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Vulnerability, Empathy, and Allyship in Syria: Reflections of an Ethnographer

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Introduction

Academics linked to contemporary Syria through research and sentiment have become deeply enmeshed in the country's ongoing tragedy. Anthropologists conducting fieldwork are perhaps most implicated, as the relationships they forge across ideological divisions are intrinsic to their endeavor. The war has hardened these distinctions. Privately-held opinions turn into public stances, often with dangerous implications—ethical dilemmas for which there are no easy solutions. These challenges stem, as I argue, from a vulnerability of position linked to an imbalance of reciprocity. This essay ponders the changing roles of the ethnographer in Syria by presenting my own work as a case study. It raises questions about anthropology's ethos of empathy, which, I argue, implies a position of privilege. I end by suggesting a move towards allyship.

Truths and Vulnerabilities

The ethnography of public culture in urban Syria reveals the structural vulnerability inherent in the building and maintaining of personal and professional relationships, the intricate and fraught processes that anthropologists refer to as "access."

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Anthropological discussions of gaining fieldwork access often recount a process of bonding with interlocutors, a process that may have been trying at first, but generally remains stable once trust is established. This trope appears most convincing in studies that involve relatively small numbers of subjects located in face-to-face communities such as neighborhoods, villages, or institutions. But it fails to capture the anxiety-laden experience of forging and sustaining ties that are much more important to ethnographers than they are to interlocutors with complex professional and personal lives spread across broad urban landscapes. Such relationships can never be taken for granted; in the case of contemporary Syria they feel ever more perilous as wartime displacement disrupts, or at best reorganizes, long-term anthropological fieldwork (Kastrinou & Knoerk 2024: 3).

Yet contemporary thinking about the politics and ethics of ethnography presupposes the relative power of the anthropologist, and the corresponding vulnerability of those studied, in the dynamics of fieldwork relationships. The anthropology of elites, now an established subfield, never fully problematized this assumption. Recent conceptual shifts from "rapport" to "complicity" and "collaboration" aim to equalize colonial anthropology's power imbalance (Marcus 1997, 2012; Collins et al. 2017), and—along with "interrogation" and "intervention"—form part of a contemporary academic argot that likely unnerves anyone connected to Syria. Indeed, ethical self-questioning has become on ongoing concern of our discipline, sometimes to the point of paralysis.[i]

Yet for fieldwork conducted among the relatively privileged, I argue, the assumption of reciprocity underlying the new terminology masks an ongoing structural imbalance. Attention has been drawn to some forms of vulnerability, such as the secondary trauma that anthropologists who write about violence must bear (Sanford 2008), and the risk that sharing it may emphasize their own victimhood, rather than that of their interlocutors (Swedenburg 1995). Beyond realms of war and genocide,

vulnerability emerges not as a fieldworker's subject position but as a narrative strategy. For instance, anthropologists write of the vulnerability they experience when sharing emotions (Behar 1996) or embracing solidarity (Davids 2014) with their subjects. They are exposed not to their interlocutors but to their readers, two audiences that are generally assumed to be separate, despite passing acknowledgement that those we write about may not only read (Brettell 1999) but also participate in constructing our representations of them (Marcus 1997, 2012; Collins et al. 2017).

Beyond the gratitude towards their subjects expressed in preface acknowledgments, fieldworker's power disadvantage is rarely acknowledged, let alone recognized as a central problem. Yet Bronislaw Malinowski, the quintessential aristocratic, white male colonial ethnographer to whom anthropologists attribute their discipline-defining practice of intensive fieldwork, himself experienced a frustrating disempowerment, revealed in the posthumously published journal written during his 1914-1918 research among the Trobriand Island villagers, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1989). Lurid entries recount the anthropologist's anger over his interlocutors' frequent evasions and out-maneuverings. The diary's appearance prompted a flurry of anthropological commentary, some censorious, some celebratory, but none addressing what it reveals about the difficulties of forging and sustaining fieldwork connections, and the emotional toll of potential failure. Challenges of relating like those Malinowski's recounted in his private writing are perhaps even more daunting for contemporary ethnographers researching the relatively powerful.

In 1992—long after intensive fieldwork had become the quintessential anthropological practice—I began doctoral research in Damascus among "natives" who had no need or desire for the commodity gifts that Malinowski had traded—not always successfully—for information, and whose social, cultural, and economic capital often exceeded my own. An Oxford professor's piercing question, "What makes you think they'll talk to

you?" haunted my early interactions. My dissertation research on heritage politics in Damascus required a wide range of contacts across professions and networks, but it also relied on social circles for inclusion in private, semiprivate, and even public events. Angst over giving offense or simply appearing tiresome filled my notebooks. Time and experience have not fully erased it; my more recent research work on the television drama industry sparked dread of being thrown off film locations as a nuisance. An interlocutor turned close friend once quipped, "She never says no," referring to my eager acceptance of invitations. I felt compelled to grasp every overture, and I worried that existing relationships would turn sour, as they often did among the Syrians I came to know, strained under myriad political and other pressures. My "go with the flow" fear of disappointing led me to participate, as a reluctant contestant, in a humiliating—but also sociologically revealing—beauty contest on the eve of my thirtieth birthday. More recently, it compelled a visit to a wartime Syria for preproduction meetings on a drama serial to be shot in Damascus.

My dissertation fieldwork in Damascus attempted to trace a shift, occurring globally in different ways and to varying degrees, from identities based on kin or production to those based on aesthetics and consumption. What I found was not so much a replacement but a reworking of the former in terms of the latter, as new patterns of consumption emerged with the Syrian state's loosening of constraints on imports and industry. I sought to understand how the waning Ba'thist ideology—which advocated a classless citizenry—was giving way to new modes of social distinction forged through consumption. Class, regional, and religious differences were still taboo, even as they proliferated. Damascus, its past, and its people featured prominently in new and old forms of public culture—in restaurants, cafés, art exhibits, written memoirs, and television dramas. These celebratory, seemingly apolitical representations of local culture and history were hotly contested. Mention of projects to preserve, or attempts to represent, the Old City of Damascus

unleashed a torrent of discourse, a bitter rhetoric of distinction that moved far beyond a discussion of architectural restoration and seemed an overreaction to fictional television (Salamandra 2004).

This vitriol rarely targeted the leadership, and not merely because it was dangerous to do so; the regime was tacitly understood as the ultimate culprit. This was the great unsaid, a silence some analysts read as support for dictatorship. Instead, what I termed a "poetics of accusation" targeted those thought to benefit the status quo, the complicit "other" whose identity shifted from speaker to speaker (Salamandra 2004, 19–24). Truth was here the property of one interlocutor, but it was inevitably turned upside down by another. Agonistic discourse emerged as interlocutors assimilated my seemingly innocuous presence: a diminutive young woman who listened intently and asked few questions. I believe that their desire to be heard, at a time when few outsiders cared to listen, overrode their reluctance to air dirty laundry. It also may have neutralized the fear that much academic literature points to as Ba'thist Syria's most salient feature.

I had entered a realm of cultural intimacy—one that felt precarious—in which unpleasant self-image are shared, and form a basis of belonging (Herzfeld 1996). I bore, I believed then as I do now, a responsibility to convey rather than conceal this multiplicity of positions. If our aim is to depict culture as self-consciously constructed, negotiated, and contested, then we must give voice to conflict and disagreement. What better way to combat stereotypes of essentialized, monolithic culture than to reveal, for instance, secular Muslims debating the link between Islam and violence, as my interlocutors often did?

In translating this contestation and its logics to an academic audience, I faced an unnerving exposure. Our digital age provides no rarified scholarly cubbyholes; and dissemination is academic survival. Moreover, I had never intended my writing to be accessible only to a specialist audience. My research entered a field fraught with representational politics.

Anthropologists conducting fieldwork regularly witness—and are sometimes drawn into—debate and conflict. I depicted such contestation as a poetics of accusation linked to recent far-reaching political and social transformation, and analyzed sectarianism as determined by class, regional, and religious affiliation, citing the latter as its least significant component. I attributed sectarian and other social divisions to the contradiction between the Ba'th Party's project to rid Syria of subnational identities and the al-Asad regime's policies, which exacerbated them. This irony was not lost on the Syrians I came to know, who acknowledged the divide-and-rule policy under whose sway they fell. My writing pointed to the implications of social cleavages, both perceived and real, and suggested that the alienation expressed in popular culture in Damascus evinced the failure of Syria's national project (Salamandra 1998, 2004).

Looking back, my naivete, even if ultimately serendipitous, astonishes me. In choosing Syria for fieldwork, I had thought I was carving a niche; instead, I entered an academic cul-de-sac in which contemporary anthropological concerns did not easily fit. How, for example, could I reconcile postcolonial thought, centered on European imperialism, with a city that remembers colonialism as 400 years of Ottoman oppression? Indeed, initial skepticism suggested that a more strategically chosen place and project might have been warranted. The quotidian experience of sectarianism dissatisfied some Syrian specialists preoccupied with authoritarianism and its persistence, who deemed my non-regime focus as insufficiently attuned to "politics." Nor did my book jibe with the then current interest in processes of domination and resistance; no easily identifiable oppressors appeared among my vying groups. In addition to complicating academic understandings of sectarianism, I examined the vagaries of what was soon to become ubiquitous: neoliberalism. A chapter on competitive consumption among elite women, in which I analyzed new leisure sites and practices, challenged depictions of female solidarity; it faced pointed hostility as a result.

In hindsight, these reactions to my research seem unsurprising. Extant ethnographies of Arab cities had focused on poor urban quarters, and most resembled transplanted village studies, their field sites confined to a few dozen households. None of these had been conducted in Syria; the implicit expectation seemed to be that I should work to fill this gap. A senior colleague suggested more fieldwork, as I had provided little sense of everyday family life. Assumptions of public and private dichotomies still reigned, and the mass culture that blurs them was not yet considered an appropriate area for anthropological investigation. At a more visceral level, invidiousness makes for uncomfortable reading, no matter how sensitively portrayed.

Syria is no longer the ethnographic backwater it had been in the 1990s. Ethnographies of the 2000s evoked social and political life in pre-war Syrian cities (Anderson 2023; Bandak 2022; Gabiam 2016; Gallagher 2012; Kastrinou 2016; Rabo 2005; Totah 2014). Unsurprisingly, the flourishing of Syria's cultural production during the early 2000s inspired a somewhat disproportionate degree of academic interest. Much like Syrians cultural producers themselves, anthropologists and others focused on or incorporated art, dance, film, literature, music, television, and theater to grapple with this vertiginous decade (Bank 2020; Joubin 2013, Shannon 2006, 2015; Silverstein 2024, Taleghani 2021; Ziter 2015) and the war that followed it (Della Ratta 2018, Joubin 2020, Wedeen 2019). Long-term fieldworks followed their interlocuters into exile (Shannon 2019).

With the 2010s, a young generation of Syrian scholars—including contributors to this special issue—has emerged to join academic conversations about social life and cultural production (Abou Zainedin 2015, 2020; Alatrash 2018, 2020, 2021; Aldougli 2024; Alhayek 2020; al-Ghazzi 2013; al-Sabouni 2016; Bader Eddin 2023; Daoudy 2020; Ghazzawi 2022; Halabi 2017, 2018, 2023; Jabbour 2022; Khatoon 2022; Murad this volume; Sayfo 2017, 2021; Skeiker 2010, 2020)[ii]. Moreover, contention is no longer controversial; ethnographies of Syria now demonstrate that the battle of narratives about past, present, and future

long predated the war. Indeed, fieldwork's Rashomon effect has followed me throughout Syria's uprising turned civil-and-proxy war. Such discord also informs the works of Syria's leading cultural producers, television drama creators, who are the subject of my current research.

Ruptures and Continuities

While researching another country—ideally in a different region—would have been a wise career move for a junior anthropologist, Syria's "drama outpouring" (*al-fawra al-dramiyya*) drew me back for a second book project. After completing my doctorate and first book manuscript, I joined a collaborative research project examining the linkages between the United Kingdom and the Gulf Cooperation Council States. My fieldwork in that period, 1999-2000, included interviews with media organizations, notably the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Center, a pan-Arab satellite entertainment network which had been launched in London a decade earlier. With the new millennium, MBC and other Gulf-based channels began to fill their plentiful broadcast hours with Syrian productions. Syrian drama creators like those I had come to know during my research on representations of Damascus now found themselves at the forefront of a transnational media landscape. They vied with—and arguably surpassed—their Egyptian counterparts (long the leaders in Arab television production). Both of my research projects had positioned me to tell Syrian drama's story ethnographically.

My fieldwork with drama creators has convinced me that in Syria—and perhaps in much of Arab satellite television's footprint—fictional television is where politics happens (Salamandra 2015, 2016, 2023a). The Syrian industry harnesses critical and creative energies that, in a less draconian polity, might have animated party politics, journalism, or academia. The result is a sophisticated genre imbued with philosophical musings and political positions. Syrians' interpretation of the *musalsal*—the

Arabic-language drama serial—offers a local authenticity that evokes a wider Arab sensibility and treats a set of sociopolitical issues that are shared throughout the region (Salamandra 2023b.).

In this differentiated industry, blockbusters like the multi-season costume drama *The Neighborhood Gate* (*Bāb al-ḥāra*) generate enough revenue to fund the equivalent of American "quality drama," a form Arab audiences know as "contemporary social drama" (*al-drāma al-ijtimā'iya al-mu'āṣṣira*) and one in which Syrian creators excel. One such social drama forms my core case study. Originally aired in 2006, Allaith Hajjo's *Waiting* (al-Intiẓār) is now hailed as a classic, even by Syrian drama's harshest critics. Set in the Damascus suburb of Dweila'a, it gave birth to what became known as the haphazard musalsal subgenre, which depicts everyday life in informal settlements, the "haphazard neighborhoods" (*al-ḥārāt al-'ashwā'iya*), as they are referred to in Arabic, which housed an estimated 50 percent of prewar Damascus dwellers. These districts share the afflictions of (sub)urban poverty in much of the Global South: crowding, hazardous construction, inadequate services, underemployment, and crime. They often house recent migrants from the countryside, signaled in drama through rural dialects, clothing, and the drinking of maté. For many, these settlements become not a first stop to urban integration but barriers to upward, or inward, mobility. Like *Waiting*, dramas of the 2000s depicted haphazard neighborhoods as products of state corruption and neglect, and positioned them as a metaphor for the nation.

Screenwriter Najeeb Nusair recently told me his *Waiting* was an alarm that went unheeded – a claim that some Syrians would treat with skepticism[iii]. Critics of the drama industry see censorship as a smoke screen obscuring relations of near total complicity. The musalsal, they argue, acts as a safety valve; its trivializing critique promotes acquiescence. Yet my ongoing fieldwork suggests that television drama creators see themselves as upholding tenets of a modernizing project the al-Asad regime

abandoned, first in practice, more recently, in rhetoric. In 2000, many in the television industry welcomed Bashar al-Asad as a potential modernizer, and over his first decade in power, they worked through state strictures and institutions in hopes of reforming the regime. Yet even those who benefited from the drama outpouring grew disillusioned. The war has fractured the drama world, or the field of art (*majāl al-fann*, as Syrians call it), much as it has all of Syria. As the nation's public intellectuals, television creators have been pressured to take public stances. Nuances of voice gave way to wartime polarization (Ghazzawi 2022). The conflict's early years witnessed a barrage of statements, petitions, interviews, and campaigns. Those who supported the protests, even faintly, were harassed by al-Asad loyalists. Those demanding the regime's demise faced assault and incarceration. Many fled into exile. Those who backed the regime or failed to show support for the opposition found themselves plastered on an internet "Wall of Shame." A few prominent drama figures have maintained support for al-Asad throughout the war. Yet most screenwriters—the industry's "brains"—have emerged in opposition, though few joined the organized groups that they found either too "Ba'thist" or "Islamist" to endorse.

Anthropologists, like other academics with ties to contemporary Syria, have been drawn into the fray. If I was once critiqued for depicting contention in Damascene social life, I now face accusations of complicity with drama makers alleged to be doing the regime's bidding. Despite years of documenting the al-Asad dictatorship's deleterious effects on Syrian society, my criticism of the regime may now be dismissed as "lip service," given that, as an anthropologist, I attempt to understand rather than condemn antirevolutionary perspectives. A researcher may be associated with a position merely by representing it ethnographically. For instance, acknowledging minority fears of post-Asad Islamization or sectarian retaliation may be read as reactionary. Questioning the opposition's vision of Syria's future elides with support for the Ba'thist regime.

Alternatively, unreserved support for the opposition invites accusations of naïveté, of denying the opposition's atrocities and antidemocratic and extremist strands.

Moreover, I maintain that public positions should not be taken at face value. Interior states are notoriously difficult to account for, and behavior—particularly in a police state during wartime—is complex and ambiguous. I vehemently disagreed with those artists who advocated repressing the opposition, but I could not dismiss their expressions of fear as mere rationalizing weapons of the strong. I have mourned the deaths of friends who publicly backed the repressive actions of the regime as I have those who fought against the regime valiantly. I continue to view most of the drama makers I worked with as honest critics of dictatorship, given the degree of dissatisfaction they often expressed over my years of intense listening. Yet many were wary of protest, fearing post-al-Asad Islamization or sectarian retaliation. Representing their positions without condemning them—exhibiting the anthropological empathy—now appears a problematic analytical stance. What, then, are the ethics of continued engagement or of abandonment?

I hope that the stories I continue to tell convey something real about the Syrians who open their lives to me. That this is both a privilege and a burden is even more obvious amid devastation. After I hosted *Waiting* director Allaith Hajjo in New York in August 2016, he invited me to Damascus during the break between semesters. I hoped this was a polite but insincere "Damascene invitation." I should have known better; Allaith is from Aleppo, a city renowned for blunt "heavy bloodedness." I sent him my passport scan and photos, then gasped at his speedy follow-up. Soon the Syrian visa I assumed would never be granted awaited me in Lebanon. My attempts to wiggle out of the trip—"I might not be able to make it for the New Year"—sparked indignation. The choice was clear, if not simple: I could either travel to Syria during wartime, or risk losing a key interlocutor and offending a friend. I flew to Beirut in late December, still suspecting—secretly hoping—that flaws in the paperwork

would stop me at the border. I worried how Syrians would receive me after their world had changed so profoundly, and feared my mere presence might compromise them. I braced myself for potential hostility. Physical safety never worried me. During the filming of *Waiting*, Allaith had forbidden me from coming to the shantytown location on my own in a taxi, forcing me to rise at the crack of dawn each day to catch the crew van, so I knew he would have canceled my visit if security had been at issue.

It is often assumed that drama creators who left the country sympathize with the opposition and that those who remain are pro-regime. Even before returning to Damascus, I questioned this neatness of opinion. I arrived to find private utterances unsurprisingly ambiguous. The debates I heard in restaurants and cafés, and in the homes of old interlocutors, suggested anything but consensus. Positions fell along a finely grained and unstable continuum. Industry figures dismissed as *shabbīha*—regime thugs—accuse others of being the same. Some adopted devil's advocacy, arguing positions far from their own to unsettle the assuredness of others. Heated argument does not always preclude cordiality or cooperation; many drama makers maintain professional relationships across positional divides. For the serial *We'll Return Shortly* (*Sana'ūd ba'd qalīl*), filmed in Lebanon in 2015, Hajjo brought together prominent, vocal actors, the pro-regime Durayd Lahham and oppositional Kinda Alloush, as characters exchanging their players' own viewpoints. While such diplomacy renders him vulnerable to attacks from all sides, it provides a valuable lesson. This instance points to cultural producers' capacity to navigate divisions that appear absolute and unassailable in the abstract. A phenomenon that ethnography is well placed to capture.

When I arrived, preparations had begun for a serial that the press proclaimed a sequel to *Waiting*. It was not quite that but rather, as drama critic Maher Mansour put it, a response[iv]. My excitement grew. I had thought of this trip as a courtesy visit, but here was an update of my key case study. The coauthors of *Waiting* and many of its cast and crew members would join

Allaith on *Fawda* (Chaos), a drama tracing the shantification of middle-class Damascus that occurred with wartime displacement. But the production company was not small, congenial outfit of *Waiting*. Instead, the sizable, well-connected Syria International (SAPI) owned this project. SAPI's resources promised high production values and salaries commensurate with Syria's acute inflation. During my brief visit, I attended preproduction meetings, casting, and location scouting. The gloomy atmosphere contrasted strikingly with the gaiety I remembered from the filming of *Waiting*. Budget delays and casting quibbles provoked general anxiety; SAPI's notorious director refused to accommodate creatives' proclivities. Allaith dismissed this obstinance as characteristic posturing, certain that appropriate funds and his own casting choices would come through in the end. I chalked up the team's vexation to the burdens of war and the atmosphere of crisis that very often pervades media production (Powdermaker 1950).

In the months following my visit, preparations for *Fawda* reached a stalemate, and Allaith refused to continue with SAPI. The company held rights to the screenplay and gave it to a lesser-known director for the Ramadan 2018 broadcast season. Social media postings lamented the hijacking of a greatly anticipated project, and the serial's authors were disappointed with the result. Allaith—who had justified biannual filming in Damascus as a means of employment for many facing economic hardship—vowed hyperbolically never to film in Syria again. I had hoped to bookend *Waiting* with *Chaos* in my ethnography, but as the drama's screenwriter Najeeb Nusair noted, the project's failure serves as a more appropriate ending to this story. Narrative symmetry will be sacrificed for something messier and uglier but ultimately truer.

Witnessing, Listening, and Hospitality

For Syria, the representational stakes are higher than ever, and long-term ethnography generates moral quandaries

that dwarf a lack of "access" to interlocutors and any "data" they might provide. Whose story do we tell, amid such ideological, experiential, and geographic divides? To maintain relationships across them, should we – can we – set aside our own positions on Syria's conflict? There are no simple answers. True allyship, I argue, involves being open to and telling awkward truths. Our source of inspiration should be the many ways Syrians themselves have found to navigate the divisions wrought by a 60-year-old dictatorship, and deepened by a war that has yet to end. We must accept that telling their stories exposes us to the often ugly cut and thrust of Syrians' own interpersonal relationships. Courage should be balanced with humility. Ethnography may do harm – and publishing on Syria must prioritize security – but we must be realistic about the good it can do. In the era of social media, Syrians no longer need non-Syrian academics to give them voice, and many speak more loudly than anthropologists do. In my case, interlocutors may read my writing, but they are certainly in no need of it. Concerns over committing "epistemic injustice" against media creators whose work appears on Netflix seems self-aggrandizing (Fricker 2007).

Over thirty years of intermittent fieldwork, I have produced ethnographic accounts of my interlocutors' lives that resonated with many of them and may have foreshadowed the war, but feel to me both now and then inadequate. They seem a paltry offering in the face of the generosity that has enabled them. My career has long benefitted from a Syrian ethic of hospitality that runs deep at personal, familial, and national scales, and one that has come to the fore of anthropological concern with the growing indifference, indeed hostility, facing Syrians in need. Syria has served as a place of sanctuary for centuries (Chatty 2018). Over the 2000s, I witnessed not only the opening of borders, but also the opening of homes to displaced Iraqis and Lebanese. In a bitterly ironic twist of fate, anthropologists, long recipients of Syrians' hospitality, now document the truncated welcome and blatant hostility extended to Syrian refugees (Alcan 2021; Al-Khalili 2023; Carpi 2021; Carpi & Şenoğuz 2019; Can 2019;

Dağtaş 2017, Musmar and Zuntz 2023). While ethnographers wrestle poignantly with the professional ethics of writing about the displaced, research on refugees proliferates, threatening to render the anthropology of Syrians synonymous with the anthropology of Syrian refugees[v].

I remain caught in hospitality's conundrum: the unconditional hospitality my interlocutors extend, which approaches an ideal, and the knowledge that the practice of hospitality is contingent, "circumscribed by law and duty" (Derrida 2000: 135), and involves reciprocity. This even as displaced Syrians themselves reconfigure their practice of hospitality, eschewing formulas of exchange and powerplays of hierarchy, emphasizing community and sanctuary (Kastrinou & Knoerk 2024), while Syrian scholars extend its hermeneutic reach and transformative potential beyond Syria (Halabi 2023).

A consequence of being an anthropologist with a long-term relationship to their field is to endure continual imbalance. To call my interlocutors "collaborators" feels overstated and bears unintended political connotations. Despite the modicum of social capital I may occasionally confer, I still need them far more than they need me. They are central to my professional endeavor; I remain at most tangential to theirs. I recognize the time and attention Syrians offer me as unrepayable favors. The imbalance is appropriate, but it also warrants a shift from empathy to allyship, one rendered easier as the new generation of Syrian scholars, the products of wartime exile, enable me to "speak along with" rather than "speak for." It is my hope that, as Fazil Moradi (2024) argues, the ethnographer's bearing witness, particularly to experiences of trauma and violence, is itself an act of hospitality.

Syrian television's "field of art" lives on, even as the nation struggles to hold together, and the drama creators' task, like mine, becomes more difficult; we operate in separate but parallel arenas of representation (Fassin 2014). The drama of everyday life, they say, exceeds anything they can script. They struggle to depict an ugly reality. If they meet that challenge and still pass

through the censors, what is their contribution? As an actor put it over morning coffee before *Fawda* location scouting, "either you prettify, or you show things how they are." The regime's pyrrhic victory placates no one: every complaint – no water, no electricity, no batteries, no fuel – they punctuated bitterly with "But we've won!" (Bas intiṣarnā!). Reconciliation lies ahead, and the roles of both television makers and ethnographers must evolve. Social drama creators frequently evoke an artistic truism: the universal can be attained through fidelity to the local. Listening patiently to them in difficult settings, and proceeding through quiet implication, remains crucial to an ethnographic account of their work. As such, the result however it may appear must remain loyal to our shared labor of representation.

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[i] See, for instance, *American Ethnologist* forum "What Good is Anthropology" (2024). Yet it is outside the discipline that the ethical dimensions of fieldwork among the privileged are most directly addressed (Gosovic 2020).

[ii] This list is far from exhaustive. It must be noted that structural constraints such as disciplinary recruitment bias and funding exigencies have thus far precluded Syrians from becoming professional anthropologists.

[iii] Personal correspondence, January 2017.

[iv] Personal correspondence, February 2017.

[v] The English language ethnography published on Syrian refugees far outweighs that published on pre-war Syria.