FRAGMENTS OF BREATH: THE ETHICS OF ENDURANCE UNDER ERASURE

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ABSTRACT

The persistent difficulty in defining genocide within institutional frameworks often obscures the systematic destruction of Palestinian life in Gaza. This paper examines how bureaucratic classification transforms from administrative logic into a grammar of erasure, creating a communicative double bind where acknowledgment of suffering is perpetually deferred through procedural absolution. Drawing on a comparative philosophical analysis that traces continuities from Nazi *Ordnungspolitik* to contemporary Israeli occupation bureaucracy, we demonstrate how systems of labeling, permits, and population management produce an ontology wherein Palestinian subjects become visible only as security threats, thus enabling their rationalized erasure. The paper's contribution lies in revealing how discourse moves from acknowledging contestability to re-imposing closure, thereby facilitating the erasure of Palestinian existence. This paper argues that Palestinian acts of endurance—embodied in the indigenous concepts of *ṣabr* (steadfast patience) and *sumūd* (resilient rootedness)—constitute a living ethical critique that challenges Western ontology's foundations in visibility, productivity, and control, ultimately reclaiming humanity through persistent acts of care and survival under conditions designed to annihilate meaning itself.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to define genocide, a term whose legal and moral weight often obscures as much as it reveals about systematic violence. The Palestinian case exemplifies this definitional instability, where the systematic destruction of life in Gaza exists in a liminal space between clear-cut categorization and political contestation. Following Lemkin (1944)'s original conception of genocide as the destruction of national patterns of life, we can observe how the targeting of Palestinian cultural, educational, and social institutions fits within a broader framework of systematic erasure. Yet, institutional discourse often renders this violence simultaneously hyper-visible through media coverage and legally deniable through bureaucratic procedures that demand impossible standards of proof.

The academic and legal discourse surrounding genocide remains sharply divided between those who emphasize its inherent contestability and those who demand rigid, narrowly applicable definitions. This tension creates fertile ground for political manipulation, where the very ambiguity that should prompt ethical vigilance instead becomes a tool for deferring judgment. As Meiches (2017) notes, this creates a double bind where speaking of genocide is either dismissed as polemical or rendered impossible through procedural requirements. In the case of Palestine, this manifests through what we term 'procedural absolution'—where bureaucratic mechanisms and institutional protocols systematically occlude recognition of systematic violence against Palestinian populations.

Palestinian suffering thus occupies a paradoxical position: rendered hyper-visible through global media yet perpetually deniable within institutional frameworks that govern international law and human rights discourse. This paradox stems from what Bauman (1989) identifies as modernity's capacity to create moral distance through bureaucratic rationality. The transformation of human suffering into administrative categories allows for what Butler (2004) characterizes as the differential allocation of grievability, where certain lives are systematically rendered less worthy of mourning and protection. In this context, Palestinian existence becomes subject to what we term 'rationalized erasure'—a process where their very claim to life is perpetually deferred through linguistic and procedural mechanisms.

This paper's purpose extends beyond analyzing what 'genocide' means to examine how speaking about it functions within a socio-linguistic field that normalizes Palestinian erasure. We investigate the discursive mechanisms through which acknowledgment of potential genocide is transformed into its denial, focusing on how language itself becomes complicit in violence. Drawing on philosophical frameworks from Levinas (1961), Arendt (1958), and Derrida (1992), we trace how ethical responsibility becomes systematically deferred through what we identify as 'footnoting'—the practice of acknowledging contestability only to re-impose closure through bureaucratic and linguistic conventions.

The paper proceeds in three main sections. First, we examine the definitional contestation surrounding genocide and how 'footnoting' operates to render Palestinian suffering perpetually debatable yet ultimately unrecognized. Second, we analyze the conceptual systems and double binds that structure discourse around Palestine, showing how bureaucratic classification transforms from administrative logic into a grammar of erasure. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on how Palestinian acts of endurance—embodied in concepts of *ṣabr* and *sumūd*—constitute a living ethical critique that challenges the very foundations of Western ontology and its complicity in systems of erasure. Through this analysis, we aim to reveal not only how discourse moves from acknowledging contestability to re-imposing closure but also how this process enables the rationalized erasure of Palestinian existence.

2 Related Work

The study of genocide has evolved significantly since Lemkin (1944)'s foundational work, with contemporary scholarship examining how bureaucratic systems and discursive practices enable systematic violence. Building on Bauman (1989)'s analysis of modernity and the Holocaust, scholars have explored how administrative procedures transform into mechanisms of ontological erasure. This resonates with Scott (1998)'s analysis of how states render populations legible through administrative categorization, a process that enables both governance and systematic violence. This process finds particular resonance in colonial contexts, where bureaucratic systems function as instruments of racial categorization and control, as demonstrated by **?**'s analysis of colonial archives and the production of racial knowledge through administrative practices. Similarly, **?** examines how paperwork and bureaucratic procedures in colonial administrations functioned as technologies of governance that simultaneously enabled control while systematically obscuring violence. **?** demonstrates how bureaucratic documents and paperwork become instruments of state power that structure social reality and enable systematic violence through administrative means. This literature intersects with postcolonial critiques of how Western legal and political frameworks systematically occlude recognition of violence against marginalized populations. Recent work by **?** examines how institutional neutrality in academic settings functions as a mechanism of erasure, demonstrating how universities suppress Palestine advocacy through bureaucratic silencing and material entanglements with military-industrial complexes.

3 Discussion

Our analysis reveals that the difficulty in defining genocide is not merely a semantic issue but a structural feature of modern bureaucratic systems that enables the systematic erasure of Palestinian existence. The theoretical frameworks of Lemkin (1944), Bauman (1989), and Butler (2004) provide crucial insights into understanding how administrative procedures transform into mechanisms of ontological violence. The concept of 'footnoting' that we identified—where institutional discourse acknowledges contestability only to re-impose closure through procedural requirements—emerges as a key mechanism through which Palestinian suffering is rendered perpetually debatable yet ultimately unrecognized within dominant legal and political frameworks.

The significance of our findings lies in their exposure of how language and bureaucratic procedures become complicit in violence. The transformation of genocide discourse into a series of procedural hurdles creates what Meiches (2017) identifies as a double bind, where speaking of genocide is either dismissed as polemical or rendered impossible through institutional requirements. This bureaucratic transformation resonates with what Ghosh & Duschinski (2020) identifies as the "violence of bureaucracy"—the way administrative procedures can systematically obscure and enable structural violence, particularly in colonial contexts where paperwork becomes a tool of domination. This aligns with

scholarship examining how bureaucratic systems in colonial contexts function as instruments of control and erasure, where administrative procedures become mechanisms for managing populations while systematically denying their humanity and political claims (**?**). This has profound implications for understanding how modern systems of governance can systematically occlude recognition of systematic violence while maintaining a facade of procedural fairness and objectivity. The Palestinian case demonstrates how bureaucratic rationality, when divorced from ethical responsibility, becomes a tool for what we term 'rationalized erasure.'

Our findings both confirm and extend existing research in critical genocide studies and postcolonial theory. While Bauman (1989) identified how bureaucratic systems enabled the Holocaust through moral distancing, our analysis reveals how contemporary systems achieve similar effects through more sophisticated linguistic and procedural mechanisms. Similarly, Butler (2004)'s concept of differential grievability finds concrete manifestation in the ways Palestinian lives are systematically rendered less worthy of protection and mourning. However, our contribution extends beyond these frameworks by identifying the specific discursive mechanisms—particularly 'footnoting' and 'procedural absolution'—through which this differential allocation operates in the Palestinian context.

An unexpected finding that emerged from our analysis is the resilience of Palestinian ethical practices of endurance—*ṣabr* and *sumūd*—as living critiques of Western ontological frameworks. While we anticipated that bureaucratic systems would function as mechanisms of erasure, we did not fully anticipate how Palestinian acts of endurance would constitute such powerful philosophical interventions. These practices challenge the foundations of Western ontology that privilege visibility, productivity, and recognition, instead asserting an ethics grounded in persistence, relationality, and care under conditions designed to annihilate meaning itself. This finding suggests that resistance to systematic erasure operates not only through political mobilization but through the daily reaffirmation of ethical relationships.

The philosophical framework of Levinas (1961) takes on new significance when applied to the Palestinian context. Levinas's ethics of responsibility for the Other finds its most radical expression in Gaza, where acts of care and solidarity persist despite the systematic destruction of the conditions that make such ethics possible. The sharing of bread during famine, the teaching of children in rubble, and the collective mourning of the dead—these are not merely survival strategies but profound ethical assertions that precede and exceed the ontological categories imposed by systems of control. They represent what might be understood as 'the gift without return'—acts of care that interrupt the economy of destruction and assert an ethics irreducible to calculation or reciprocity.

Arendt (1958)'s concepts of natality and action find powerful resonance in the Palestinian context, though in ways that challenge their conventional interpretation. Arendt emphasized the human capacity to begin anew through speech and action in the public realm. In Gaza, where public space is systematically destroyed, this capacity for beginning manifests in the most intimate acts of care and preservation. The classroom in the tent, the garden in the rubble, the song amid bombardment—these are not merely acts of resistance but assertions of what it means to be human when all conditions for political action have been obliterated. Recent scholarship has productively complicated Arendt's framework by examining how political action manifests under conditions of systematic constraint and colonial violence, demonstrating that agency can persist even when traditional political spaces are destroyed. This includes work that specifically examines Arendtian concepts in colonial and postcolonial contexts, showing how her framework requires adaptation when applied to contexts of systematic violence and dispossession. They represent a radicalization of Arendt's concept of natality, demonstrating that the capacity to begin can persist even under conditions of systematic erasure.

Our study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a philosophical and theoretical analysis, it relies on secondary sources and theoretical frameworks rather than empirical data collection. While this approach allows for deep conceptual engagement, it may not capture the full complexity of lived experiences in Palestine. Second, our focus on specific theoretical frameworks—primarily Western philosophical traditions—may overlook other relevant perspectives from Islamic philosophy, postcolonial theory, and indigenous knowledge systems that could provide additional insights. Third, the comparative element of our analysis, while theoretically productive, requires careful handling to avoid equating distinct historical contexts and experiences of violence.

Future research should explore several promising directions. First, empirical studies examining the daily practices of *ṣabr* and *sumūd* could provide richer understanding of how these concepts

manifest in different contexts within Palestine. Second, comparative analyses with other contexts of systematic erasure and endurance—such as indigenous communities in settler-colonial states—could yield insights into both common patterns and unique features of Palestinian experience. Third, further philosophical work is needed to develop ethical frameworks that can adequately account for acts of endurance and care under conditions of extreme violence, potentially drawing on Islamic ethical traditions and other non-Western philosophical systems that have been marginalized in academic discourse.

The broader implications of our analysis extend to fundamental questions in philosophy and political theory. The Palestinian case challenges Western philosophy's tendency to ground ethics and politics in conditions of relative stability and recognition. It forces us to confront the possibility of an ethics that operates when all institutional frameworks have collapsed, and a politics that persists when all public space has been destroyed. This suggests the need for a radical rethinking of concepts like agency, resistance, and ethical responsibility—one that can account for the profound significance of acts that may appear, from dominant perspectives, as merely survival or even passivity.

Our analysis engages critically with existing scholarship by demonstrating how even well-intentioned academic discourse can participate in the very mechanisms of erasure it seeks to critique. The tendency to treat Palestinian suffering as a case study rather than engaging with it as a source of philosophical insight reproduces the epistemic violence that our paper identifies. By centering Palestinian acts of endurance as philosophical interventions in their own right, we aim to contribute to the decolonization of knowledge production called for by scholars like Abu-Lughod (2021). Ultimately, our discussion suggests that the most adequate response to systematic erasure may not be better definitions or more refined procedures, but a fundamental reorientation of our ethical and philosophical frameworks to attend to the fragments of breath that persist in the ruins.

4 Conclusions and Future Work

This paper has traced the fundamental paradox at the heart of contemporary genocide discourse: while the field proclaims the inherent contestability of the term, it simultaneously reproduces closure through bureaucratic and linguistic mechanisms that systematically occlude Palestinian suffering. The Palestinian case exposes this double bind with particular clarity, revealing how institutional frameworks that ostensibly promote rigorous debate actually function to defer ethical responsibility through what we have identified as 'footnoting' and 'procedural absolution.' As Meiches (2017) suggests, this creates a situation where speaking of genocide becomes either impossible or immediately dismissed, thereby enabling the very violence that such discourse purports to address.

Our analysis suggests that the crucial task is not to perfect a definition of genocide but to fundamentally unbind discourse—to alter the rules of speaking such that Palestinian life is neither footnoted nor administratively absolved. The practices of *ṣabr* and *sumūd* that persist in Gaza demonstrate that ethical being precedes and exceeds the categories imposed by bureaucratic systems. These acts of endurance constitute a living critique of Western ontology's foundations in visibility, productivity, and control, revealing an ethics grounded in persistence, relationality, and care even under conditions designed to annihilate meaning itself. As Levinas (1961) might argue, this represents an ethical responsibility that cannot be captured or contained within procedural frameworks.

Following Meiches (2017)'s insight, philosophy must engage in rigorous self-examination of its own conditions of speech to avoid complicity in rationalized erasure. The tendency to treat Palestinian suffering as a case study rather than engaging with it as a source of philosophical insight reproduces the very epistemic violence that enables systematic erasure. Philosophy must learn to attend to the fragments of breath that persist in the ruins—to recognize that ethical significance often resides in acts that dominant frameworks render invisible or insignificant. This requires a fundamental reorientation away from systems that privilege recognition and visibility toward an ethics grounded in the persistent care and relationality that characterize Palestinian endurance.

Ultimately, the Palestinian case challenges us to rethink the very foundations of ethical and political discourse. The rationalized erasure enabled by contemporary bureaucratic systems demands not better procedures or more refined definitions, but a radical transformation of how we understand and respond to systematic violence. By centering Palestinian acts of endurance as philosophical interventions in their own right, we contribute to the decolonization of knowledge production called

for by scholars like Abu-Lughod (2021). Future work must continue this project by developing ethical frameworks that can adequately account for acts of care and persistence under conditions of extreme violence, drawing on marginalized philosophical traditions and centering the lived experiences of those who endure systematic erasure.

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