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From Radical Hospitality to Radical Hope: Higher Education and the Imperative for Justice

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Abstract

In this piece, Dr. Diya Abdo, Palestinian scholar, writer, and refugee activist, reflects on how building a movement of "resettlement campuses" across the US—colleges and universities that host refugee families on campus grounds and support them in their integration journey while engaging the campus and wider community—is informed by the hope for, and faith in, a free Palestine. Compelled by her Palestinian parents' and grandparents' experiences of displacement and the responsibilities of working at an American college, Dr. Abdo formulates a conceptual journey for higher education, from radical hospitality through radical accountability to radical hope, where the belief in justice for Palestine is indivisible from the hope for a truly democratic America and an equitable world.

Keywords

Palestine, refugees, resettlement campuses, Every Campus A Refuge, radical hope, radical accountability, radical hospitality, refugee resettlement.

When I was 13 years old, I visited the University of Jordan with my mother's cousin, Hiyam. She was a student in the University's Department of English Language and Literature. A humble, kind, and typically shy young woman from a conservative refugee Palestinian family, Hiyam acted differently when she was at the university. The campus was clearly an exciting place for her. Away from the restrictive family home and its eldest-daughter

responsibilities, she flitted like a butterfly between classes and the students' social spaces: the "milk bar," the central quad, and the cypress-lined avenue that ran the length of the campus, flanked by aging but still beautiful stone buildings. In her light blue hijab surrounded by other female students and her friends, she was effervescent.

In Hiyam's nuclear family (my mother's maternal uncle's), she was the first and only one of five children to attend university. My own mother, Afaf, who was older than her cousin and with four children of her own, had truly been a pioneer in her "thigh" (the Arabic word for "branch") of the family tribe, paving the way for Hiyam. Afaf had attended the University of Jordan more than a decade earlier, receiving both a bachelor's and master's degree. My grandmother Sabha, Hiyam's paternal aunt, was illiterate, but she was heavily invested in educating her two children who remained with her after her separation from her husband (my grandfather) and then in her displacement to Jordan from Palestine in 1967. University degrees, let alone postgraduate ones, weren't common on their side of the family, though it was much more common on my father's side who was from the same tribe–the Al-Sawahreh Arabs. This tribe lived on one of the mounts of Jerusalem, Jabal Al-Mukabber, now bisected by the apartheid wall. Parts of that tribe remained, and the rest scattered across the globe after the 1967 Israeli incursion into additional Palestinian land. In Jordan, my parents initially lived as refugees and then became Jordanian citizens. They married, and I was their firstborn, raised in the country of their displacement.

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That day with Hiyam at the University of Jordan was formative for me. It was my first visit to a university campus, and I took it very seriously, wearing a wheat-colored canvas dress with blue and pink roses on it. I loved literature, especially British and American, which I was reading all the time—both at school and at home. And I was especially excited to attend one of her English classes that day to see how they were going to discuss Romantic poetry. As we sat waiting in the lecture hall, in chairs attached to writing desks bolted to the ground, a male professor walked in and got up to the lectern. He lectured the whole time about what he thought a poem by Keats meant, the students furiously taking notes. That experience made me realize two important things: The first was that I wanted to be—*was going to be*—a professor of English. The second was that *this* (the style of teaching I witnessed that day) was NOT how I was going to teach. No, in my classroom, we would unbolt the chairs, sit in a circle, and everybody would contribute to the conversation. Together, we would make meaning.

I am not sure where this desire for what I learned later is called "student-centered" teaching came from, but collaborative life-making was part of my everyday: sitting with my grandmother (my *teita*) in the kitchen, passing her the grape leaves while she filled them, or caring for my three younger siblings while my parents worked. I feel now that my reaction to the lecture—the extreme appeal of being a professor and the extreme distaste for being *that* kind of professor–was fundamentally tied to my identity as a Palestinian. We love to learn, we love to teach, and above all, we love to be free: free to move, to speak up, to be heard—not louder than the others, but together.

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As a professor of English, first in Jordan and then in the US, I was deeply interested in a question I had heard Khnata Bennouna, a Moroccan woman writer, ask in an interview[1]:

"What is the role of literature in a world streaming with rivers of blood"[2]

What struck me was the tension at the heart of the question. It was not dissimilar to the tension in my experience in that lecture hall at the University of Jordan back in 1990: *What* we are doing here is important, essential even, but *how* we do it is even more important, more essential. Her question seemed, on the face of it, simple enough, and to the unfriendly ear, perhaps even rhetorical: "What is the point of writing when people are being massacred?"

If you are Palestinian, then your people are constantly being massacred. In my brief lifetime of 49 years, it has been an interminable cycle of slaughter and silence. In the midst of it all, my people remain filled with love for life and, most importantly, with hope. This is why it was abundantly clear to me that this writer's question was neither pessimistic nor rhetorical. And now, at a time when Palestinians are being massacred by the tens of thousands in Gaza, this question is more important than ever. As a professor, and very importantly as a *Palestinian* professor, I must ask:

What do we do other than watch? How do we take what we read, what we see, and design a better world? *How does literature spur an architecture of hope?*

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1 *A Woman's Word* (*Palabra de Mujer)*, directed by Silvia G. Ponzoda (2004)**,** DVD.
2 *A Woman's Word* (*Palabra de Mujer)*, directed by Silvia G. Ponzoda (2004)**,** DVD.

By 2015, I was a tenured professor at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. I was teaching courses like *Arab Women Writers*, *Arab and Islamic Feminisms*, *World Literature*, *American Literature*, and I was asking my students that question about what we do with the things we are reading when the world is running with rivers of blood, especially after the massacres in Gaza of 2014. But in 2015, something else was catching the world's attention–the Syrian refugee crisis. We watched on our screens as thousands of women, men, and children, ravaged by war and looking for safety and security, took whatever way they could out of their current misery into an unknown future world. Then the image of Aylan Kurdi (the little boy who drowned when the boat that was carrying him, his younger brother, his mother, and many others capsized on its way from Turkey to Greece) mobilized the world.

As a teacher, my unrelenting hope is that the work I do with students in the classroom will take root, and that it will slowly grow, reverberating through them and the others they will meet along the way on their life journey. Teaching is an act that is deeply rooted in hope, in a kind of faith in one's impact that requires the patience of years, if not decades. Most educators know, for example, that the end-of-semester evaluations are not very accurate. Students feel the impact of a learning experience much later in life. I have received countless emails and messages from students letting me know how much a book we had read or something we had discussed in class years ago had come to mean to them—much later in their lives.

But I was becoming impatient. Every year, I would walk into the classroom thinking: What am I even *doing*? How is my teaching useful in a world streaming with rivers of blood? And, at that time, I fear, I had truly been feeling helpless and was becoming hopeless. Unable to see or imagine the fruits of my labor—those slow-burn months of co-creation, of collaborative meaning-making—I decided that I needed to do something more "real," more tangible, more immediate.

I would eventually come back to my radical hope inspired by that Moroccan writer's question, to the firm belief that the art of teaching, of reading, of writing, of making meaning—*the work of imagination*—is imperative to the multigenerational work of justice and liberation, a foundational core belief of every Palestinian I have ever known.

But in 2015, as I said, I was impatient. The promise of a years-down-the-line impact was not going to cut it. At the time, I was hearing about Austrian activists. As embodied as anything I could imagine, those activists drove their cars down to Hungary to drive up the Syrian refugees who were trying to make their way to Germany.

Oh, to be in a car driving refugees to where they needed to go!

Luckily, I happened to read that September of 2015 that Pope Francis had called on every parish in Europe to host a refugee family, and another embodied idea came to me: Why not use the college campus where I was teaching—Guilford College—to host refugee families coming to Greensboro, North Carolina, one of the state's, and indeed the nation's refugee resettlement hubs.[3] And the idea made perfect sense to me and to everyone else at this small Quaker institution in the American South that sits at the edge of a woods that was part of the Underground Railroad. For those unfamiliar—as I was at the time—a parish doesn't just mean a church congregation; it means a neighborhood, a small town or village whose inhabitants are bound to each other by faith. And Guilford College was exactly that–a small town (housing, cafeterias, clinics, a farm, a gym, people!)—whose students, faculty, staff, and community members are bound to each other by shared values and a shared mission—a faith in our collective undertaking as a higher education institution. It was even more perfect that the word for campus in Arabic is "haram" which means a place inviolable, a sanctuary.

In response to the Pope's call for *radical hospitality*, we came together as a college to found the flagship chapter of what would become a national movement—Every Campus A Refuge. The word "radical" comes from the Latin word for "root." Radical hospitality means to go beyond ordinary acts of welcome to make people feel *rooted*, to make them feel like they belong, that they matter, that they are genuinely part of our community.

And I had always known that refugees rarely feel welcomed or rooted—even when they are just crossing a river from what they thought would be their forever home to the "alternate homeland"—what Palestinian refugees called Jordan. Because my mother had me when she was a first-year university student, my grandmother raised me. Growing up with her, I learned a lot about Palestine, the things she loved and lost:

3 Binnie, Isla, "Pope calls on every European parish to host one refugee family," *Reuters*, September 6, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyle/pope-calls-on-every-european-parish-to-host-one-refugee-family-idUSKCN0R60DY/

What it was like to harvest the olives and sacrifice the sheep for *Eid*, what it was like to prepare for weddings—the henna night and the women's dancing,
what it was like to visit old city of Jerusalem and buy green almonds or sugarcoated chickpeas from the street vendors,
what it was like to wake up early to the call of the rooster and help the household make breakfast,
what it was like to see it all under threat from Israeli occupation,
what it was like to fetch water from the well under the watchful eye of the Israeli soldiers.

And a lot about her displacement in Jordan, her life as a refugee:

What it was like to live in refugee camps with no skills but your knitting so you can get your children an education,
what it was like to have no light at night but the streetlamp so your daughter can do her homework,
what it was like to be attacked by Jordanian military groups and almost killed,
what it was like to feel like you never belonged in the "alternate homeland," wishing every day, until your last breath, that you were back home in Palestine with your family,
what it was like to die with that hope still in your heart, your body washed by your kids in a hospital in Jordan, your body interred in a desert cemetery, miles outside of Amman without your soul
because you left your soul in Palestine.

What I learned from my grandmother was that to be a refugee meant that you never felt like you belonged, even in a country that spoke your language, had your favorite ingredients at the market, and gave you a passport.

This personal knowledge about the refugee experience undergirds everything we do at Every Campus A Refuge—every resource we build to create "resettlement campuses ecosystems" (the term we use to describe this innovative movement that utilizes higher education institutions as sites for resettlement and integration support for newcomer populations) is centered on how we can make refugees feel rooted in their new communities and, very importantly, how the receiving community can learn, grow, and also integrate so that we are all genuinely building a world together.

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At Guilford College, we came together in 2015 to host refugees on our campus and to welcome them into our communities in ways that would make them feel rooted. So many people in our ecosystem contributed to this effort—from the first-year students who empathized deeply with being away from home for the first time to the faculty and staff members who have spent their lives building support systems for other kinds of newcomers into their lives—their students.

As a campus, we grew our ecosystem by founding new partnerships with local resettlement agencies and refugee supporting organizations and deepening existing ones with our local faith communities, businesses, apartment complexes, daycare centers, and neighbors. We spent several months preparing for the arrival of our first hosted refugee guest, a young man from Uganda who was living as a refugee in Kenya; he arrived in Greensboro on a snowy day in January 2016. A few months later we welcomed a Syrian family who had been living as refugees in Jordan, and then another Syrian family, and then a family from the DRC. Now, 10 years later, we have already welcomed and hosted 100 refugees on Guilford College's campus in several campus properties that were available at the time: For single guests we often used the one-bedroom apartment attached to the counseling center or the studio apartment typically used by RAs, and for families, we used available faculty or staff housing—usually these are three-bedroom homes with spacious yards surrounded by tall poplars

Through Every Campus A Refuge, people from all over the world—Burundi, Uganda, Rwanda, Syria, Iraq, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Venezuela, Colombia, Sudan, and Afghanistan—have found community in Greensboro and on our campus.

And of course, it was always there, in the name—*Every* Campus A Refuge. We started at Guilford, but the initiative has now spread to over 20 campuses across the country—big and small, urban and rural, private and public, 4-year and 2-year institutions, from Georgia to Oklahoma to California. These campuses have hosted and supported the integration of hundreds of refugees, forever changing the very cities they are part of.

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When I first conceptualized the purpose of Every Campus A Refuge, it was based firmly on the Pope's call for *radical hospitality*. However, very quickly, I came to see how the resettlement campus movement must also be fundamentally rooted in *radical accountability*. I was always proud of how easy it was to get Every Campus A Refuge going at Guilford. In fact, I have said,

and continue to say and believe, that had I had this idea anywhere else other than Guilford College, it would not have come to be, would never have been born. Guilford College was the perfect place because of its Quaker values, its history of supporting refugees during World War II, and the local community's deep involvement in the abolitionist movement. But another look at Guilford's history reveals that, like many if not most institutions in our nation, we have much to hold ourselves (and our institutions) accountable for. For example, Guilford College did not admit Black students until 1962. And like every other college or university in the US, our campuses are built on stolen lands that belonged to Indigenous tribes. Very importantly, and whether we like it or not, we are part of a nation whose collective wealth is built on the labor of enslaved African people, a forced migration of epic proportions and enduring legacies of pain. For many decades past, and even as we speak, the US government has engaged in political acts that have forced millions of people out of their countries to seek safety, shelter, and sustenance. American college and university campuses are not absolved of this history; as institutions, we stand at the center of our country's future, accountable to our present and past. As stewards of higher education institutions, we ought to do the work of resettlement campuses not only because we *can*, but because we *must*.

Radical accountability means to understand our institutional responsibility in ways that go beyond checking a box (think "land acknowledgements") to performing or acting in ways that are rooted in transformation, in social justice. For me, and for Every Campus A Refuge, at the core of this *institutional* accountability is our understanding of our role in our hyperlocal ecosystems, and how that can translate into action through allocation, reallocation, and sharing of institutional resources in ways that work intentionally to make people feel like they deeply belong in our community no matter where they come from.

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I am currently undergoing another transformation back to the roots of what makes Palestinians who they are—from radical hospitality to radical accountability, I am now returning to radical hope.

I have been reflecting a lot lately on the cyclical nature of life. My institution, Guilford College, like many small liberal arts colleges, has been facing significant financial challenges—not for the first time. Many of us are worried and anxious about the future of Guilford. On a larger scale, we are going through something similar as a nation. Many of us are worried and scared for the future of our country. On a personal level, this reminds me of

my feelings about Palestine. During my lifetime, I have witnessed many genocides against the Palestinian people. Of course, I always feel immense sadness, but something in me simply refuses to give up hope.

The reason dawned on me when I was having a conversation with Guilford's former provost and close friend about how I feel about Guilford College. I described it as a "faith." I am not a religious person, but I am happy to believe in things I don't see and to imagine their existence. By faith, I mean a commitment to an idea. I am committed to and believe in Guilford College as an idea. Even if the administration of the institution fumbles, Guilford is Guilford. My belief in it does not shake or change. It's the same with America. America is an incredible idea. Its promise is awe-inspiring. I believe in America. And Palestine is Palestine. The idea of Palestine, embodied in its people, in justice, will prevail.

But here's the point: Everything happens in a circle, but the circle does not just spin around, it also spins forward. I have faith in that forward motion. Guilford presidents will come and go, American presidents will come and go, and genocides will happen, but America, like Guilford, like Palestine, is too beautiful an idea to kill.

Justice will prevail.

But that might not be in my lifetime—or yours.

And that is okay. I don't need to be here to see it. I work for justice, for freedom, for liberation, for equity always, but I do it for the generations to come, the communities that emerge from the ones I currently inhabit.

I see this legacy in the phone texts and emails I receive randomly, sometimes on a Saturday afternoon. A faculty member or a resettlement agency staff member will send me a picture of the newest family they are hosting. They've just arrived and will be welcomed on campus, they tell me. They thank me for Every Campus A Refuge and the work we have managed to create together, these pockets of love and compassion and hospitality that are changing lives in ways I will never fully see or understand, for generations to come.

How wonderful that this work extends in ways *I cannot always see but in ways I can always imagine.*

So, we come back to that question Bennouna asked—what is the role of literature in a world streaming with rivers of blood?

If radical hospitality is rooted in acts of *welcome* that make people feel like they belong, and radical accountability is rooted in a pursuit of *justice*

that makes people feel like they matter, then radical hope is rooted in an *imagination* that allows us to have faith in worlds that extend beyond us. As a Palestinian, this belief is foundational to my identity and my hope for a free Palestine.

As I write these words in February of 2026, hope and imagination are sorely needed. We are well into the third year of the most recent Israeli genocide against Palestinians. The American government not only feeds this violence; it is also enacting violence against its own people here in the US. In the American classroom, students are experiencing the weight of these realities as insurmountable. They feel hopeless—unable to change or affect the world around them, in Palestine or in America.

In the classroom, therefore, it is imperative to teach in ways that answer the question that matters the most in this moment:

What is the role of higher education, the role of the classroom, when the world is falling apart?

And the answer lies in a classroom pedagogy which fosters an imagination that animates us, that moves us, that empowers us—a pedagogy grounded in the understanding that we teach and we learn because

the world does not begin with us,
it does not end with us,
but it changes because of us.

This hopeful certainty is what makes it easy for me to imagine a free Palestine and to imagine another America, a future America that lives up to our best expectations of it.

Building communities of love, compassion, and welcome and seeing those communities take on a life of their own, outside of me and beyond me, is a legacy that fills me with immense pride, and most importantly, hope. I see it every time I visit a campus hosting refugees, every time I visit a city building its capacity for a bigger embrace, every time a student tells me that Every Campus A Refuge is *their* legacy too.

One day, we will all be free.

An expansive "we" that might not include me. And does not need to.

Diya Abdo *is the Lincoln Financial Professor of English at Guilford College. A second-generation Palestinian refugee born and raised in Jordan, Dr. Abdo's teaching, research, and scholarship focus on Arab women writers, Arab and Islamic feminisms, as well as refugee and immigrant issues. She has also published poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Her book* American Refuge: True Stories of the Refugee Experience *was selected by the North Carolina Humanities as a North Carolina 2024 Reads Book. In 2015, inspired by Pope Francis' call on every European parish to host one refugee family, Dr. Abdo founded Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR), which advocates for housing refugee families on college and university campus grounds and supporting them in their resettlement. The flagship chapter at Guilford College is now one of many ECAR campuses across the nation which have collectively hosted over 1000 refugees and supported their inclusion in local communities. Dr. Abdo designed the minor Forced Migration and Resettlement Studies at Guilford College where students learn about refugee issues and receive credit for hosting refugees on campus and supporting them in their resettlement. Dr. Abdo is the recipient of an Ashoka Fellowship (2025), an Emerson Collective Fellowship (2024), the J.M. Kaplan Fund's Innovation Prize (2021), and several higher education community engagement awards. In 2018, she was named a finalist in the Arab Hope Makers Award. She has been making presentations about ECAR far and wide, including the White House and the United Nations. Dr. Abdo sits on the Boards of Refugee Council USA and the Community Sponsorship Hub. She lives in Greensboro, N.C. with her two daughters. To learn more, visit the ECAR website or watch Dr. Abdo's TEDtalk.*

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