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La La Lil Jidar as a Model of a Queered Arab Space for Palestine Solidarity

by

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Abstract: Queer activism has a long history of engaging in solidarity for Palestinian rights. This paper examines *La La Lil Jidar,* a largely queer and Arab arts and activism collective based out of Philadelphia, PA, USA, as a model of a "queered Arab space" for Palestine solidarity. Situated within a broader history of queer-led movements for Palestinian rights, and rooted in Arab cultural traditions, the *La La Lil Jidar* collective provided a refuge for politically marginalized activists during the Gaza solidarity organizing of 2023-24. Using qualitative methods, this paper explores the role of queer activism as part of a wider, global solidarity movement for Palestine. *La La Lil Jidar* transformed its archival photography exhibit focused on the injustices occurring in the Occupied West Bank into a safe space for those protesting and grieving for Gaza. Ultimately, this paper shows how SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) and queer identities are not in conflict but complementary. *La La Lil Jidar* demonstrates how through incorporating Arab hospitality, with a queered understanding of community through the concept of the chosen family, the idea of "home" can be mimicked for the politically marginalized.

Introduction

LGBT+ folks, as a marginalized group, have always demonstrated in solidarity against various forms of oppression, and Palestine solidarity organizing is no different. Palestine solidarity is defined by a shared political philosophy, and identity is secondary to what bonds activists together in the ongoing movement. Since the early 2000s, queer folks have been visible in Palestine solidarity work, both active-

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ly resisting the Israeli occupation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), as well as directing the attention of their respective communities to Israeli violence. Arabs have also been active in the pro-Palestine movement, and have brought elements of Arab culture into organizing efforts. This essay focuses on the largely queer and Arab identified arts and activism collective *La La Lil Jidar (No No to the Wall)*, located in Philadelphia, PA, and how this group incorporated a heavy Arab sensibility, and a queered understanding of community, during the Gaza solidarity organizing of 2023–24. The intent of the *La La Lil Jidar* space was to mimic "home" for the politically marginalized – via Arab hospitality, and the queer concept of the chosen family.

La La Lil Jidar's elements of queerness and Arabness were not contradictory aspects of identity, but were, in fact, fused together to build community for Palestinian solidarity. Not all members of *La La Lil Jidar* are queer, nor are they all Arab, although the majority of members are both queer and Arab. The *La La Lil Jidar* collective embodies differences in culture, gender, and sexual orientation, bringing a diverse positionality to the local Philadelphia Palestine organizing community. The collective's members include Palestinian, Moroccan, Egyptian and Lebanese Arabs, Pakistani, Afghani, and Indian members, and one white guy. South West Asian and North African (SWANA) traditions were thus central to how the group envisioned feeling safe. Of course, *La La Lil Jidar*, as an arts and activism collective in Philadelphia, is just part of a longer history of queer-led movement building for Palestinian rights.

Methodology

La La Lil Jidar emerged from my own twenty-year journey as a photographer of Palestine. As a queer, Arab American from a Jewish background, I first joined Palestine organizing efforts during the winter of 2003, not as an activist, but as a researcher seeking to understand the region's character beyond the narrow, biased, pro-Israeli frame of US mainstream media (Elmasry 2009). As a young peace studies graduate student, it was important for me to witness realities on the ground first-hand, and to subsequently share these with my community in the US. During my earliest months in Palestine, I quickly learned about the newest form of structural violence in the OPT: Israel's Apartheid Wall (B'Tselem 2017). The Wall is 26 feet high and concrete, mostly in urban areas, and switches to a fence system in more rural areas. The physical barrier separating Israel and the Occupied West Bank is referred to differently, dependent on political views. On the Israeli side it is known as a 'security fence,' yet for Palestinians, and those in solidarity, it is referred to as the 'apartheid wall' (Rogers and Ben-David 2010). The Apartheid Wall is a continuation of Israel's colonial expansion. It continues to be a serious threat to local Palestinian communities inside the Occupied West Bank by restricting their movement and dispossessing Palestinian villagers of their lands. The local Palestinian population directly affected by the Wall used strategic nonviolence to resist its construction. Activists from all over the world, and from inside Israel, too, joined local Palestinians in solidarity. As a participant myself in this iteration of Palestinian popular struggle, two parts of my identity were present and accepted into the

movement: queerness and Jewishness. My Jewishness was discussed, while my queerness was tolerated without discussion. Both of these identities supported the local Palestinian villagers in resisting ongoing Israeli violence. Nevertheless, it was clear that a shared political framework, rather than identity, was what bonded people together in the movement.

Armed with a notebook and a camera, I closely documented this popular struggle (*muqawameh sha'abiyeh* in Arabic), and the ongoing structural violence of the Apartheid Wall's construction. My intention was to educate American audiences about the injustice occurring in Palestine. I applied mixed qualitative research methods, and traveled throughout the Occupied West Bank, from the north in Tulkarm to the West Bank's southernmost point, the South Hebron Hills. I gathered oral testimonies from residents in both rural and urban environments about their first-hand experiences of living near the Apartheid Wall. From 2003-22, I photographed thousands of images. From 2006 onwards, I also gathered countless oral histories to complement each photograph, enabling each image to convey a deeper meaning.

My research and photography honored an Arab model of collective effort; every aspect of my research was facilitated by local groups already working on the ground in the OPT. On my last visit to the West Bank, during the summer of 2022, I worked with a local team to locate numerous individuals whom I had previously photographed in 2004 and 2005. I wanted to photograph these individuals a second time in order to tell a visual story of how time operated in this environment. Once I'd reconnected with these individuals, they posed for me, many in the same locations, and in a similar manner, as their original portraits. Several had been children in 2004 and 2005, and now these second images showed how these children had become grown adults in the shadow of the Wall – highlighting how these Palestinian communities were physically trapped. The data I generated around this twenty-year history would become a multi-media exhibit in Philadelphia – a means to visually combat US media framing on Palestine, while simultaneously activating a gallery space for community building.

Queer Solidarity for Palestine

There is a long history of queer activism for Palestine, both by Palestinian queer groups themselves and from the wider queer community. During the early 2000s, queer led activism for Palestine was visibly emerging as a movement against the violence of the Israeli state. Palestinian queer communities inside the OPT, inside Israel, and in the international diaspora argued that queer Palestinian rights were inseparable from the global movement for Palestinian human rights. Those in solidarity followed this call. Queer activism for Palestine sought to connect liberation movements, with one activist stating, "queer liberation is connected to the liberation of all people," while another stated, "you can't just pick and choose your battles" (Prager 2024). As Audre Lorde's essay "There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions" clarifies: "I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group" (1983: 9). The queer political community was thus still fighting

the same patriarchal, white supremacist system that simultaneously oppressed Palestinians and themselves.

As queer groups became more visible in Palestine solidarity efforts in the early 2000s, they disrupted "business as usual" practices, and queer spaces became key sites of activism. In 2000, Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism (QUIT!), a San Francisco-based group, emerged as a leading force. Shortly after the Second Intifada in 2001, an Israeli LGBTQ group, Black Laundry, formed and engaged in Palestine solidarity activism inside Israel. Many queer activists used civil disobedience tactics to disrupt LGBTQ film festivals and annual pride events, stating: "There is no pride in occupation."

In the context of Palestinian queerness, the intersectionality of being queer and Palestinian became a site of activism. Palestinian queers were also more visible in the early 2000s, pursuing human rights while also combatting homophobia. Several groups formed during this period: *Aswat* (Voices), the Israeli Arab Feminist Center for Gender and Sexual Freedoms (2000); *Al Qaws* (Rainbow) for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society (2007); and the Palestinian Queers for Boycott Divestment and Sanction Movement (PQBDS) (2010). These groups actively engaged in the public struggle for Palestinian rights, while also seeking their own freedoms as queer people.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, my activism and research began at the height of this visible queer solidarity movement. During the winter of 2003–4, when I first arrived in Palestine as a participant observer, I was exposed to a queer community in solidarity with Palestine. Identity, often assumed to be a barrier, was the least important aspect of what brought us together. Rather, we bonded through our political ideologies and direct engagement in popular resistance. The local Palestinian population's capacity to accept us was clear—not only did Palestinian households host visibly queer solidarity activists, numerous villagers also welcomed Jewish and Israeli anti-Zionist activists into their homes. I thus experienced, first-hand, how queerness in Palestine solidarity was a prominent feature of activism for Palestinian rights, even if we didn't discuss this aloud.

Queer organizing for Palestine was also additional proof that the idea of Israel being the only safe place for queers in the Middle East – known as pinkwashing – was a false claim. As BDS (n.d.) notes, "pinkwashing is an Israeli government propaganda strategy that cynically exploits LGBTQIA+ rights to project a progressive image while concealing Israel's occupation and apartheid policies oppressing Palestinians." Queer visibility for Palestine became necessary to combat pinkwashing. It demonstrated that Israel was not, in fact, the only safe space for queer people in the Middle East, but was rather a key space in which queer allies needed to engage in Palestine solidarity activism.

Following this initial decade of visible queer activism, academic analyses of queerness and Palestine began to appear. In 2010, *GLQ*: *a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* published an issue titled, "Queer Politics and the Question of Palestine/Israel," bringing together multiple queer voices for Palestine. In 2012, Sarah Shulman emphasized her queer solidarity as a Jewish queer activist in her book *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*. Shulman recalls the journey she took as

a hardcore ACT UP gay rights activist, becoming a staunch ally and solidarity activist for Palestinian rights, pertinently stating:

> One of the strangest things about willful ignorance regarding Israel and Palestine is how often "progressive" people, like myself, with histories of community activism and awareness, engage in it (2012: 1).

The *GLQ* issue, and Shulman's monograph, were important academic references concerning queerness and Palestine, highlighting the need for the queer community to engage in the ongoing Palestine conversation. However, the field was still limited by a lack of Palestinian voices. In 2018, the *Journal of Palestine Studies* published the special issue "Queering Palestine," which brought queer Palestinian voices into the academic sphere via the intersection of Palestine studies and queer theory. In Walaa Alqaisiya's article in that issue, "Decolonial Queering: The Politics of Being Queer in Palestine," she emphasizes "that queerness in Palestine is an essential element of the Palestinian struggle to eradicate Zionist settler colonialism" (2018: 29). In 2020, Sa'ed Atshan's book *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* focused on queer Palestinians and the limitations of the global queer social movement, arguing that queer Palestinians were positioned between the global queer movement and everyday demands for social justice. As At'shan states, "queer Palestinians face systems from all directions of marginalization, policing and repression from both Zionism and homophobia" (2020: 12). Analyzing queerness and Palestine during this period strengthened the solidarity movement, integrating the activists' organizing efforts with the intellectual threads of Palestine studies and queerness.

US Exhibit

As a scholar and activist, I was interested in both intellectualizing Palestine solidarity and actively resisting Israeli propaganda. As a photographer, my work used images to combat the mainstream US media framing of Palestine. My work wasn't focused on being queer, but my queer body was very visible in all of my work. Upon returning to the US in 2022, after my most recent trip to Palestine, I assembled a team of artists, activists and a trauma therapist to create the Philadelphia exhibit, aiming to replicate the collective approach I'd experienced in the field. Exhibiting images of people suffering wasn't our goal, and we were mindful not to exploit the individuals featured, but we still wanted to convey the reality of what was occurring in the OPT to Philadelphians. For four months, the team gathered weekly to view all of the 25,000 photographs I'd taken during the previous two decades. By the late spring of 2023, the team settled on 103 images to be included in the exhibit's four respective photography series, titled: "The Wall," "Violence and Resistance," "Portraits," and "Then and Now."

The Apartheid Wall affected every aspect of Palestinian life for those residents living near it, and the US exhibit offered an expansive visual understanding of how the Wall's structure impacted the local population. "The Wall" photography series comprised fifteen images of the structure itself, ranging from 18 x 24 inches to 30 x 42 inches in size, with most sized at 26 x 36 inches. The "Violence and Resistance"

series featured sixty smaller images, ranging from 4 x 6 inches to 8 x 10 inches (Figure 1). These latter images created a chaotic viewing experience of resistance to the Wall, resonating with my own experience in the early years of my work.

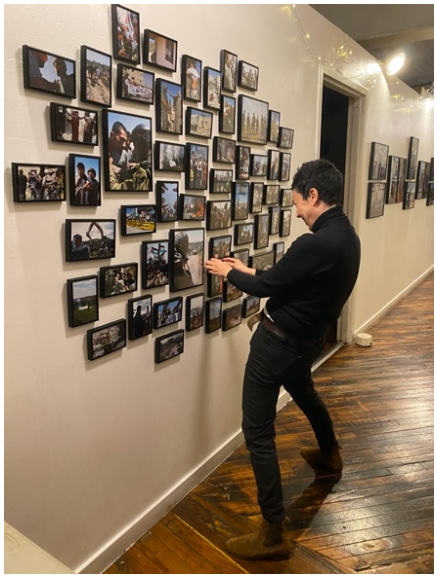


Figure 1. Photographer Aisha Mershani,
Violence and Resistance Series.
Philadelphia PA. November 2023.

The "Portraits" series consisted of six large-format images of individuals, since featuring the faces of Palestinians, at a large scale, seemed particularly important for reframing how mainstream Americans view the Palestinian population. The final series, "Then and Now," was the most impactful of the four. It featured eleven side-by-side "duos," formatted at 12 x 18 inches, which showed how those living behind the Wall had aged. Small boys photographed in 2004 and 2005, for example, then aged 2 and 3 years old, had become young men by 2022 – and yet, as I photographed them in the same locations as the original photographs, it was abundantly clear that nothing in their physical surroundings had changed.

Besides the "Violence and Resistance" series, every image caption in the exhibit was accompanied by an online audio recording, with embedded QR codes enabling Palestinians in the images to "speak" directly to the gallery visitors, providing a valuable multi-media dimension to the exhibit.

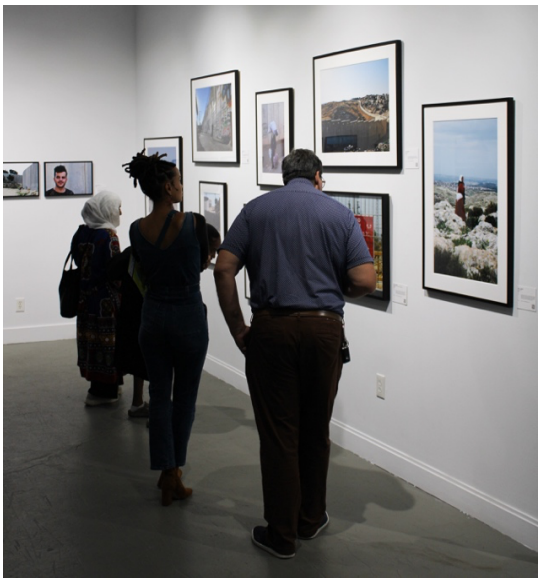


Figure 2. *La La Lil Jidar* exhibit. Philadelphia, PA. September 2023

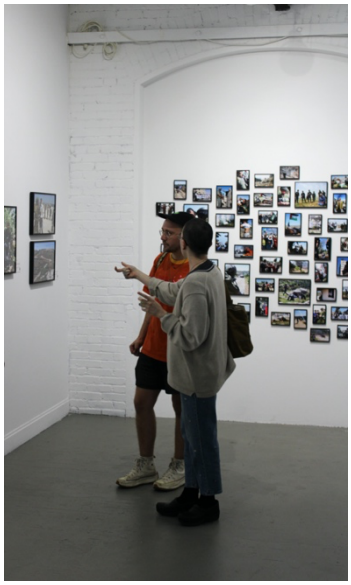


Figure 3. Philadelphia, PA. September 2023

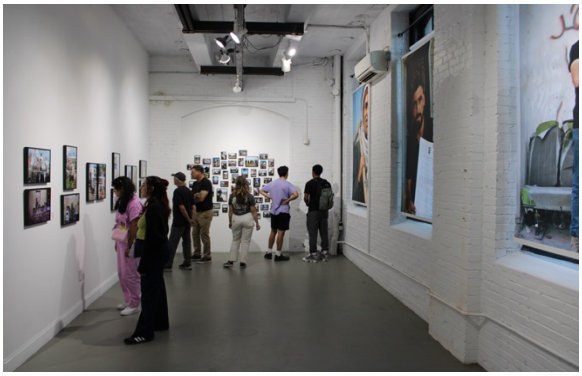
The exhibit was a visual experience, connecting the movement in Palestine to Philadelphia's solidarity community. Chants from the popular struggle used in Palestine were considered as a potential title for the exhibit, and we eventually chose *La La Lil Jidar* (No No to the Wall). The subtitle "*20 Years Behind the Apartheid Wall*" was then added to provide additional context. The photography exhibit was housed in a Philadelphia art gallery for two months, and then for a further two months in a yoga studio elsewhere in the city. In both spaces, our intention was for the exhibit to combat mainstream US media framings of Palestine, while hosting various events that emphasized the interconnectedness of state violence across borders.

The space of La La Lil Jidar

When *La La Lil Jidar* was initially housed in the traditional gallery space, from September to November 2023, the intention was to activate the space with events that connected the exhibit's theme to ongoing activism in US cities. *La La Lil Jidar* wasn't interested in just focusing on Palestine organizing; the group also wanted to connect to local struggles. Other movement-building groups – working against similar forms of state oppression to those witnessed in Palestine and the US – were thus invited to hosts events in the space. The objective of these space activations was to emphasize a key message: *No no to all walls separating us as people*.

The photography exhibit, originally intended to educate American audiences, quickly shifted to a place of refuge for politically isolated activists in Philadelphia. The exhibit opened on September 14, 2023, with countless events planned throughout the initial two months in order to activate the space. Palestine Writes, a literature conference for Palestinian writers, was hosted at a local university cam-

pus, and occurred a week after the *La La Lil Jidar* opening. For the month of September, Philadelphia's Palestinian and Palestine solidarity communities thus merged at the intersection of arts as resistance.



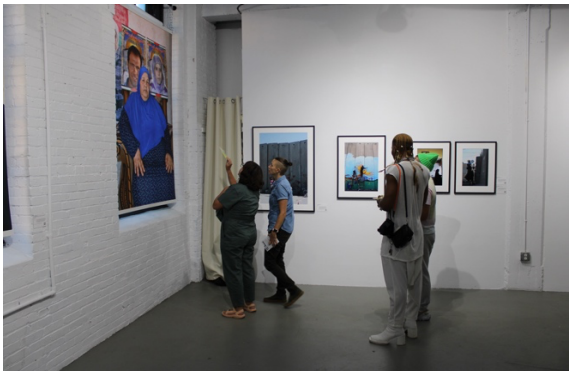


Figure 4 and 5. *La La Lil Jidar* opening. Philadelphia, PA. September 2023

Philadelphia's Palestine solidarity community had been visible against ongoing Israeli violence in the OPT, including both the West Bank and Gaza, long before October 7, 2023. On that date, however, Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) breached the wall enclosing the Gaza Strip, and ambushed an Israeli army base and an Israeli music festival. Hamas were elected as Gaza's political leaders, and ultimately gained control of the territory in 2007. Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have since lived through a constant Israeli military blockade, limiting the movement of people and goods in and out of the territory. In recent years, there have been significant periods of fighting between Hamas and the Israeli army. In 2008–9, the first of Israel's many sieges of Gaza lasted for 23 days, and killed nearly 1,400 Palestinians. Aggression continued at a smaller scale until 2014, when the next siege lasted 50 days. As Al Jazeera (2022) reported: "2,100 Palestinians are killed in Gaza along with 73 Israelis, including 67 soldiers." In 2018, the people of Gaza attempted a nonviolent action to end the ongoing blockade, called the "Great March of Return." As Yara Asi notes: "As of 2018, 68.5% of Palestinians in Gaza were consid-

ered food insecure" (2020: 206) and the protestors' grievance was that the blockade limited the flow of resources into the territory, thus stifling Gazan's potential to thrive. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) described how the "Great March of Return demonstrations (GMR) began on 30 March 2018 to demand the end of the Israeli blockade and the right of return for refugees" (n.d.). During the Great March of Return, according to the United Nations Human Rights Council (2019), Israel "shot over 6106 demonstrators, killing 183, between 30 March 2018 and 31 December 2018."

The political situation in Gaza shifted dramatically on October 7, 2023, when Hamas broke through the wall and attacked Israelis in the area. As Amnesty International (2024) reported, "some 1,200 people were killed and around 250 abducted." Hamas held Israeli hostages inside the Gaza Strip, and, for 15 months, Israel then bombed schools and homes, and closed Palestinian access to goods and clean water. Based on Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) documents, media reports estimated the Palestinian death toll at roughly 46,000 over 15 months, with 18,000 of these being children (Al Jazeera 2025). Yet a *Lancet* study claims that an "estimated 64,260 deaths (95% CI 55 298–78 525) occurred due to traumatic injury during the same period, suggesting the Palestinian MoH under-reported mortality by 41%" (Jamuluddine et al. 2025: 469). Because Israel responded with extreme violence towards the civilian population inside the Gaza Strip, many have asserted that this was a genocidal campaign. Academics in the field of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, such as Israeli historian Raz Segal, signed a group statement released in December 2023, two months after the initial aggression began, with Segal (2023) noting separately that:

> [O]ver 55 scholars of the Holocaust, genocide, and mass violence deplore the atrocity crimes against civilians committed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad on 7 October and by Israeli forces since then. The starvation, mass killing, and forced displacement of Palestinian civilians in Gaza is ongoing, raising the question of genocide.

October 7, 2023, changed the landscape of Palestine organizing in Philadelphia. Suddenly, Palestine solidarity protestors were viewed as supporters of Hamas violence, rather than activists opposing the extreme violence Israel was deploying against the Gazan people. Philadelphia was one city in a global community taking to the streets in solidarity with the Palestinians, as protests occurred all over the world against the Israeli bombs falling on Gaza. An analysis of these protests by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED 2023) was announced with the headline that: "During the first three weeks of the current round of hostilities, ACLED records approximately 4,200 demonstration events related to the conflict in almost 100 countries and territories, accounting for 38% of all demonstration events reported globally." Of the 4,200 demonstrations, 3,700 were pro-Palestine, and many included large numbers of people in attendance, such as half a million people in the streets of London (Middle East Eye 2024), and nearly 30,000 people calling for a ceasefire in Washington DC (Mondoweiss 2023). This wave of nonviolent protest and mass mobilization for Palestine was met with repression: "in Amman, Jordan, hundreds of protesters were arrested between October and November 2023. In Germany, protests in support of Palestine were banned" (Acar et al. 2024: 10). Protesting continued in the US as the year of onslaught against Gaza

continued. Activists in the US, already paying for this war without consent through their tax dollars, took to city streets and campus lawns to express solidarity and call for a ceasefire. The demonstrations took many forms, including blocking highways (CBS 2023) and building encampments on college campuses.

Palestine organizing on many college campuses was met with repression, with university administrators using city police to quash the national student movement. These student encampments made international headlines, as did student expulsions for pro-Palestine organizing. While student groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) were banned from numerous US campuses during these encampments, one university in the Philadelphia area saw the establishment of a JVP faction in the wake of October 7, 2023. JVP is a group of anti-Zionist Jews engaged in Palestine solidarity. They use the slogan *Not in Our Name* and have become more visible since participating in the call for a ceasefire in the war on Gaza.

In the months after the war began, Generation Z became especially visible in calling for Palestinian rights. As Mohamed Buheji, Mohamed BenAmer, and Aamir Hasan (2024: 86) state:

> The recent surge in student activism can be attributed to a growing disillusionment among young people with the contradictions they perceive in their political, academic, and commercial systems. Generation Z, which places a high value on justice, transparency, and authenticity, finds the support for the Israeli occupation by their institutions and governments to be hypocritical.

The evident diversity of Arab students and anti-Zionist Jewish activists standing in solidarity with Palestine strengthened the campus movement. Growing Israeli violence viewed on cellphone screens brought even more people to encampments. Young people were visible and loud in their pro-Palestine solidarity.

Academics also spoke up against the ongoing war on Gaza, and many were accused of antisemitism for supporting Palestinian rights. The widespread adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism intertwined antisemitism with criticism against Israel. This definition makes it impossible to speak up against Israel's human rights violations without being negatively labeled. As Somdeep Sen (2024: 336) argues:

> Consequently, the IHRA definition has been weaponized to cancel public events, courses, and conferences on the Palestinian liberation struggle, and to sanction faculty members who have publicly criticized Israeli violations of human rights and war crimes and 'bring coercive legal actions' against those who support the BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) movement.

The IHRA adoption left many academics at risk of losing their jobs when speaking up for Palestinian rights. Buheji et al.'s 2024 study outlines numerous academics who have been fired or suspended for speaking up against Israeli violence. During this time, an anti-Zionist Jewish tenured professor in the Philadelphia area was fired for being outspoken about Gaza (Intercept 2024). Philadelphia was at the forefront of this movement in demanding a ceasefire.

As Philadelphia became a hub of activism for Palestine, many in the community sought refuge from the aggression experienced in the city's streets and campuses. After October 2023, the events in the gallery space continued as planned, and brought together additional community members who were seeking like-minded

people. In November 2023, the exhibit moved from the art gallery to the yoga studio. Philly's activist community sought a space to collectively grieve for Gaza, and the yoga studio invited us to exhibit and hold events there for precisely that reason. For four months in total, between the two locations, the *La La Lil Jidar* exhibit became a backdrop for these numerous events. The space became a site where those actively engaged in the struggle for a ceasefire could momentarily exhale. From September 2023 to January 2024, *La La Lil Jidar* organized nearly thirty events, including poetry readings, concerts, film screenings, art workshops, and academic talks. Huda Asfour, an oud musician, held a concert in the gallery space, the first event held in October 2023 (Figure 6). Later, at an event titled "We Charge Nakba," outspoken academic and legal expert Noura Erakat was in conversation with local writer Nicki Kattoura (Figure 7). The diversity of these events brought many people together in community to collectively grieve. *La La Lil Jidar's* art space activations, originally intended as a gathering place, inadvertently became another "home" for the politically and culturally marginalized.

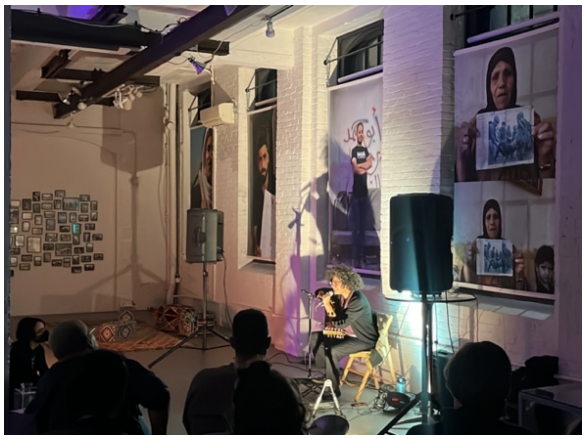


Figure 6. Huda Asfour Oud Concert. October 2023

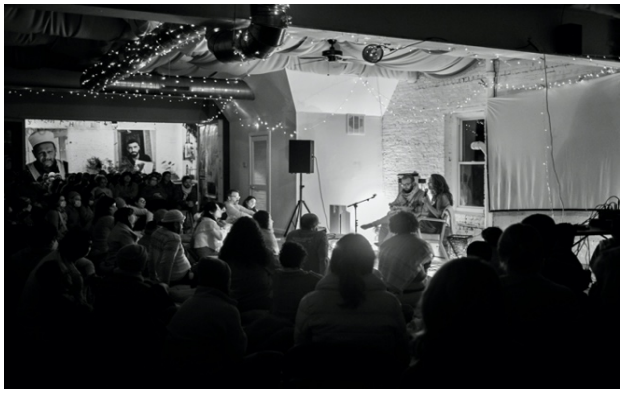


Figure 7. Noura Erakat and Nicki Kattoura in conversation. January 2024.

La La, a space of *Home*

Hospitality is a central trait of Arab culture, and Arab hosts are measured by how well they treat their guests. Arab hospitality (*karam al-arab* in Arabic*)* has roots in Islamic and Bedouin traditions (Stephenson and Ali 2018: 5), and shapes how the Arab family unit shares their private, personal space with guests. As Feghali states in Stephenson and Ali (2018: 6), "From a young age, children in Arab homes are socialized into the importance of hospitality as both a personal quality and a symbol of status." The origins of hospitality lie within the tribal era, and have evolved to become a current Arab cultural norm, yet the concept of hospitality expands beyond the Arab region. Peace philosopher Immanuel Kant's seminal essay, *Perpetual Peace* (1983) focuses on hospitality as one means to eliminate war. Robin Schott cites Kant when analyzing one of his features of hospitality (2009: 185) stating that for Kant "Hospitality is a right, not a privilege. By implication, hospitality not be dependent on an individual's acting out of charity. Rather, the right of hospitality implies that citizens of a country have a duty to protect the foreigner." In Palestine, inviting guests into homes was an attribute of the popular struggle against the Apartheid Wall as both an Arab cultural trait, and a way to protect the foreigner. Participants in the movement were brought into the safety of local homes after every demonstration, where lunch was provided. In the OPT, a sense of community was established both in the marches to the site of the Wall – actively resisting Israeli violence – as well as in these village homes. As a guest and a solidarity activist in the movement, the act of hosting while resisting was impactful for me. It became something I believed was important to introduce to US organizing. The *La La Lil Jidar* collective thus used this Palestinian trait, hosting after protesting, as a feature of our work in Philadelphia. Hosting guests was a way for us to create a sense of mental safety for those targeted in the streets. And as a predominantly Arab collective, events were hosted as if the art space was our home – a feature of our culture that we wanted to share.

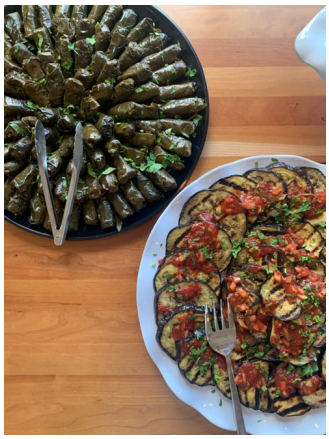


Figure 8. S. Maham Rizvi, collective member, Preparing the table of fruits. December 2023.
Figure 9. Food trays provided by a local Palestinian restaurant for the events.

Visitors in the activated space were hence fed literally and figuratively when joining a La La Lil Jidar event. Food was provided at the beginning of every occasion. Upon entering the yoga studio, for example, visitors encountered a buffet prepared by a local Palestinian restaurant and distributed by the collective members themselves. People filled their plates before they found their seats (Figure 10). Guests were also fed figuratively; the people who walked into the La La Lil Jidar space shared a sense of feeling politically isolated from those in their existing circles, and were seeking like-minded people. Buheji et al. (2024: 96) highlight that "The other main source of pressure comes from the family and close community. Some students have faced pressure from family members who disapprove of their activism due to differing political beliefs or concerns about potential repercussions." During these months, mainstream news was reporting on Israel as if it were a solitary victim, while bombs were dropping on Gaza. Many in the activist community felt gaslit. The La La Lil Jidar space was one where Arabs, activists, and others could gather and align around their politics. Community members could see that they were not alone during the ongoing onslaught against Gaza, able to share a meal and partake in artistic expression against state violence.

Figure 10. Community members finding their seats with full plates. December 2023.

La La Lil Jidar, as a SWANA-led, largely queer identified space, naturally introduced the Arab trait of hospitality. To fully create a home, however, it was clear that family was also needed. As Buheji et al. (2024: 94) highlight, "Activism can strain relationships with peers who either oppose the pro-Palestine stance or prefer to remain apolitical. This can lead to social isolation and a sense of being marginalized within their own community." Many of the people attending *La La Lil Jidar* events shared that they needed a place to feel safe and heard, as the people around them were not all aligned to their politics, and finding space with like-minded people was healing. Building upon the decades-long queer-led movement for Palestinian rights, *La La Lil Jidar* queered the event space by bringing together people who

were political outcasts – building a new community together in the form of an alternative and chosen family.

Figure 11. Qais Assali, collective member, holds an art workshop as if the space was a living room. January 2024.

In queer culture, becoming an outcast and feeling isolated is a common experience. To combat this loss, and to build something new, alternative, chosen families are created. Chosen families don't replicate the family unit, nor are they fictive kin; chosen families are community that transforms the biological family unit. Anthropologist Kath Weston (1997: 106) describes "gay kinship ideologies as historical *transformations* rather than derivatives of other sorts of kinship relations." Weston's work on creating an alternative chosen family unit describes how, in the 1980s and 1990s, the LGBTQ+ community would often find people outside of their biological family to bond with. Although the concept of chosen family has focused on the rejection of one's sexual and gender identity as a point of contention, it is also relevant for those who have experienced rejections due to political ideology. In this case, creating a chosen family during the Gaza war was a way to build something new.

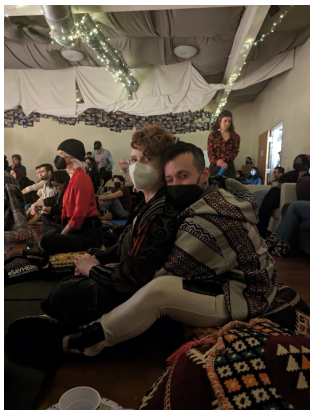


Figure 12. Queer couple in attendance at a *La La Lil Jidar* event.

Chosen families are necessary for queer people to feel seen, and queer safe spaces are needed for people to gather away from heteronormative and patriarchal violence. As Petra Doan (2007: 57) describes, "Conceptually queer space occurs at the margin of society." Queer spaces vary, and include bars and cafes for recreation, as well as urban geographies where LGBTQ+ activism is occurring (Goh 2018). Queer community has been forced to persevere in the face of violence, both by biological familial rejection, as well as the violence of society at large. Creating alternatives to this violence is what makes queerness both an identity as well as an action. José Muñoz (2009: 1) asserts, "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."

To queer a space isn't to merely be queer, but to envision a future reality filled with inclusivity and safety. The need to feel safe and seen, too, was a reason why people gathered a few times a week in the *La La Lil Jidar* space. Community members who gathered at *La La Lil Jidar* events were not all queer, but many were. These guests had already forged a chosen family due to their sexuality and gender identities, and now they were experiencing a new form of rejection based on their politics—becoming politically isolated for speaking out against the violence in Gaza. Philadelphia's college students, JVP activists, academics, and Arabs and Palestinians gathered at the *La La Lil Jidar* community space to engage with art as resistance. As Priya Parker (2020: xi) explains, "Gathering – the conscious bringing together of people for a reason – shapes the way we think, feel, and make sense of the world." However, it is not enough to merely gather, convening community is also a political act. Meir Lakein (2022: 44) states that "gathering politically turns us into a political force." Gathering in shared community helped Philadelphians already engaged in Palestine solidarity to share another political experience. It was thus a space focused on "home" by way of Arab hospitality and the chosen family in a hostile political climate. *La La Lil Jidar* held events and space for the Philadelphia community for the first several months of the war on Gaza, with sporadic events held throughout the following year in various other spaces, at times with over 100+ people in attendance. For 15 months, activists called for a ceasefire. As time passed, demonstrations lessened as activists grew fatigued. An official ceasefire was declared in January 2025, but Palestine solidarity activism in the US was now a target. Newly elected President Trump detailed new laws, as reported by Reuters:

> "To all the resident aliens who joined in the pro-jihadist protests, we put you on notice: come 2025, we will find you, and we will deport you," Trump said in the fact sheet. "I will also quickly cancel the student visas of all Hamas sympathizers on college campuses, which have been infested with radicalism like never before," the president said, echoing a 2024 campaign promise (Shalal 2025).

The new US administration has conflated Palestine solidarity protesting with Hamas support, which is inaccurate as activists are merely seeking to support Palestinian human rights. This Trump law further clarifies how spaces like *La La Lil Jidar* are essential for the community – helping members to not feel alone during times of political unrest.

Conclusion

As part of a wider global solidarity movement during the war on Gaza, *La La Lil Jidar* created a sense of "home" for activists in Philadelphia. Using art and activism as an entry point, and drawing from our experiences organizing against the Apartheid Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, *La La Lil Jidar* transformed a photography exhibit focused on the injustices occurring in the Occupied West Bank into a space of home for those protesting and grieving for Gaza. Activists bonded via shared political philosophies, and throughout the past two decades of Palestine organizing in US cities, it is clear that safe spaces are needed to support activists.

Arab and queer have proven to be compatible, harmonious identities for political work, functioning together to support the politically marginalized. Queerness is part of the movement for Palestinian rights, not separate from it. *La La Lil Jidar* connected Arab hospitality with queerness, creating a safe space for the politically marginalized. The inclusion of Palestinian/Arab hospitality as an integral element of protest, and queer bodies simultaneously becoming more visible in the movement, has impacted future activism in Palestinian solidarity work. The *La La Lil Jidar* collective hosted marginalized visitors as any Arab would, with food. The collective also helped build an alternative, chosen family, as many queer people have experienced. As a result, a wide range of people converged in the *La La Lil Jidar* event space: Palestinians and other Arabs seeking community and connection, Jewish activists who defined themselves as anti-Zionists, and students and academics who were seeking refuge from the violence of their institutions. This SWANA collective is a model of how to marry Arab culture with the queer concept of the chosen family, thereby creating a sense of home within the Palestine solidarity movement.

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