

Chapter 11. “Quadeesh hathi?”: Negotiating Positionality as a Transnational Filmmaker

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In 2019, I was in Tunis City in Tunisia conducting interviews for my research project around the role of affects (emotions) in pushing people to revolt and protest in the streets in 2010-11. During one of my breaks, I went shopping at the old market in the city, accompanied by a Tunisian guide and friend, Montasar. Cautioning me about merchants' tendency to raise prices for foreigners, Montasar suggested that I didn't speak to the shop owners and workers and let him manage the bargaining part. As I paid attention to Montasar's Tunisian Arabic dialect, which is different from my urban Jordanian-Palestinian Arabic dialect, I picked up some of the bargaining phrases, so I started communicating with merchants by asking “Qadeesh hathi?” which meant “how much is this?” While Montasar was impressed by my attempts to speak the Tunisian dialect, one shop owner recognized my non-Tunisian accent immediately and asked, “Where are you from?” I answered, “I am Palestinian, born and raised in Jordan.” And that was like a magical answer. His face lit up, and with a wide smile on his face, he shook my hand enthusiastically with both hands welcoming me warmly. From there, the man gave me huge discounts on the clothes I bought, which left Montasar amazed and speechless. After that, in other shops, I got out of my silence, and spoke proudly and confidently in my Jordanian-Palestinian accent, revealing my identity whenever I was asked where I was from.

That incident summarizes the Tunisian hospitality toward me. Although initially Montasar cautioned me of introducing myself as a researcher in the U.S. academia, I found people very welcoming to me as soon as they knew I was Palestinian-Jordanian. It helped that there are strong ties and a shared history between Tunisians and Palestinians. That is, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was welcomed in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, after it was kicked out of Beirut-Lebanon in the early eighties. During their residency in Tunis, Israel massacred Palestinian members of the PLO and Tunisian citizens in what is known as the Hammam Al Shat massacre on October 1, 1985. In my interviews with Tunisians, they indicated that the massacre was one where the Palestinian and Tunisian blood mixed, which strengthened their bond as Arabs in resistance to Israel's occupation of Palestine.

My initial research project in Tunisia inspired me to work on a documentary film about the Tunisian revolution in the winter of 2022. As I reflect on my

communication with Tunisians as a Palestinian-Jordanian scholar and documentary filmmaker, I recognize how privileged I was, as my research experience in Tunisia was all facilitated by my identity and positionality as a scholar of Palestinian origin. This positionality granted me positive connections with Tunisians who were eager to help with my project. Yet, while I succeeded in prioritizing my relationship with the research and documentary film participants over the final products, I also fell short in some areas. Specifically, I felt that what Tunisian citizens gained from my projects was less than what I earned. In this chapter, I reflect on three areas of my research relationship with Tunisian citizens responding to Shawn Wilson's emphasis on the researcher's "relational accountability" (2001, p.177). The three areas are monetary compensation, authorship, and intellectual property ownership. I then illustrate how I attempted to sustain a positive relationship with my research participants after the end of some research and documentary film phases, despite the hiccups throughout the research and documentary filmmaking processes.

A Research Context

In my research and documentary film design, I was inspired by indigenous research methodology, articulated by Shawn Wilson (2001; 2020). Wilson emphasizes "relational accountability" where a researcher needs to continually think of and question their role and responsibility toward their research participants (2001, p.177). I was aware of the ways researchers dehumanize and colonize their research subjects. Despite the Institutional Research Board (IRB) regulations, more often than not, researchers gain the benefits of publicity, promotion, recognition, and tenure while leaving their subjects without any benefits. Therefore, I was determined to treat Tunisian citizens as partners in my research and, later, my documentary film project.

In the summer of 2019, I traveled to Tunisia to interview Tunisian citizens who contributed to the Tunisian revolution of 2010-11 to be part of my monograph. My friend and PhD student colleague, at that time, Akram, put me in contact with his friend, Montassar, in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia. In his turn, Montassar helped me locate research participants and accompanied me during my travels in Tunisia's various cities and towns, all for no compensation other than my extended friendship. Another person, my host, Maryam, who I rented a room from, also helped me connect with her friend Hayat, who also connected me to other participants. Tunisian citizens showed high generosity in welcoming me and introducing me to more citizens, which supported my research project and contributed to its success.

The idea for the documentary film arose in that summer where many Tunisians told me they were dissatisfied with mainstream Arabs and Western media coverage of their revolution. These coverages, Tunisians critiqued, left out many important factors and participants that contributed to the revolution, such as

women and inner cities population. Thus, I decided to go back to Tunisia to film and produce a documentary film, narrated by those who contributed to the Tunisian revolution across the country in 2010-11.

I wanted to make a documentary film with Tunisians rather than about them. I wanted Tunisians to be the ones who decided the storyline and documentary focus. I envisioned Tunisian citizens filming the interviews and other footage and asking the interview questions they found adequate. I expected the project to take a few years and to start with me and, perhaps, another filmmaker from Tunisia, to train a group of 4-6 Tunisians from various areas of Tunisia on the basics of filmmaking. The training was to include conducting interviews, filming, audio recording, and video editing. The group and I were going to decide a storyline for the documentary together, film the documentary interviews for a year, and finally work with a professional Tunisian video editor to compose the footage into the story that we drew. Such a project seemed ambitious, but I was confident in making it happen with the main challenge of securing adequate funds to pay Tunisian novice filmmakers and documentary participants stipends to compensate their labor.

Working on the Documentary

In the summer of 2022, I returned to Tunisia to conduct more interviews for my monograph and gauge interest among Tunisians for making the documentary film. With the help of Montassar, I found through the Ministry of Culture that foreign filmmakers were not allowed to make any films on their own but rather in collaboration with Tunisian filmmakers and film production companies. Thus, my mission became finding a Tunisian film production company with which to collaborate.

That's where I got lucky. Maryam's boyfriend, Taher, connected me with his filmmaker friend, Maher. Maher suggested that a collective documentary with many filmmakers wasn't practical. As he insisted, the documentary needed one leader with a clear vision to guide the process of filmmaking. He highlighted the logistic difficulties that would arise from relying on multiple novice filmmakers to capture the interviews and form the storyline. Maher invited me to watch his documentary about one hundred years of resistance in Tunisia, titled "Karama Be Doon Tarkhees" in English, "Dignity without a License." I was astonished by the documentary's level of professionalism. The well-made documentary enhanced Maher's credibility in suggesting that I be the sole director of the documentary film while he would provide the filming and video-editing equipment, take care of the paperwork, and acquire a filming license from the Ministry of Culture.

With a humble budget of \$7,000 left over from my startup money at UNC Charlotte, I decided to proceed with the documentary film in collaboration with Maher. From Charlotte, NC, I met with Maher via Zoom for a few months to prepare for the film. My vision was to make a documentary to track the progress of the Tunisian revolution through narratives about Tunisians' emotions throughout the revolution. Working on the storyboard, Maher gave so much input that I decided

he should be a co-director of the film, as his contribution exceeded the role of renting me his company's equipment. While I thought the film needed to be made in stages, Maher insisted on filming and editing the footage into a short documentary of 20 minutes during my next visit to Tunisia. I thought that was not fair to Maher and the rest of the crew he would hire, as my budget was too humble. I suggested to Maher that we do only the first stage of filming with the budget we had, then with the plan to secure more external funds to finish filming and then edit the footage into a documentary film. However, being unemployed for a long time in the documentary filmmaking industry in Tunisia, Maher was eager to demonstrate his talents and capabilities with the hope that the film would bring him more work. Under his pressure, I gave in and agreed to make the full film at once, and that is what he committed to in the contract between him and the UNC at Charlotte.

Monetary Compensation

Because I agreed to rush into the project without securing adequate funds, I couldn't compensate the interviewees in exchange for their labor. However, since we arranged to meet several interviewees at filming locations other than their homes, I was determined to pay participants for their transportation out of pocket. Some interviewees accepted my offer with hesitance, while others welcomed it. In other cases, Maher cautioned me against offering compensation as it could be culturally offensive and inappropriate. On one hand, as an Arab myself, I understood how sensitive Arabs can be about money, where they insist on offering their service for free even when they are in financial need. At the same time, residing in the U.S. for 13 years, at that time, I became more straightforward about money. Also, I was aware that many of our interviewees were in tight situations financially, but even if they weren't, I thought that monetary compensation was the right thing to do. Perhaps if I had already prepared the transportation money in envelopes affirming that they were within a research budget provided by my institution, I would have spared everybody the discomfort of speaking about money. As a way to show appreciation for the Tunisian citizens' contribution, however, I insisted whenever we had time to invite them to nearby restaurants and cafes for meals and drinks.

What I learned from that experience is that I always needed to include interviewees compensation as an essential element in any research fund that I acquire. However, I also noticed that monetary compensation is not the only way to recognize research participants' contributions. Including the participants in both the research and film agendas is as important to produce research and documentary films that reflect ordinary people's agendas and needs.

Authorship

My original plan was to make a documentary film with Tunisians rather than about them. However, I let logistical considerations deter me from that direction.

Ideally, I needed to invest more time meeting with the documentary film participants, explaining my story idea to them, and asking them for their input. I needed to meet with them several times and prepare them for the camera before I filmed the interviews. Instead of doing that, my work with Maher went without enough collaboration with the documentary participants.

This lack of collaboration appeared during the filmed interviews as the interviewees often didn't directly answer the interview questions and told other stories that we didn't ask about. However, to honor their stories, and despite logistics, I made sure to give the interviewees all the time they needed to narrate their own stories, even when they didn't comply with the story that I wanted to tell. I knew that such flexibility was going to be costly during the production process. For instance, moving the filmed interviews from the camera storage devices onto external hard disks was going to cost us long hours. Also, editing the footage to extract a few minutes from hours-long interviews and synchronizing the recorded sounds with the footage was going to be labor-intensive. For all these reasons, it became impossible to finish the full 20-minute documentary film within the month that I spent in Tunisia. Thus, I had to work hard to make the case to my department chair and college Dean to compensate Maher by paying him the full \$7,000 for filming the footage without editing it into a documentary. Making that case was stressful, time-consuming, and put me in a position of conflict with my department chair, but it was an ethical choice that I had to make.

As I started watching the footage after I returned to the U.S., I recognized the richness of the unplanned stories that could have been elaborated on by the Tunisian interviewees, had I spent more time planning the documentary film with them. Therefore, I contacted all the participants back in Tunisia to apologize to them for rushing the project and promised them to proceed with more consultations with them about the stories that they wished to tell about their revolution, even with me being the film director.

Ownership and Intellectual Property

Although non-academic documentary films don't require a consent form, they require a videography and photography release form as a legal document to guarantee the filmmaker permission to publish and distribute human interviews. For my documentary film in Tunisia, I adapted a release from a previous one that I used in the past when I worked for New Mexico State University (NMSU). The older form granted full ownership and intellectual property to the university and none to the interviewees. When I worked on documentary films for NMSU, I didn't question the ethicality of that videography/ photography release form, but I started questioning it when I used it with Tunisian interviewees.

I recall one particular interviewee's reaction, Tarek, who read the release form out loudly in a sarcastic voice, critiquing how it left the documentary film participants without any rights. Yet he signed the form at the end. Hosting us at

his home, he and his wife, Dalenda offered me and Maher tea, cake, and good conversations. Tarek showed us his impressive artwork, and when I asked to take photos of his work and maybe include it in the documentary film, he questioned who would have the intellectual property of his work in that case, and that made me feel ashamed of that release form that I circulated among the Tunisian interviewees.

The trust and hospitality that Tarek and Dalenda showed Maher and me contrasted the lack of trust that I showed them using that release form that gave me all the rights and gave them nothing. The form became an oppressive document and tool that I employed to affirm that the labor Tarek and the rest of the interviewees invested in the interviews was not worthy of intellectual property. If the documentary film was to win an award, for instance, it would be Maher and I who were to receive the award, and the interviewees would be reduced to subjects used to make a compelling argument in a documentary film. I understood of course, that I inherited the release form from others before me who created and circulated videography/photography release forms mostly to protect themselves from legal liability. However, I still own my mistake of choosing such a legally abusive document that reinforced the hierarchy between me and the film interviewees. Reworking the whole plan of the documentary film, I redesigned the consent form to distribute the intellectual property among the film participants and me equitably.

Moving Forward

While thinking of how to go back and rework my relationships with Tunisian participants, I understand that it should not happen as a list of actions. Rather, I need to follow a framework that dismantles the hierarchy between my research participants and me. I need to internalize and embody my communication with the research participants as a process of interaction with equal partners, where I make things with them, not about or for them. That applies not only to documentary films but also to any research-based project. I want the memories that my communication creates with the research partners to be positive, full of respect, enthusiasm, and engagement in a way where participants experience the benefits of the projects they contribute to.

It might not be possible for me at this point to secure funds to compensate previous Tunisian research and documentary film participants. However, I'll reach out to the Tunisian participants, explaining to them my reflection on the past. I'll commit to them that if I win any monetary or non-monetary awards, I will share the awards with them and always acknowledge their valuable contribution in any occasion where such acknowledgment is possible.

Research is public-facing work that requires genuine interest and care toward research participants before the research outcome itself. As academics, we will always benefit from our research, whether it is for publication, awards,

recognition, and/ or promotion. We can leave our research partners vulnerable even if we comply with the IRB requirements. The IRB doesn't ask us to maintain positive relationships during and after we conduct our research, but ethical considerations and compassion compel us to.

My research and documentary filmmaking experience in Tunisia made me recognize the importance of maintaining relationships after the end of the research project. I continue to try to implant that recognition in my students in their relationships with their research and documentary film partners.

References

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