and the Israelis, the aggressors. From “The Catastrophe,” as the Arab-Israeli war is often termed by Arabs, to the November 12, 1956, massacre in Rafah to Israel's construction of the wall, this is a narrative of Palestinians' ongoing struggle to live in peace with their Israeli neighbors.

Both narratives collided when Hamas, which the U.S. Government considers a terrorist organization, won legislative elections in 2006. Despite their being democratically elected by the Palestinian people, Hamas as part of the political process was not acceptable to either Israel or the Quartet (U.S., United Nations, Russia, and the European Union), and economic sanctions ensued. These narratives again collided in 2011, when Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas petitioned the United Nations for Palestinian statehood. Leading the opposition to the PA's request were Israel and the United States, and at issue were land, sovereignty, jurisdiction, and violence.

Yet there are other voices: voices of nonviolence advocacy and activism, voices of both Palestinians and Israelis who look beyond the violence and fear, voices of those who look toward peace. They are the voices that “get lost in the shuffle” (*Encounter Point*). In 2009, Jennifer Hitchcock and her husband, Vernon Hall, traveled to Israel and the West Bank with a \$600 Canon camera in an attempt to find and capture those voices, to seek out and show the stories they knew were there, the voices that are overshadowed in the mainstream

media by narratives of violence, terrorism, and demonization. Their findings are documented in *Dreams Deferred: The Struggle for Peace and Justice in Israel and Palestine*, a compelling feature-length documentary that questions dominant representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, challenges stereotypes of both Palestinians and Israelis, and brings to light the assumptions that reinforce these stereotypes and representations.

I recently had the opportunity to talk with Jennifer about *Dreams Deferred*. Having taught the documentary in a composition course this past spring, I wanted to hear more about how Jennifer and Vernon had conceived of the project, what their research entailed, and what their goals are for the film. I also wanted to know why a composition instructor from Northern Virginia and her architect husband would take on a project like *Dreams Deferred* and how they went about it.

Q: So I have to ask: How did you get from composition and rhetoric to documentary making?

Jennifer: I was a communications and mass media major at Virginia Tech, where I took one film production class. I left that and went into education, but I always had an interest in film. Then the technology changed so you could edit video with a computer. When we made our film production movies in college, it was in the 90s. They didn't have this technology yet, so we used SVHS. We had these \$20K machines that could only do three different types of editing. It was all very clunky, and you couldn't do much. Suddenly, here's this free software that's 20 times as good. I think it was 2002 when a friend of mine first showed my husband and me how to use iMovie with a Mac. Once we had the ability to edit movies very inexpensively with this free software, we started making little short videos for fun: our road trips, or travels, or experiences in different places—scenic pieces with music.

It was fun making those videos as a hobby. We made some wedding videos for people, and in 2003, we made a short piece just for fun—20

minutes long—about hiking the Appalachian Trail. A year after we'd finished hiking the trail ourselves, we interviewed some friends of ours who'd also hiked it and got some footage together. It was the first real documentary we made, a little piece, but it was the biggest project we'd done at that point. It wasn't high quality, but it was fun, and people we showed it to liked it. I also did a short piece in 2007 about an exhibition that my husband's architecture studio did in grad school, and I interviewed people as part of the documentary. I was getting into this documentary thing, although it was just a hobby at the time, and I enjoyed it.

When I was adjuncting up here after grad school, I realized—I guess I was about 31 at the time—that at some point in the next few years, we'd probably want to settle down and have a family. If I was ever going to make a real documentary, I needed to do it before settling down to see if it was something I wanted to do or whether it was enough just to have the experience. So I told my husband that this was a subject I'd been interested in for a few years, something I'd been reading about.

I'd studied the Holocaust in a class in undergrad, which is what got me interested in human rights, so I started to learn more about the history of Israel and the situation there. My research opened my eyes to the complexity of the situation beyond what I'd thought, beyond common thinking on the subject. My father is a Christian fundamentalist, so I was raised with a strong Christian Zionist background, which, in addition to the mainstream view of the situation between the Israelis and Palestinians, colored my perspective. So there I was, thinking how I'd love to travel to the Middle East and try to make a documentary while we were there. At first, Vernon said, "Are you serious, Honey? This is a little crazy!" But he's such an awesome guy, and he goes along with all these adventures. He said, "All right, I'll do it, but I don't want to go *just* there. Let's also go to North Africa, to Morocco and Egypt."

I agreed, so he took off work, and we made a big trip out of it. We had this great romantic idea to go across North Africa. We went across Europe, and you go across South America—we did a trip there, too. But when I looked into it, I realized that you can't actually go across

North Africa; the borders aren't open. We wanted to go to Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria, to all the countries there, but there's no train to take you. Instead, we decided to go to Morocco and Egypt, then to Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan. We spent over two months in North Africa and the Middle East, including two weeks in Israel and two weeks in the West Bank.

We spent maybe \$2,500 in total on the equipment, and we purposely got equipment that was small. We got HDV, high-definition video, and paid about \$600 for the camera. We toyed with the idea of buying a more expensive professional camera that was used, but we decided in the end not to do that because it looked like a professional camera, whereas the other camera, a Canon, looked like a tourist camera. If we were going to be traveling around with our equipment and trying to film, it was better to look inconspicuous. So we chose the cheaper, inconspicuous camera that still recorded in HD. Because I'd heard so many stories about activists and people getting their equipment confiscated by the Israelis, I had a back-up story that I was a Christian pilgrim tourist—in case we got busted. I also purposely didn't label any of my tapes with what they actually were.

We just decided to do it, and I only had a few contacts ahead of time. I tried to set up interviews via email, which isn't always easy to do, and we made the rest of them when we got there. In most places, once you got hooked up to the activist community, it was easy to meet other people. One person told us about someone else; then the next person told us about someone else, so we had tons of people to interview.

Q: Can you talk just a little bit about the planning process for the trip? How did you decide how much time you'd spend where? Did you spend a lot of time actually researching where you were going to go inside?

Jennifer: We planned this trip similarly to how we'd planned other trips in the past. One thing that was different and very helpful for the West Bank, though, was that a Palestinian-American friend of mine gave us the contact information for a man my friend had met when he had traveled to the West Bank a few years before. This man

used to run alternative tours, so I had this contact who basically helped me to set up home stays in different West Bank towns. That was good because if it hadn't been for him, I probably would have gone through an organization since I wouldn't have felt comfortable winging it myself.

As for the West Bank, I had ideas based on the reading I'd done about the situation. I read a lot of books. I followed the Israeli news, and I read *Haaretz*, an Israeli paper, on most days, so I had an idea of what was going on and where. I told my contact that I wanted to go here, here, and here, but I also figured he knew better than I did and asked where he thought I should go. There were some lesser-known villages that I really hadn't known about, villages where things were going on that were worth raising awareness about. So part of the list of places in the West Bank was from this contact and part of it was from me. The contact is also a nonviolence activist. He studied at James Madison University, I think—non-violent conflict resolution. He had a Fulbright here in the U.S., so I trusted his judgment.

For Israel, I'd heard about different organizations, and I tried emailing them. That's how I set up a few of my contacts ahead of time. But as I said, I had a short list, and we wanted to get more people. The first woman we interviewed was Ruth Hiller, an American Israeli with New Profile [Movement for the Civil-ization of Israeli Society], and she gave us the names of other people to talk to. But since I could only set up so much before the trip, there was a bit of stress because we weren't exactly sure beforehand who we were going to talk to.

We had this Lonely Planet guidebook that mentions a bookstore and coffee shop, an anarchist activist coffee shop called Salon Mazal. When we got there, we spent an entire day—they had moved their location—wandering around half of Tel Aviv on foot trying to find this bookstore/coffee shop. We finally found it, and that's where we found the Young Refusers, specifically, Netta Mishly of The Shministim [high-school Refusers]. In fact, a lot of the Refuser interviews were through people we met at this coffee shop. So some of the trip was planned out ahead of time, but the rest of it was on the ground. Often, we would meet someone on the ground who would tell us who we should we talk to, and they gave us names and phone numbers.

Q: If you had to guess, how much would you say was planned and how much was spontaneous?

Jennifer: I'd say 30 percent was planned and 70 percent was spontaneous. It was mostly spontaneous, especially in Israel because we didn't always know what the situation would be. In the West Bank, though, it was a little more planned. For example, we went to Jayyous expecting to go to a demonstration like we had gone to in Bil'in. Our thinking was to have one day of demonstrations in each village, but there was no demonstration in Jayyous because there was curfew all day. Instead of filming a demonstration, we ended up filming while we were locked in this person's house all day, filming from the roof, which was, in some ways, more compelling footage. A lot of what happened there was unexpected. For example, Issa from Hebron was amazing. He was one of the interviews we'd set up ahead of time. We weren't necessarily expecting that much from him, but he gave us a very extensive tour and an explanation of the issues.

Q: Obviously, the people you had on camera were willing participants. Did they express concern about being part of this project, about being interviewed? Did you have people who simply refused to participate?

Jennifer: There were a few activists who said they didn't want to be interviewed but gave the names of people who would. When I talked with Ilan—the elderly anarchist from Bil'in—on the phone, he asked me to explain what we were doing before he would agree to talk to us. I said something in my explanation about wanting to go to a demonstration with an Israeli and mentioned the phrase *both sides*. He said, "Both sides? What do you mean, both sides?" He bristled. I think he thought this project was going to be one of those artificially balanced projects where I would arbitrarily decide both sides of the story.

I also thought about trying to interview some settlers in Hebron, but people told me it would be hard. If you tell them what you're doing, they're not going to talk to you. You'd have to lie to them, and that made me uncomfortable, so I decided not to try interviewing settlers. One day in Jerusalem, we decided to get some man-on-the-street interviews. That was a fiasco! If you're honest about what

you're doing, people don't want to talk to you. If you lie, then you're misleading them. It was very awkward. We filmed one person who tried awkwardly to answer our questions, but we decided in the end that we didn't need any man-on-the-street interviews.

Q: You had an idea of what you were trying to accomplish: you felt like there needed to be more awareness about these issues. Did you have any goals beyond raising awareness? You know how it is. Sometimes you write because you have a specific goal, but sometimes you write and something just comes out. I'm making assumptions that documentary making is very similar.

Jennifer: Part of my intention was to see for myself what was on the ground, what was going on, and to try to show that situation. But I primarily wanted to raise awareness, specifically about Israeli and Palestine activism against the occupation and about nonviolence activism. I knew it was there, but I'd never seen it in any mainstream American media form. I wanted to interview those activists so they could talk about their view of things, which you just never hear. You always hear how the Israelis are gung-ho and hawkish or, obviously, how the Palestinians are terrorists. There's a very limited scope to the dialogue. I knew there were Israelis who were against the occupation, but I never heard of them in the mainstream media. I wanted to show their perspectives, let their voices be heard. I wanted to show some of the things they're doing as well as show some of their daily realities—what it's like, what it means to live under occupation.

I wanted this to be for an American audience that is, in a way, on the fence about the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. I'm not trying to reach Christian fundamentalists or hardcore Zionists. There are certain people you can't really reach, people who aren't going to be open to the message. I thought liberal American Jews would be a good example of a target audience or somewhat liberal, young Americans who don't know much about the issue. I had questions prepared, and I had talked to some friends here to get ideas for questions. I have a really good friend whose father is a Rabbi, and he's a very liberal American as well as a Zionist Jew. He talks about the issue a lot, so I wanted to know what he would ask if he were going and included several of the questions he gave me. I didn't ask

everyone all the questions, but I treated them almost like targeted research questions.

Q: How easy was it for you to find any type of balanced information when you were doing your research for this project?

Jennifer: It was hard. There were times during filming, during editing, and afterward that my husband said, “You *would* pick this issue!” But I would say that there’s no such thing as balanced. What is balanced? What is objectivity? What is an objective source? An unbiased source? I explain to my students that it’s like a sliding scale: the one side is extremely biased and not very credible, especially to some audiences. The other side approaches objectivity. But I would argue that there’s no such thing as objectivity.

To present all sides of this Israeli-Palestinian issue would take a documentary series. It would be 20 hours long and such a complex project. People have already heard so much about so many of the angles that there was no point in going back over the staid, already-talked-about, well-worn, stereotypical arguments—except when I asked people questions to refute some of those things without saying, “Here’s the stereotype.” Otherwise, I didn’t see a point in representing what had already been done. I just wanted to show a slice of what I knew was there, especially if the goal was somehow peace and reconciliation, equality and justice. These are the voices that have the most benefit of being heard.

I briefly considered whether I needed to put a disclaimer at the beginning of the film to say that I’m not trying to present a balanced view. But my liberal American Zionist friend loved it and thought we did a great job. I also had pro-Palestinian people say that the film might be too pro-Palestinian, which I thought was a little strange. Granted, it’s hard with family or friends because they’re a little biased, but even people who are hardcore Zionists liked it. My mom told me that my stepfather, who’s a strong Christian, really liked it and actually started to think about the issue. She said if it weren’t for the fact that he already believes the Bible gave that land to the Jews, he might have changed his mind. He wasn’t offended by the film, but he can’t get over that the Bible says it’s their land.

Q: Of course your voice is there in the film simply because of the choices you made, who you met with, and how you decided to edit the footage. But your voice isn't *overtly* there; there's no narrator, no "voice of God." The voices of the people you interviewed carry the weight. Why did you opt not to have a narrator?

Jennifer: Before I answer that, I want to mention that the problem with a lot of the material out there is that it's significantly biased one way or the other. You have either this pro-Israel view that's very stereotypical, focuses on terrorism, and tries to downplay Israel's role in the violence or pro-Palestinian material that's too heavy-handed and too prone to demonizing Israel and Israelis. Rhetorically, that's a problem because these approaches push people away. Certainly, I think that's what pushes away and turns off the people I'm trying to reach, such as liberal American Zionists and liberal American Zionist Jews, especially given the history of anti-Semitism.

The occupation isn't the worst human rights violation in the world. America's done equally terrible things in many places. In a lot of places, far more people have been killed than in the Palestinian territories. The Israelis aren't the worst human rights abusers in the world, but it's bad. And because we're such a close ally of Israel's, in a way, we're on the hook for what the Israelis do, while we're not for things that occur in other places. I really did try to make a point of not demonizing Israel and Israelis. I wanted to show that not all Israelis support the occupation.

I also tried to show that the fear is understandable and how fear motivates and explains why Israelis feel victimized. One thing motivating Israel to continue this occupation and not resolve it is that the Israelis just don't trust that the Palestinians really want peace. They believe that the Palestinians want to kill all Israelis. I don't think that's true; it's part of the propaganda. But, in reality, it's how the average Israeli often feels, so I really wanted not to demonize Israel.

Regarding your question about not having a narrator, it was partly an artistic decision. I made a point of not having a narrator; I prefer documentaries that don't have a director narrating his or her views, so

I didn't want to add my narration. We also hadn't intended to include as many informational or explanatory titles with written words—I think it makes the film seem more opinionated, but it's hard. I showed a rough cut to friends and family who didn't know very much about the situation to see if it was confusing, and people wanted more explanation. But because I didn't want to do any narration, I was very careful about the wording for all the explanatory titles. I tried to make them as unbiased and objective as possible and edited them many times. In those cases, I was trying to stay as close to the facts as I could, but I thought explanations needed to be in the film to fill in some of the background information. I just didn't want those titles to come across as my own opinion.

Q: Not having a narrator is particularly effective because it allows the viewer to focus on the voices of the people you interviewed.

Jennifer: That's a good way to put it because not having a narrator lets the activists tell the story of what's going on rather than my telling their story. Plus, I'm an outsider. My point was to let their voices be heard and not impose my views of the situation, but you're right. Obviously, documentary filmmakers are imposing their voices in the choices that get made, who they talk to, and what they choose to include. I just wanted to make it more subtle and less heavy-handed.

Q: When you see the finished product, do you see things you would have done differently?

Jennifer: My husband and I feel pretty good about it when we watch it. I did most of the editing and had a hard time with it. At one point, it was almost three hours long. I was so attached to this material. Everything was so important, and it's such a complex issue. My husband was half of the team, but he was supporting me—it was more my project. I was better read about it, knew so much about the complexities, that I thought I needed all the material. I didn't know what to cut. So he went through and cut it down to approximately 60 minutes, cut out what I couldn't let go of. And he was very right. He did an excellent job. He said, "This is the footage that's the most important, the clearest."

Because there are so many side issues, we had a lot of decisions to make about what to include: Do we include a part about home demolition? We didn't end up using the footage from one village because we interviewed a man there who was in the local communist housing party, but he didn't speak English. That was one of the things we wanted: to interview people who spoke English. Some people just won't read subtitles, but we also didn't have the means to get material translated. Also, if we went more than 80 minutes, it would get boring and be less than useful for educational purposes. We wanted it to be shorter than 75 minutes so it could be shown in class.

There might be a few things here and there that maybe I should have put back in—that one clip of that one guy saying that one thing. But it somehow, miraculously, got finished. We both had day jobs. Other than the summer before I got my job, it was something we did on the side for almost two years. I'm pretty happy with how it turned out, considering our purpose, intentions, and the fact that it's our first feature-length documentary and given that we winged a lot of the interviews and didn't know what would happen.

I think we would do better in film festivals if we had taken a more traditional approach and had more in-depth personal stories of Palestinians so you can really get to know them more, but that wasn't our intention. That's not what we were trying to do. Instead of getting to know just one or two individuals, I wanted a range of different voices. I wanted the movie to be more for educational purposes, and I think it turned out really well for that. And considering we were so inexperienced, I'm very happy with it.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to do with this particular piece beyond what you've done with it so far?

Jennifer: I should try to do a little more promotion. We have no intention to make any money from it, but I would like people to see it, if possible. I'm somewhat involved in the local DC area peace activist circles and Middle-East peace advocacy. I've gone to some events, talked to people, and given out copies of the movie. I have a few people who teach and show it to their classes. I'm also trying to get

other people to do public showings in the area, and we can speak about it. A Canadian chapter of Amnesty International showed it publicly, and I did a Skype Q&A session with them. We'd love to do more events like that. We want to encourage people to see it and to show it to other people.

We also just found out that we won best documentary feature at the Los Angeles DIY Film Festival, although we haven't gotten into any other film festivals so far [In May 2012, *Dreams Deferred* was selected for the Awareness Film Festival in Los Angeles.].

In a way, I think the movie is perfect for the DIY Film Festival since it was very DIY—it was *just* my husband and I who, basically, did everything. My husband even did all the music. He knows music from playing the guitar, and, again, with the technology these days, there's software you can use to get the sounds of different instruments. He recorded himself playing the guitar and played notes on the keyboard, with different sounds generated by the software, then mixed it all on the computer. We wanted background music that wouldn't be too distracting but would fill in different parts. In a way, I think that the film's being so DIY hurts us in other film festivals. The product is very professional, but I think it looks less impressive to bigger film festivals that only two people made it. It's nice to get some type of recognition, but that's not why we did it.

The experience of making the documentary and seeing for ourselves what was going on was worth it to us, but the reason we made the movie is for educational purposes, so people can see it in college classes, in community groups, in religious organizations, and in activist groups. We also made a shorter version that's only 35 minutes long and doesn't have all the interviews. It's specifically for activists and people who have gone to the Palestinian territories and want to come back and talk about it. They can use the documentary for an introduction about what's going on there. I also point anyone who is interested to our website [www.supportisrael/freepalestine.org], give them copies of the documentary, and encourage them to show it to other people and to make copies if they want to.

Q: After watching *Dreams Deferred*, I was surprised to learn that the film was your first foray into feature-length documentary making. It's really well done. You shot over 30 hours of footage? Do you have any plans for the footage you don't use in this film?

Jennifer: I do have plans to make several short segments of interviews about specific subjects—the type of material that didn't make the final cut—for people who are interested in more, and I will put it up on our website. I just haven't gotten around to doing it. Now that I have a baby, I've done a little bit here and there.

Q: Can you talk a bit about supportisraelselfreepalestine.org? In addition to links to the full-length and short versions of *Dreams Deferred*, you have a lot of good information and links to other sources on the website. How do you see the film and the website working together?

Jennifer: Most documentaries these days have websites to promote the projects, solicit money for copies, or promote screenings, etc., but we wanted a place where people could watch and download the movie for free. We also knew we wanted to provide links to further information about the conflict and about Israeli and Palestinian organizations that are doing good work. But as I was setting up the website, I got a little carried away with trying to include a significant amount of information, especially about different aspects of the situation that we didn't have time to cover in our documentary. As a result, the FAQs are pretty extensive.

Our documentary only offers a brief introduction to nonviolence activism and some of the larger issues involved in the conflict, so I also wanted to include links to good sources of information that offer a variety of perspectives so people can then go and inform themselves. I also include suggestions for how people can get involved and active because I've found that people, especially young people who don't have a history of activism, often ask, "What can I do?" I wanted to provide useful links and information to help support viewers who want to learn and do more.

I also tried to be careful how I explain the issues we address in the FAQs so that, as in the documentary, the information doesn't come

off as too biased or opinionated. And I thought it was important to address the roles of both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia because both these things can color the discourse in unhealthy and distracting ways. I think sometimes people are ignorant of how things they say are manifestations of these bigotries, or they may have a hard time recognizing it when they see it—and so many Internet sources on the topic display either one or the other!

I definitely see the website as a supplemental companion to the documentary, and I encourage people to go to the site and check out the information we have there.

Q: Have you considered doing a study guide for *Dreams Deferred*? All the things we've talked about this afternoon are incredibly nuanced points, but many students, and even a few instructors, won't necessarily know how to ask the questions that will help them to understand this very complex web of narratives.

Jennifer: Yes, I have thought about it, and I'm currently working on creating a page on our website that will include some suggestions for lessons and questions for discussion and writing to be used by educators. I haven't finished it yet, but I hope to put it up soon. Some of the useful content currently on the website that could be used in classrooms includes links to *Daily Show* clips, for example, that point out the hypocrisy of our positions. Our site also includes many links to good articles and essays about various aspects of the conflict as well as good brief histories.

Q: How do you see activism and advocacy linking up to our work in the field, in the composition classroom?

Jennifer: You can definitely link activism and advocacy to the classroom, and rhetoric connects them all together. I saw that when I was making and editing the movie. Being very conscious of my background in rhetoric, I would ask myself, "How do I present this in a way that people will be open-minded enough to hear it, in a way that isn't heavy-handed or offensive to someone?" I also think the film can be an object of study for visual rhetoric, which is an

important element in a composition classroom. I personally haven't used it in my own classes at this point—partially because I haven't taught many classes since I finished it and also because the online classes I'm teaching are somewhat structured. I can't really add my own material in there. But when I go back to campus, I might try to develop a course in which I include it.

The film could definitely be useful for a composition classroom, including in a course that is focused on documentaries, which is a course I would love to develop. I have colleagues who have done that at other campuses and might use this film in their classes as well. Even taking other articles or documentaries that show the more mainstream views of this issue and comparing the rhetoric and the arguments they make—what people are saying and why one or the other may be effective or not effective with certain audiences—would be useful. For some people, how do you advocate for something, especially in this case, something that's controversial and that people really feel very passionately about one way or another?

Then there's this whole idea of bias and objectivity. Where does that lie if such a thing does exist? What would be a bias? What would actually be an unbiased view of this topic? You could easily tie it to current events with all the things the candidates have been saying about Palestinians' being an invented people and try to figure out why they say these things. What are the political ramifications?

Q: Your comments about bias and objectivity are interesting. Students are always concerned about writing with an “objective” voice. It often isn't easy for them to understand that the framework within which they define these values is different from my framework, which is different from yours and that these differences make objectivity elusive, at best. What, then, do you see as the role and the challenges of your voice in *Dreams Deferred*?

Jennifer: As an American, I feel that the U.S. is the number-one sponsor of Israel in so many ways and, by default, the occupation. Because of that, I think I have more of an obligation, maybe a right, to talk about the issue. I haven't really gotten this question yet, but I wonder if, because of the nature of this issue, people are going to say

to me, “Who are you? You’re not Jewish; you’re not Palestinian. Do you even have a right to even talk about the issue?” Some people have a certain credibility just by virtue of who they are, especially on an issue like this. People listen to them more than they listen to someone else, and maybe that’s why I didn’t want to put myself in the movie because I don’t have that automatic ethos that says, “Listen to me.” I’m not an Israeli. That’s not my personal experience or my personal heritage. I think, though, that people will perceive those who are in it and do talk about it as having more of a right to talk about the issue, and this is why I like to let the activists talk. I’m just someone who’s interested in the issue, and some people are sensitive to that.

Q: If you had to defend your interest, if someone wanted to know who you are to take this on, how would you answer? What would you say besides, “I’m a human being who cares; I’m an American”?

Jennifer: Yes, because I’m an American, but also out of concern for the well-being and long-term security of Israel and because I have Israeli and Palestinian friends. I care about the well-being of both peoples. Studying the Holocaust, I was interested in human rights and then became interested in the history of the Jewish people. That’s when I came to believe that this isn’t good for them. I don’t necessarily like some of the advocacy groups that only focus on that aspect of the problem and almost sideline Palestinians’ human rights as if, for us to care about Israel, this will have to do. As if it’s bad, but it’s only bad because it hurts Israel. That’s maybe going too far because, obviously, Palestinians are human beings, and they have their own legitimate claims to freedom and human rights. The more I learned about it, especially going there and meeting Palestinians, who are a very generous and kind people, the more I came to see the effect of the occupation for its own sake. But I think people who watch the movie can tell that I’m not demonizing Israel at all.

Q: Well, you have the Refusers speaking for themselves.

Jennifer: I do. I definitely have a strong understanding of the history of the Jewish people and how fear plays into the situation and how the fear is legitimate. I didn’t want to get into too much discussion of Palestinian terrorism in the movie, in part because there wasn’t room

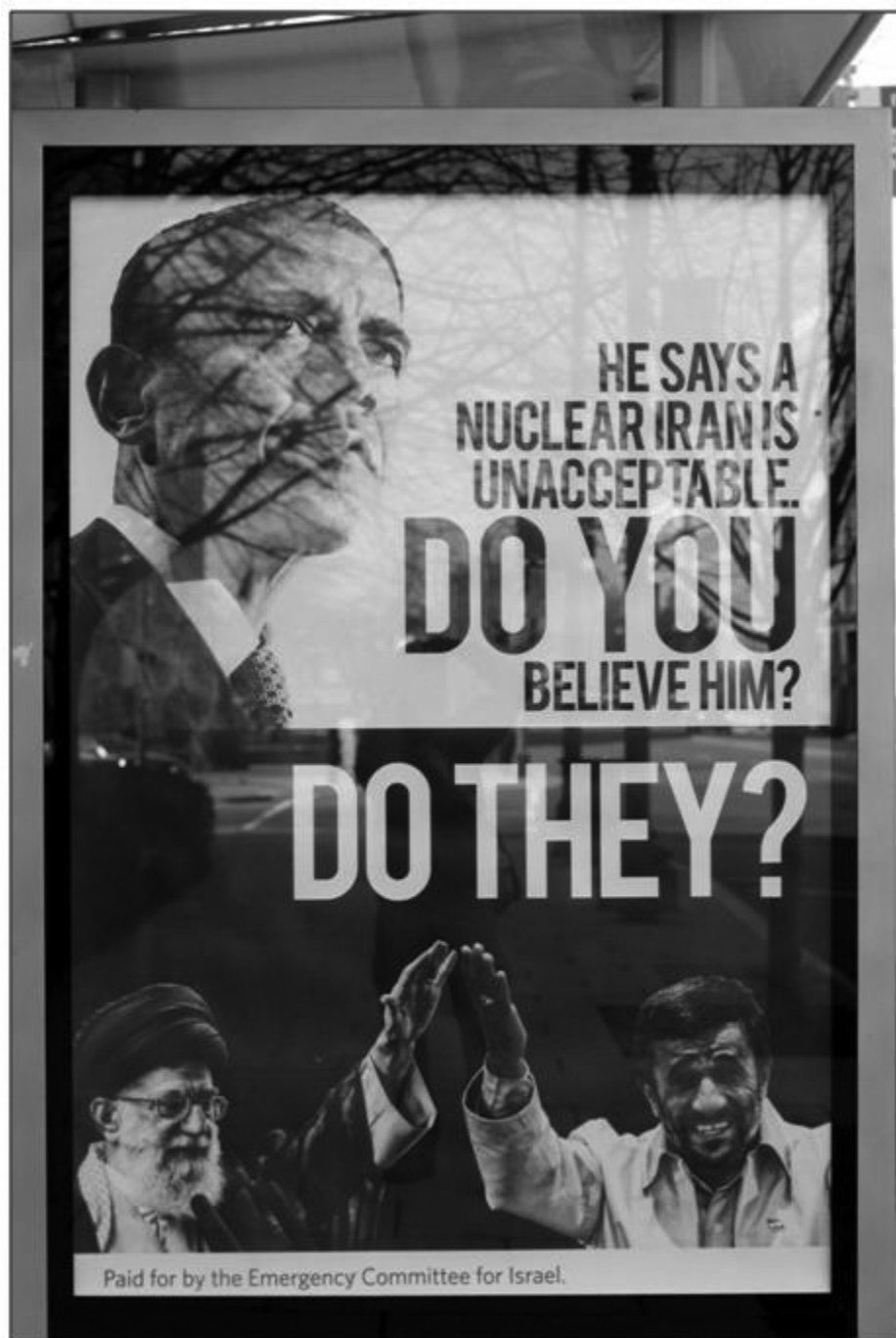


Photo by Raymond Bryson

but also because it's been hashed over so many times. I recognize that the violence of the Second Intifada certainly didn't help to make the Israelis feel that secure peace would happen. I could also point out that AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] might seem very influential with the American Government, but I don't think they represent most American Jews on this issue. A lot of young American Jews are pretty critical.

Q: I saw a billboard at the end of the bus stop on Massachusetts Avenue in DC the other day that, essentially, calls into question President Obama's sincerity that a nuclear weapons-capable Iran is unacceptable. The Emergency Committee for Israel, which says on its website that it "seeks to provide citizens with the facts they need to be sure that their public officials are supporting a strong U.S.-Israel relationship," paid for the billboard. How do you view this representation of an issue that's so complex and nuanced and the rhetoric surrounding Obama's position on a nuclear Iran?

Jennifer: I would bring it back to fear. I didn't see the billboard, but I'm sure that's what the billboard is getting at: fear. I teach in my intro to composition class that one of the strongest emotions is fear, and one of the most effective ways you can persuade people is to make them afraid. If you can make them afraid, you can convince them of many things. On the one hand, I think Israelis really are afraid. On the other hand, they're using propaganda to advocate a certain policy. The people who are making these things are genuinely afraid too, but I don't think their fear has a completely legitimate basis. I don't think they have as many reasons to be afraid as they think they do. Given the history of the Jewish people and the rhetoric coming from Iran, for example, some Israeli politicians definitely play up fear for political gain—just as politicians everywhere do. The Republicans do it here. I think some of Israel's politicians manipulate that fear, but the fear is there, and it's understandable why it's there. That's why there are so many groups and why these people, including American Jews who say they don't want to live in Israel, want to know Israel's there in case they ever need it.

I would say that in a significant majority of Jews in the world, American Jews included, there is a deep-seated fear that a second

Holocaust could happen. There aren't many groups of people who have such a history, and that history was ultimately a primary motivation for founding Israel. Even before the Holocaust, of course, there was discussion about establishing an Israeli state. A lot of Americans think Israel was founded because of the Holocaust, but Zionism began well before the Holocaust because the persecution of Jews was going on well before the Nazis, for hundreds of years. The earliest immigrants, the early Zionists, were fleeing pogroms in Russia, for example. Then there was the Dreyfus affair in France, where the French Jews thought they had been assimilated and were becoming equal. Because of this incident, which began in the 1890s and continued into the early 1900s—a Jewish officer was framed for something he didn't do—people were suddenly shouting in the streets, "Death to Jews!" The early Zionist immigration began during this time, and the Dreyfus affair helped to motivate Herzl, one of the fathers of Zionism, to write *The Jewish State*.

The fear goes way back and can still be seen in propaganda such as this billboard, in the thinking and belief that, if the Israelis don't bomb Iran, the Iranians are going to get a nuclear weapon and blow up Israel. It isn't totally logical, but fear makes you not totally logical. And enough has happened in the history of Israel that if you already have that schema of fear, the perspective of seeing the world colored through that lens, it just reinforces the fear.

Q: You don't know another way.

Jennifer: Exactly. Even if you have to ignore other things: the humanity of Palestinians, the overtures toward peace, the denunciations of violence by certain Palestinian leaders. There are enough examples of people wishing violence or ill will on Israel that totally reinforce that view and make a person think this is the way it is. Granted, that works for anything. Whatever your world view is, whatever stereotype you hold, you select examples from the world that support your schema and ignore any other examples. And maybe, in a way, that's what the movie does. It selects the examples that people don't usually see and might want to ignore and shows another way of thinking about the issue.

Q: Ali Abu Awwad, whose brother was killed by an Israeli soldier, told a great story. Can you talk a little bit about your experience with him?

Jennifer: Yes, he was very compelling. He was in another documentary. In fact, he's the main character in a documentary by Just Vision called *Encounter Point*. That organization also made *Budrus*, which I think is one of the best films about Israel and Palestine. Ali is very good speaker. That was a funny story: the first time we interviewed him, the lighting was too dark and the sound was not good, so we had to call him up and interview him again because he was so good. But it was fun. We hung out with him and drank coffee and smoked sheesha.

Q: Do you stay in touch with any of the people you interviewed?

Jennifer: One of the guys I stay in touch with the most isn't in the film because he didn't want to be interviewed. He's not so much of an activist, but we stayed with him and his family in a refugee camp in a village near Nablus. It was interesting to get to know him, and I've stayed in touch with him and the former tour guide operator, Husam Jubran, who set up our interviews in the West Bank. I've also been in touch with Ali and Issa a few times. I sent them copies of the movie. And I actually saw Ruth Hiller. She came to the U.S. to do a speaking tour last year, and I talked to her then. I've been in contact mainly to give out copies of the finished movie, but I haven't been in touch as much as I would like; it's hard.

Q: You had a man in the movie, Sulaiman al Hamri, who had participated in the First Intifada, but he decided not to participate in the Second Intifada. He was very compelling given the fact that he'd done what he did during the First Intifada and then decided to move in a different direction. How representative is he of other Palestinians based on what they told you during your trip, what you know, and what you learned?

Jennifer: I don't know if anyone has statistics on it, but in recent years, a much larger number of Palestinians have turned to supporting nonviolence and being against violence, so I think he's not unique in

that sense. Most Palestinians, like most Israelis, just want to live their lives and want the occupation to end. But most aren't activists one way or another; they're just normal people trying to do their thing.

One thing that makes Sulaiman very representative is that he supports Palestinians' right to resist, including fighting and using weapons against the military. That's a very common view, even among Palestinians who would otherwise primarily advocate nonviolence. There's a strong belief that Palestinians have the right to resist occupation. Their thinking is that since Israel is using the military against them, killing them, and committing violence against them, they have a right to take up arms against the military. Almost any Palestinian will agree with that view. Like Sulaiman, most Palestinians nowadays would say that violence shouldn't be used against Israeli civilians, but they see it as unfair that they can use only nonviolence when the Israelis use military violence against them. Most people would say if someone is oppressed anywhere else—whether it's in Libya or in Syria—those people have a right to defend themselves if violence is being used against them. Palestinians see this right of resistance elsewhere and think it is their right as well. Sulaiman wanted to say that this is a common view but also that nonviolence at this point is more effective.

Another thing that I didn't get to in the movie is that Palestinians have been using nonviolence since the beginning. It's something that's not widely known. The First Intifada was 95 percent nonviolent. There were strikes, marches, and boycotts. There was tax refusal. All these different creative nonviolent resistance tactics were used in the late 80s, but the few examples of violent terror are what got all the attention. In the Second Intifada, Hamas was more active—Hamas was created during the First Intifada—and there were a higher number of suicide bombings. Even though it was a small number of Palestinians, a significant number of Israelis, hundreds of civilians, died in the Second Intifada, and Israel cracked down really hard. I think some Palestinians, aside from other ethical, philosophical, or rhetorical reasons to support nonviolence, saw what happened when there was more violence: they got violence in kind, so a lot of Palestinians died.

The measures were very harsh repression in the West Bank and Gaza during and after the Second Intifada under Ariel Sharon. Palestinians saw that response, and some said the violence wasn't worth it. It didn't work, obviously. Violence was like sticking your hand in a hornet's nest. You could argue that the Israelis might think their violence actually helped, in a way, to turn Palestinians toward nonviolence. That's not the only reason; I think rhetorical reasons played into it too. With nonviolence, the Palestinians could get the international community's attention and more support. The Israeli activists have helped too because now there are a lot of young Israelis who are in solidarity with the Palestinians, joining in the demonstrations. They wouldn't be joining the Palestinians in violence. There are towns, such as Bil'in and even Jayyous, where the Israelis actually did reroute the fence, not completely giving the Palestinians their land back, but you're seeing some actions resulting from these demonstrations. Nonviolence is working in a way violence never did.

Q: How do you view this success with nonviolence activism relative to Hamas and Fatah and their involvement with the political system and, particularly, with respect to the 2006 legislative elections in which Hamas took the majority, a win that resulted in economic sanctions and, ultimately, violence between Hamas and Fatah? Is there a relationship?

Jennifer: I think Fatah and the PA have turned very strongly in recent years, even before the elections, to supporting nonviolence. In a way, going to the UN was a form of nonviolence, and it's so sad to see the U.S. so easily shoot down the Palestinians' request to the UN for statehood. It's a nonviolent intent to say, "Look, we're not bombing; we're going to the UN to make a case, to make a rational argument nonviolently." It's scary when those attempts at nonviolence are shot down by the U.S. and Israel. It increases the danger of turning people toward Hamas, toward violence.

I think the flotilla incident¹ opened Hamas's eyes to nonviolence, though. It hasn't been publicized here, but the leader of Hamas has said that they support these nonviolent actions as well and that they're willing to go along with a peace deal that is supported by the Palestinian people. I think they're realizing the power of nonviolence,

even though they don't believe certain things and haven't changed their charter. I don't think they're ever going to say they're against violence because, as I said, most Palestinians will say, "We have a right to resist the military." Only a handful of liberation movements in the history of the world have been completely nonviolent. Even in South Africa, the ANC [African National Conference] was a terrorist group for years. It's an unfair double standard to say the Palestinians can only use nonviolence.

If elections happen again, a possible uniting figure—and he might win, even though he supports violence—is Marwan Barghouti. He's one of the slightly younger generation of Fatah leaders who crafted the Prisoners' Document² several years ago and who are trying to unify Hamas and Fatah. Barghouti was on the last list prisoners to get released, so even Hamas has a high esteem for him. Almost all Palestinians have a high opinion of him. He put out an op-ed during the Second Intifada that basically says Fatah supports Palestinians' right to resist the Israeli military with violent means but that they should not attack Israeli civilians. If the Israelis release Barghouti, he could potentially unite the Palestinians and bring about some sort of peace deal. He's been in jail for conspiring on acts of terror, though, so I don't think they want to release him.

It's hard: we can't talk to Hamas; they're a terrorist group. But they tried to become part of the political process. They were elected, and they were arrested. Yet we accept that the Muslim Brotherhood won elections in Egypt, and Hamas is basically an offshoot of that group. Hamas has been involved in terrorism. That's true. But I like to use the Northern Ireland analogy. Sinn Féin and the IRA [Irish Republican Army] didn't fully give up violence and all their weapons until 2005. They were incorporated into the political process years before they completely renounced all violence, and only by virtue of their being incorporated into the political process did that violence stop. I don't think there are other cases of groups renouncing violence for another reason; it's just not how the world works.

You set up all these preconditions you know can never be met; therefore, it's an excuse never to have to give up the land. It's sad because the rest of the world can see quite clearly that our politics

are geared toward supporting Israel, right or wrong, and most Americans don't know much about the situation, only what the news chooses to show them. The rest of the world sees it as ridiculous. How can Obama go to Cairo and say all these things, then turn around and veto the one UN resolution that condemns settlements? Yet our government policy before Obama for many administrations was that settlements are bad. Even the liberal Zionist advocacy group J Street says we shouldn't have vetoed the resolution. It's unfortunate because it certainly doesn't make us look good.

One of the things that worries me—because I am concerned about the long-term security and well-being of the Jewish people and Israel—is doing things on behalf of Israel that are clearly hypocritical and don't seem to be clearly in the interest of the U.S. It looks bad. Thomas Friedman echoes this sentiment in a recent piece in the *New York Times*, saying it's in the *United States'* interest not to let Iran get a nuclear weapon. If people think Israel is pushing us to war, that's another anti-Semitic line of reasoning. We need to be conscious of how these things appear.

Q: So what's next? More documentaries?

Jennifer: I think so. I think someday. I don't think my husband and I plan to do other feature-length documentaries, and we don't have plans to do documentary filmmaking as a fulltime career. It entails a lot of other things that I'm not particularly interested in doing. More than half of it is trying to get funding, begging for money. We have other careers. I think it's nice if you can do it as a hobby. Maybe some short pieces down the road, but not right now. I figure if we ever make something else, considering the first thing we did was a feature-length on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, anything else will seem easy. And we learned so much from this project. We know certain things to avoid and certain things to do to make it easier down the road.

Q: I have one last question. If you have any parting words, what is that “thing” you want to say? What do you want people to take away from this project, your movie, if nothing else?

Jennifer: Obviously, I would love it if people watched our movie and passed it on to others, if they went out and learned more about this issue. It not only has implications for the Israelis and the Palestinians; obviously, I want both those peoples to enjoy peace and equality. But the occupation and the conflict in general also reflect on the U.S. because we are a sponsor, and it certainly doesn't help our standing in the world to continue supporting everything Israel does, especially its oppression of the Palestinians. A lot of Israelis brought up the drug addict or alcoholic analogy when talking about the occupation: if you have a good friend who has a problem, addictions—in this case, the addiction is to the occupation, to the land, to settlements, to this aggressive posture, and, in a way, this addiction to fear—what do you do? Do you continue to give them billions of dollars to feed these addictions? That's an unhealthy enabling relationship. A good friend, a true friend, would try to help. There needs to be an intervention instead of continued support for those habits. As Ali Abu Awwad says in the film, "you can't have security if you are occupying a nation of people." You'll never have long-term security if you have a boot on the Palestinians. They'll resist one way or another; you can't have it both ways. If you want them to use nonviolence, you can't cry that every nonviolent method is delegitimizing.

It would be great if people got more informed on the issue, either through watching our movie or through other means. Palestinians said, "Come and see for yourself." Go there so you can witness it. Call your congressman. Get active in peace and justice movements. It affects not only them. It also affects us because we are the number-one sponsor. Our tax dollars go to support the occupation in the long run.

Q: Which brings us back to this idea of nonviolence activism and advocacy as an alternative to the more mainstream narratives of terror and violence or occupation and oppression—

Jennifer: Yes, I just wanted people to hear some other perspectives on what I see as an important issue that needs to be resolved for the sake of not only Israelis and Palestinians but also for us as American sponsors. Right now, The Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories is the longest-running military occupation in the world, and it will

eventually end, one way or another. Hopefully, it will end in a way that leads to peace and reconciliation between the two peoples.

We tried to avoid being too heavy-handed so that the film will appeal to a wider American audience. But people can ultimately see it for themselves and decide if they think *Dreams Deferred* is useful and effective.

Q: Thank you, Jennifer, for taking the time to talk about your work. I always tell my students, “If nothing else, question your assumptions. Search for what’s behind your beliefs; dig into what supports your understanding of the world and what’s taking place in it.” Your film and the companion website help us to do just that with respect to an issue that has traditionally been as polarizing as it is complex. *Dreams Deferred* not only challenges the dominant narratives that have been associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for so long, but it also provides an alternative: a narrative of nonviolence activism and advocacy.

Kathy Kerr is a second-year PhD student in Rhetoric and Writing at Virginia Tech, coming to the program after a career with the federal government. Her research interests include the language of government, the rhetorics of bureaucracy, and also the rhetorical moves of governmental languages and how they interact across cultures.

Endnotes

- 1 On May 31, 2010, Israeli forces boarded Gaza Freedom Flotilla vessels that were planning to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza. The raid, in which nine Turkish activists were killed and numerous others injured, was carried out in international waters. Activists participating in the flotilla accused the Israeli military of using excessive force against unarmed protestors, and the incident sparked international outcry (Zacharia). Israel subsequently eased its land blockade
- 2 Representatives of several Palestinian groups, including Fatah and Hamas, wrote this document, which calls for Palestinians to unite in their quest for statehood. It also calls for Israel to withdraw to its 1967 borders, which some analysts suggest is an implicit recognition of Israel's right to exist (Hardy).on Gaza; however, the international community continues to pressure Israel to end the blockade.

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