

Chapter 10. Syrians for Truth and Justice: Articulating Entanglements, Disrupting Disciplinarity

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Producing Truth (Steve Parks)

There is a danger to any conversation focused on how the “truth” is produced.¹

There is also a danger in our overestimations of our ability, our actual power, as individuals and as a discipline, to create a progressive inclusive “truth” in response to recent national and international events.

I say this because over the past several years, I have been witness to individuals in Syria who have had their truths, their collective ethical values, tortured, gassed, and bombed until the very streets on which those aspirations emerged no longer exist (see Figure 10.1).

With some of these very individuals, I have been part of a collective attempt to confirm this harsh reality. We have documented chemical bombings in Syria that are deliberately timed to inflict pain onto families in local markets. We have recorded the stories of prisoners so closely packed into a prison cell that their sweat formed condensation that rained down on them. We have proven the existence of prison cells deliberately located near the very rooms where torture occurred and where resulting dead bodies were stacked.

Throughout, we have tried to escape the rhetorical box which reduces these individuals to the sum of their torture by projecting the agency of those who still live in their neighborhoods (See Hesford). We have attempted to demonstrate the collective attempt by these individuals to build a future for their families, their neighbors,

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and their land based upon local values of tolerance and rights. Organized as Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), we have tried to attach our work to other efforts dedicated to producing a new configuration of moral and political apparatuses that might enable a different constellation of truth upon which to build a more just future.



Shabeh, a common torture method used during interrogations in Syrian Security apparatus. In this method, detainees are suspended by the wrists for several hours, with their feet barely touching the floor, and some other times the feet are left hanging above floor level

Figure 10.1 – “An illustration of a torture method. Caption reads: “Shabeh, a common torture method used during interrogations in Syrian Security apparatus. In this method, detainees are suspended by the wrists for several hours, with their feet barely touching the floor, and some other times the feet are left hanging above floor level.”



Illustration depicting the “German Chair” torture method. Although there are different testimonies on the position of the chair, all testimonies confirmed that the purpose of this method is bending detainee backward (head towards foot sole) causing awful pain, in addition to severe physical damage, sometimes causing fracture in vertebrae

Figure 10.2 – An illustration of a torture method. Caption reads: “Illustration depicting the ‘German Chair’ torture method. Although there are different testimonies on the position of the chair, all testimonies confirmed that the purpose of this method is bending detainee backward (head towards foot sole) causing awful pain, in addition to severe physical damage, sometimes causing fracture in vertebrae.”



Figure 10.3 - An illustration of a torture method. Caption reads: "Dulab, an Arabic word meaning 'Tyre,' one of the torture methods used widely in Syrian security dungeons. This position involves the detainee being forced into a vehicle tyre, then interrogation starts with a shower of curses and beating all over the body using different things like whips, sticks and electric shocks. When detainees are forced into this position, they cannot make any move."

Throughout, I have tried to articulate the conceptual, programmatic, and institutional contexts in which my professional identity exists into these efforts. I have tried to understand how the history of my field, as now embedded across a range of concepts—such as public rhetoric, community partnership, social justice—might allow new possibilities of alliance and effort between myself and Syrian activists. I have tried, that is, to understand how our overlapping waves of effort could be formed into a structural intervention.

Yet, I have often been asked whether such work can honestly be described as within our field: "Isn't it really just activism?" Indeed, as the field moves aggressively to produce its own truth—through concepts such as writing about writing; through expanding apparatuses such as graduate programs and undergraduate majors—this is not simply a rhetorical question. Indeed, as the "we" of our field continues to consolidate, this same "we" needs to consider whose identities, heritages, knowledges, and world views are being actively excluded from our concern. This same "we" needs to consider what is lost when certain projects seem to fall outside of the true work of our field by being considered "primarily activism." And there is a need to be concerned when our field cuts itself off from the political firmament and actions which led to its disciplinary status today, even in the name of seemingly productive possibilities.

Using the creation of STJ, I want to offer an example of how existing within the complexity of a moment and working within the differing subject positions being

offered by disparate institutions and conceptual frameworks, it is possible to build new institutional mechanisms dedicated to the enactment of an inclusive vision of truth and human rights. And in doing so, I want to argue that we are better off as a field deeply committed to the humbling work of producing important ‘truths,’ than cutting our ethical conscience to open up disciplinary possibilities within a university structure which has historically cared neither for our students nor our labor.

Syrians for Truth and Justice (Steve Parks and Bassam Alahmad)

As a result of the current conflict, Syrian civil society has struggled both in Assad and counter-Assad held regions. Stores, banks, and government offices that typically offer important services have been closed (or destroyed). Networks of communication among Syrians have been damaged. This situation has led to the creation and public circulation of deliberate fake news as well as inaccurate rumors that increase sectarian divisions within communities already suffering from military attacks and terrorist strikes. Within this environment, there was a need to create a verified and trusted source for information that documented to the outside world what was occurring in Syria as well as provide information to local Syrian communities to mitigate against festering tensions.

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) was created with the goal of sponsoring a public rhetoric that provided validated information about the conflict, as well as conducted workshops that can enable local communities to foster a new rhetoric designed to build a future civil society premised on tolerance and equity. The first stage of this work involved activating a network of human rights activists who would work with witnesses to record events as they occurred on the ground in Syria. To this end, STJ created an information network, initially premised on cell phone technology but later expanding to having individuals travel into Syrian war zones. (Here it should be noted that STJ has been unable to provide adequate protection for women activists; thus, the STJ documentation network in Syria is primarily conducted by men). This network works with local residents to report what has occurred in their area. The act of Syrian activists and local residents documenting the acts of violence against their communities provided a legitimacy for STJ’s reporting that state-controlled or corporate-controlled media outlets could not possess.

“Truth,” however, was not simply the result of eyewitness testimony. With the support of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Fund, STJ developed a submission protocol for all stories that designated the degree to which the story could be trusted. This system has led to “vetted” stories which document, from the local residents’ perspective, instances where military forces from all warring factions have deliberately targeted civilians, violated cease fire agreements, and used internationally banned weapons, such as chemical agents. In the most recent chemical attack on Khan Sheikoun-Idlib, STJ was able to send reporters directly

into the area to confirm that the attack was the result of weapons connected to the Syrian government, to collect video footage of the impact site, and to interview/videotape resident testimony of the human costs of the attack. This report was then co-published with the Justice for Life Organization and circulated on-line to media outlets, human rights organizations, and public officials. (For an informed discussion of the production of “data,” something central to STJ’s mission, see Patrick Danner, “Becoming Data.”)

Testimony

Based upon this work, STJ has received funding from international foundations to sponsor reconciliation workshops within Syria as well as refugee sites. These workshops will use STJ’s data to create a venue in which local residents can begin to piece together how the current conflict has impacted their communities, not only in a material sense of damage and death, but how it has fractured elements of their civil society. Part of this work will be attempting to bring together those residents who supported different factions and militia within the conflict, perhaps even being involved in violent activities against the community. Since the goal is not to romanticize the past, these conversations will necessarily touch upon gender-based and religious-based discrimination occurring long before the conflict. There will then be an attempt to find a pathway forward based upon local values of tolerance and compassion which emerge from local histories of such actions. (For a discussion of how trauma needs to be systemically addressed within our scholarship and classrooms, see Michelle Day, “On Trauma and Safety.”)

Hani Zeitani: An Account of a Survivor

Hani Zeitani was a member of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (CMFE), where he produced studies of Syrian press coverage during legislative and presidential elections. As a result of these studies, he was detained and interrogated by Syrian security officials. In 2012, the Interrogation Department at the Military Airport of al-Mezzeh stormed the Center’s offices and took Zeitani and other CMFE employees into custody. His detention lasted three and a half years.

Jafal Nofal: An Account of a Survivor Told in Three Parts

Jafal Nofal is a licensed doctor and psychiatrist. He has been detained four times by the Syrian government, initially for his activities as a member of the Communist Labor Party. These detentions led Nofal to reject violence as a means of political change. During the current conflict, Nofal established the Doctors Coordinate of Damascus, which provides aid to peaceful protestors wounded by Assad’s forces. He also established the Syrian Youth Assembly, which chanted the original revolutionary slogans associated with the current unrest across several

parts of the city, the period before it turned violent. These activities also resulted in multiple detentions.

Impact

Still, it is difficult to assess the success (or ability) of STJ to support an alternative future. It is still relatively new. It is unclear whether its news stories, testimonies, and reports are gaining access and traction with mainstream/popular networks of information—the evidence in local communities is more evident. Still this much is known:

Over 900 individuals have read each of STJ's special reports.

Over 27,000 unique views of STJ videos have occurred on its Facebook in July 2023.

Almost 15,000 individuals have actually joined its Facebook page, with over 100,000 individuals accessing the site in general.

STJ has also cooperated with regional media agencies inside and outside of Syria, such as Alwan Radio and Orient Television to support and expand coverage of the conflict.

International media organizations, such as Radio Netherlands Worldwide, as well as human rights based organizations, such as Justice for Life, have reached out to develop common projects.

STJ has developed a partnership network that includes the Transitional Justice Coordination Group, the Syrian Center for Justice and Accountability, and the International Federation of Human Rights.

STJ founders have been asked to appear on CNN international channels, to testify at the United Nations, the European Union, and state-based forums/committees.

Yet, despite this seeming success, in the time it has taken for me to draft this article, 657 more people, approximately 21 people a day, have been killed as a result of the military conflict. Clearly, this “truth,” these harsh facts, show the need for more work to be done.

Building Community Partnerships (Steve Parks and Bassam Alahmad)

Syrians for Truth and Justice has been described within this essay primarily as an organization, an existing entity doing documentation and reconciliation work. It

is also, however, a community partnership—the result of individuals, embedded in communities, deciding to find common cause in an effort at structural and political change. In this particular partnership, the goal has been to be part of creating a future for Syrians that “matters,” that is premised on concepts of democratic and human rights. Such ambitions, however, emerged and developed within the particular networks in which its original partners circulated, sometimes with and sometimes against existing global patterns of military and economic power. To understand how “futures” are created and ladders to potential success formulated, then, it is important to examine the “moment where all ladders start/In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (Yeats).

It is important, then, to begin at the beginning: I met Bassam Alahmad, future co-founder of STJ, at a workshop for Middle East/North African democratic activists focused on the use of narrative in community organizing. We arrived at Syracuse University through different trajectories but imbued with a similar faith in importance of supporting human rights. We also both carried with us an intuitive belief in the need to connect our personal lives to collective efforts for change. Bassam’s arrival at the workshop emerged from his work in literature in college and activism on behalf of Kurdish culture. He then moved to working more broadly on human rights in Syria, work that resulted in Bassam being arrested and tortured by Assad’s regime. Rather than being reduced to Assad’s brutal acts, Bassam escaped to Turkey, developed an idea for a way to continue his work, and journeyed to Syracuse University to enact that plan.

I had found myself conducting this workshop at Syracuse University as a result of a journey that included growing up on military bases as the son of an Air Force Master Sergeant and hearing stories of his missions in Viet Nam and Cambodia. As a child, I walked through military hospitals in the Philippines where the wounded and disabled were resting in the hallways, waiting for a visit from Bob Hope or some other visiting celebrity. Prior to this workshop, I had spent much of my adult life drawing these latent threads together into a critical vision of United States military involvement, its effect on local populations, and the potential power of concepts such as human rights that pointed toward a more humane future.

Now, from the opposite side of the globe, within a network that seemed broadly implicated in the human rights abuses occurring in the Middle East/North African (MENA) region, I stood in the same room with Bassam. As individuals and as part of collectives, we were using the workshop to consider how to respond to the current political crises in the MENA region. As one strategy within the workshop, I had split the participants into small groups, asking each of them to imagine a project that might grow out of the skills acquired that day. Bassam’s group developed a book project focused on testimonies by Syrian victims of torture, which I offered to help publish through New City Community Press if completed. It was that moment which initiated our partnership. Over the course of the next eight months, as the conflict in Syria worsened, the book project morphed into a recognition of the need to create Syrians for Truth and Justice.

Yet, if this was the personal beginning of our work together, I now want to use this partnership to highlight more explicitly how our interactions were situated within an existing network of institutional, political, and economic networks that enabled or disabled collaborative possibilities. That is, I now want to tell the story of the creation of STJ as an institution circulating a human rights public rhetoric, which was the result of negotiating the different possibilities existing within a network of material apparatuses (such as government or university institutions) and the conceptual rhetorics that existed within and beyond such institutions. While not strictly a “new materialist study of entanglements,” I want to broadly invoke such a framework to highlight how Bassam and my own identity acted as collective nodal point which allowed new truth mechanisms, such as STJ, to emerge. (For a discussion on how this strategy intersects with “new materialism,” see Chris Scheidler’s “Making Future Space”).

With this in mind, I want to return to and expand upon some of the conceptual and institutional networks that existed prior to working together. Currently, I am a cis-gendered, abled-bodied, White male with United States citizenship living in Philadelphia and—at that time—working at Syracuse University. My intellectual/political work involves community partnership and organizing within local communities. I have not been to Syria. I have no cultural or familial relationship to Syria. And I do not speak Arabic or Kurdish. My primary relationship to this region prior to knowing Bassam emerged from stories told by my father’s military friends. Bassam was defined as Kurdish by the Assad state, only gaining official Syrian citizenship near the outset of the current civil war (despite living in the territory called Syria his whole life). As noted above, he worked as a human rights defender in Damascus, prior to his being arrested and tortured. He is now a refugee in Istanbul, which is undergoing its own political transformation. He speaks Kurdish, Arabic, and English. Prior to the conflict, he had travelled to numerous countries. These different identity networks offered different affordances and restrictions for our work together. For instance, as a United States citizen, I have travelled to approximately ten European countries as a “United States professor,” having travelled previously as part of a military family. To leave Turkey currently, Bassam often has to have me, as a United States-based STJ Board member, validate the reason for his trip. In this case, my national/state identity, and perhaps academic credentials, “authorized” his travel. Yet, at other moments, Bassam’s “Syrian” identity (not necessarily his Kurdish heritage) has brought Middle Eastern/North African allies into our work in ways my United States identity/location could not achieve.

As we began to develop STJ, then, there was a need to develop language which would draw together Bassam’s resources as a human rights activist and my own resources as community partnership advocate to create arguments to secure funding from foundations or government agencies. In the beginning, our strategy echoed (worked within) the language of community literacy partnerships now placed in the Syrian context. There was a focus on collecting testimony,

publishing, and circulating victim insights, and, thus, providing a platform for marginalized individuals/communities to be heard. There was, then, a latent sense of community change based upon models within the field of composition/rhetoric. Yet because it emerged from a States-based disciplinary enterprise, I would argue such rhetorical models imagined a local population rooted within a certain geography; it imagined a sense of the state, with recognized borders, where within that space there was some semblance of a free press and a protection of speech; finally, there was often an implicit sense of nationalism or appeals to a public “citizenship,” or civic action, that spoke implicitly to a “higher ideal” of civil society with the United States as an implicit model.

This combination of human rights/disciplinary frameworks was challenged as actual grant money began to move through the work of STJ. At the outset STJ had no legal status. Initial grant funds had to be held by Syracuse University, given my identity as a faculty member. Within the University, the formal system of budget keeping works within a paradigm of an individual being geographically located within a state, possessing identification from that state, and being networked into the financial systems of that state—a bank or credit union. Yet, many of the individuals helping to form STJ had fled Syria for Turkey or Jordan. They did not always have the required paperwork. Nor, given the complex politics within Turkey and the MENA region, did these individuals necessarily want US dollars entering their bank accounts.

Here it is worth noting again that STJ is registered in Turkey, a decision made prior to the recent government crackdown. For a period, the United States was considered a possible registration site, but United States foreign policies (and now Trump) coupled with the registration being so far geographically from the crisis, removed it as a possibility. Now, with the post-coup political situation in Turkey, increased fees are being applied to non-profits, which threaten our sustainability. There has also been a political crackdown on dissidents, professors, and protestors. The United States is still not a viable alternative, again think Trump, but we are exploring whether a state government exists in Europe that will allow STJ, and its activities, to claim a legal status and receive funds. Here, the very geographic state identity of its founders (Syrian and American) now becomes the very reason why some states might deny its entry as a legal civil society entity. (For a discussion on how “mangle” might be a productive lens through which to view this partnership, see Layne Porta Gordon’s “Transformation and Agency in Activist Scholarship.”)

To successfully build STJ, then, it was necessarily to understand our identities as enabled by a series of conceptual/institutional overlaps which opened up possibilities for the creation of STJ, as its own nodal point of redistribution of possibilities. In this sense, the concept of “community,” as a generalized concept, had to be particularized within the material practices through which it was instantiated within an institution or institutional network. These material practices, such as budget processes or travel documentation, had to be brought into alignment, if only momentarily, to allow passage of STJ’s conceptual framework across seeming

borders. And it was only this particularized vision of community and expansive vision of “entanglements” in our work that allowed STJ to ultimately emerge as its own institution with material practices—the practices of Syrians documenting the human rights abuses in their neighborhoods, then using that same documentation to rebuild.

By working within and through an unarticulated network of possibilities, STJ became articulated into reality.

Disrupting Disciplinarity

A consistent theme across many of the essays in this collection is entanglements (Sheridan). Those moments where we cannot but be implicated in oppressive narratives (Pimentel) and where we must strategize to build an alternative ontology within an activist ecology (Rhodes). While this essay has been more colloquial in its use of the term “entanglements,” somewhat based on the work of Karen Barad, the intention was to explore what networks our discipline might understand themselves as always already existing within; what assemblages, both sedimented and emergent, might it imagine as the field of its activity. This essay has been an attempt to answer such questions as: Is the work of STJ really the work of composition and rhetoric? Why not just take up activism? And this essay has implicitly argued that such a question is a desire to articulate our discipline out of socio-political contexts. It is asking us to pivot into a field where writing teachers focus on writing, or as mentioned at the beginning of this piece, one might even say focus on writing about writing.

Yet, such a pivot ignores how the sheer fact of essays for a collection on rhetoric and composition (let alone a conference dedicated to them) is dependent on the work of our elders, such as Black, Latino, LGBTQ, working-class, Asian American, Indigenous, and disabled activists who literally entangled their bodies into the apparatus of the university. Elders who demanded an accessible education for all students as well as courses and programs which spoke to the intellectual and moral heritages in which their identity was fostered (see Kynard, “I Want to be an African” and *Vernacular Insurrections*; Smitherman; Parks). And we cannot but be aware that many of the very bodies that made events like this possible are still systematically and institutionally blocked from taking full advantage of this legacy of public and institutional activism. So, we would argue, that yes, such activism concerning human rights based on localized histories was, is, and always should be an inherent part of composition and rhetoric.

We would further argue that to disentangle ourselves from the global context—except for the production of rhetorical analysis of discursive structures—is to give ourselves a moral alibi, dressed in cloaked professionalism that allows for the continued and systemic human rights abuses by the United States and other global powers. (And if this is particularly true in the Middle East and North Africa, it is equally true in the legacy of colonialism which covers the ground on

which we walk every day.) What is the sense of privilege that understands acting against the immorality of Assad's brutality as not part of our profession? Why does the "disciplinary we" being produced for "scholars" and "teachers" in our field get a pass? Why does this "disciplinary we" become allowed to disentangle itself in the name of professionalizing the writing classroom when other bodies are being entangled in brutal and inhuman systems?

For as we draw from the work of elders, we understand public rhetoric not as an object of study, but an enactment designed to alter oppressive apparatuses; community not as a romanticized whole, but a constellation of interests attempting to alter the micro-material practices which currently exclude but which can be transformed into openings for new possibilities; and partnership, not as an act of benevolence, but as a collective project from which new insights and skills can be produced. And across all these domains, we can see how we were always already enacting our field within an international terrain marked by both Indigenous and colonized legacies. With Kynard ("Teaching While Black"), then, we can begin to recognize the contours of White United-States/Eurocentric privilege (too often framed in ableist terms) and perhaps, strike a blow against it. (For a discussion of how we too often work within ableist paradigms when announcing progressive disciplinary projects, see Caitlin Ray, "The Shit that Still Haunts Us: Disability in Composition and Rhetoric Research." We are grateful for how her essay allowed us to see such limitations in this essay.)

Yet here is the sad truth. Much of what we have just said, much of the work of building STJ, much of our colleagues' activism, is not considered the work of composition and rhetoric. Consider graduate education. All too often, graduate students are taught to write for academic journals; not how to use their academic knowledge to right systemic wrongs. They are too often taught their labor is valuable only in the classroom, not in the community. They are taught history through James Berlin, not through the activism of the Latinx, Black, Queer, or Native American caucuses. And they are taught how to talk to administrators, not to the public activists, policy makers, and international human rights advocates.

We would go even further here and argue our graduate programs actually de-skill committed individuals in the name of their only learning how to work in writing classrooms. My own graduate education (Parks) provided almost none of the skills needed for the work described above. And while we all need to work for a more just labor system within the university (see Schell/Stock), preparing students with skills that seemingly only have value within that currently unjust labor system seems wrong—particularly when we often sell that future in mantles of activism and justice. If we claim to be a socially-committed discipline, if we recognize the activism that was a fundamental foundation to our field, then we also need to claim the responsibility of fully preparing our students to take on such work in writing program and in public writing projects.

So, yes, it is true, much of the work discussed in this essay, and many of the individuals highlighted, are not seen as being entangled in the work of

composition and rhetoric. And what, we wonder, does that say about the future of our discipline?

Epilogue

When I Am Overcome with Weakness

by Najat Abdul Samad

Trans. Ghada Alatrash

When I am overcome with weakness, I bandage my heart with a woman's patience in adversity.

I bandage it with the upright posture of a Syrian woman who is not bent by bereavement, poverty, or displacement as she rises from the banquets of death and carries on shepherding life's rituals. She prepares for a creeping, ravenous winter and gathers the heavy firewood branches, stick by stick from the frigid wilderness. She does not cut a tree, does not steal, does not surrender her soul to weariness, does not ask anyone's charity, does not fold with the load, and does not yield midway.

...

I bandage my heart with the determination of that boy they hit with an electric stick on his only kidney until he urinated blood. Yet he returned and walked in the next demonstration.

I bandage it with the steadiness of a child's steps in the snow of a refugee camp, a child wearing a small black shoe on one foot and a large blue sandal on the other, wandering off and singing to butterflies flying in the sunny skies, butterflies and skies seen only by his eyes.

I bandage it with December's frozen tree roots, trees that have sworn to blossom in March or April.

I bandage it with the voice of reason that was not affected by a proximate desolation.

I bandage it with veins whose warm blood has not yet been spilled on the surface of our sacred soil.

I bandage it with what was entrusted by our martyrs, with the conscience of the living, and with the image of a beautiful homeland envisioned by the eyes of the poor.

I bandage it with the outcry: "Death and not humiliation."

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