



GATHERING FIRE

Solidarity Through Word, Image, and Song

Case Study | Written by Farihah Zaman

FirelightMedia | 2026



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*What if a person is a person because of other people?
What if I am because you are?
What if we acknowledged our unbreakable connection?
What if we reconnected those who have been
estranged and returned to a sense of Ubuntu,
a sense of solidarity, a manifestation
of the truth of our interbeing?
What if we forgave each other and healed?*

– Aisha ‘Ish’ Al-Hurra



INTRODUCTION

These words from artist and poet [Aisha “Ish” Al-Hurra](#) pose questions and provide answers simultaneously, harnessing the dynamic, galvanizing tension between the two to prompt one to think and feel a little deeper. They ask ‘what if?’ but take ‘unbreakable connection’ as an inalienable truth, community as an existing state of being to be recognized, not plucked out of thin air. These are radical reminders in a time of extreme polarization and the increasingly fascistic American government. There are spectacles of force, like the casual violence of ICE agents that tear families apart; the legal system used and abused to strip Black, Brown, Indigenous, and so many other people of their civil liberties and most basic bodily autonomy; the tax dollars of American people spent to fund a genocide in Gaza rather than alleviating any such suffering.

In moments of crisis, artists like [Al-Hurra](#) are urgently needed to spark new ways of seeing, to lift the spirit, and revolutionize the imagination. Documentary filmmakers, too, have their part to play: to bear witness and keep the score, to create better frameworks of understanding, and reflect on history in order to innovate new paths towards justice.

But when the artists, truth tellers, and activists are worn down from having their needs mocked and their dreams crushed, the how of it all can feel elusive. How do we build and rebuild? How do we continue to ensure our work is made, seen by those who need it most, and make real contributions toward shaping the cultural and political landscape?

INTRODUCTION CONT.

There may not be a complete answer to how to build this new world, but at **Gathering Fire**, a day-long conference held on the eve of Firelight Media's 25th anniversary celebration this past November, it became clear that without a foundation in community, there is no way forward.

The excerpt above was read aloud at **Gathering Fire**, and throughout the day, there was space to hold questions and answers together, and to sit with nuance, contradiction, and sometimes discomfort. The Western, white-supremacist notion of time only places value on a moment of action, a single point on a line, but this gathering curved and swerved in the loophole created by just slowing down and breathing together, luxuriating in learning. Stealing back one's time means there is more of it to spend on listening well and sharing wholeheartedly, to consider what resources would even make action possible, let alone meaningful, then turn over words like 'solidarity' and 'liberation,' to create new, shared definitions to take into the righteous battle for our liberation.

The simplest act of solidarity, of course, is to be together. You can't build community without collecting yourself and yourselves, in one place, at one time, in real life, and the energy that was built through everyone's willingness to be with one another at **Gathering Fire** was especially palpable in the energized discussions and friendly embraces that occurred in between scheduled sessions. This is when participants could be nourished by eating meals together amidst a sea of beautiful Brown faces, unburdened as they found the difficult words to communicate their experiences, and shored up by the certainty that they will not have to work alone.





Loira Limbal
President & CEO
Firelight Media

OPENING REMARKS

Upon becoming Firelight’s President and CEO in June 2025, **Loira Limbal** quickly went on the record to say that rather than rolling over in the face of government pressure to quiet “diverse” voices, the organization’s plan is to double down, creating more resources as others shuttered. “Documentary film is not a luxury,” she said. “It is an essential part of a healthy arts and story narrative ecosystem. And our voices as filmmakers of color are essential right now.” Limbal brought this same loving defiance to **Gathering Fire**, an in-person offshoot of Firelight Media’s **Beyond Resilience** series, as she spoke plainly about the current state of affairs without losing perspective or hope. Amidst frequent applause and sounds of understanding and recognition, Limbal spoke of solidarity as a practice woven into the fabric of Firelight Media, due to the organization’s core belief in community building and peer support structures as methods to reject capitalist frameworks of hierarchy and competition.

TAKEAWAYS FROM LOIRA'S INTRODUCTION

We are living in a moment of manufactured crises, not in the sense that the threat to our communities is not real, but that they have been intentionally created with the goal of disempowering communities of color and concentrating that power and material wealth for those who already have it.

The targeting of our specific communities, including trans, nonbinary, and queer folks, immigrants and people with disabilities, Muslim and Palestinian people, and others, is designed to distract us from the mass extraction of our resources.

What those in office fail to recognize is that our true resources - creative, social, political capital - are limitless and cannot be snatched from us like property.

Communities of color have always found ways to survive, even thrive, in times when their very existence is challenged. Documentary filmmakers have consistently been there to capture, broadcast, and convey their message to a broader audience.

Community engagement and support have allowed Firelight Media to grow sustainably as an organization, creating even greater networks of film workers whose mutual support is emblematic of the kind of solidarity explored throughout the day.

PERFORMANCE BY AISHA AL-HURRA

Opening the day's discussion with poetry set the tone for the day-long experience that would consider emotion as deeply as intellect. **Aisha Al-Hurra** brought both a strong heart and mind, immediately captivating the room with questions that were both provocative and firmly rooted in kindness. By beginning with poetry, the artist called upon that inner, limitless well earlier described by Limbal, calling upon the resources of the soul, over the fickle gifts of the market. Material stability and safety is, of course, also a concern and reality for this community, and the poem went on to explicitly question the structures built to deprive us, asking, "How has colonialism, slavery, and capitalism interrupted our innate connection?" As Al-Hurra led into a breathing exercise meant to repair that connection, the room fell quiet, growing more attuned to all the life in the little ecosystem created that day.



TAKEAWAYS FROM AISHA'S OPENING PERFORMANCE

Contrary to what manufactured crises would have us believe, we are living in an era of repair, where the archaic and outdated cultures of exploitation and domination can be eradicated, so that we might shift to repair, healing, love, protection, dignity, and thriving for all.

- Al-Hurra

Certain moments in Al-Hurra's piece, such as "Time is more valuable than money" and "No scarcity, no envy, no lack", echoed Limbal's sentiments about true and meaningful resources being limitless. Scarcity is constructed.

We could consider ideas of family and social bonds more expansively across identity, geography, and time; the more freely you give and connect, the greater your pool of resources. As Al-Hurra put it, "Expand your idea of family and community...there are no barriers to watering our bonds. Learn the names of our shared ancestors and commune with them, honor them, and it will free you."

Global Indigenous practices that center on land stewardship teach us how to connect and give in ways that are replenishing rather than extractive, and the land itself offers lessons on how to thrive.

*Love each other more than you love the system,
Love each other more than you love the system,
Love each other more than you love the system.*

- Al-Hurra



SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

A Conversation with Stanley Nelson and Amy Goodman, moderated by Athena Jones

Journalist **Amy Goodman** and filmmaker **Stanley Nelson** believe in the potential impact of moving communities to action, and they have both harnessed the power of the moving image to do that. They also both look like they have a great time doing it, as they turned questions to each other and back to moderator **Athena Jones**, a combination of playfulness and the genuine curiosity about other people that undergirds their work. Nelson shared stories from many years in the field, and one in particular perfectly illustrated Firelight Media's belief in the value of people telling stories from within their communities. Interviewing a former Black Panther about a moment he was trapped by the cops, he paused to look Nelson in the eye to say that even on the verge of capture, he felt free, because he fought for the ability to be a Black man living on his own terms.

And Nelson knew he would only have shared that insight with another Black person, with someone he could be certain would understand what it meant to be free. Goodman shared her experience being arrested while covering the Standing Rock protest for the Dakota Access Pipeline, and how the media coverage helped release her from the charges, along with many Indigenous water protectors arrested then, too. Throughout the session, she reiterated that this work needs to be done, despite the risks involved, because there is power in directing the spotlight in the right direction.



TAKEAWAYS FROM SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Every historic moment is unique, and each comes with its own set of challenges. *But there is always progress.* Knowing history will help people make sense of the times they are living in. “We stand on the shoulders of movements of the past,” said Goodman, “and it is really important to have media that reflects all of those moments and movements, so that people can learn, and hear an echo of their own thoughts.”

Documentaries have held a mirror up to America, showing us who we are and sharing the hard truths about this country's slow progress towards a truly representative, multiracial democracy; hard truths about the very rights that are under attack right now.
– Goodman

Filmmaker Sian-Pierre Regis posed a question about sustainability and survival that had been lurking on the edges of several sessions, but was difficult to ask and even harder to answer. “Given the collapse of various funding sources and the threat to civil liberties, it is harder for independent filmmakers to make our living, to put food on the table. How do you continue to stay the course, making uncompromising choices in terms of your funding and allies?”

The Panelists acknowledged there is no clear answer to the question above, only factors like integrity, safety, and fulfillment that each person needs to weigh for themselves.

“Just keep doing what you're doing, because...the stories that we're telling are really valuable. And, you know, we'll win. We'll win. Let that reverberate through the room, throughout the city, throughout the country, and the world. Truth is going to be victorious.” This was reminiscent of a beautiful passage in the newly reprinted revolutionary fable *The Faggots and their Friends Between Revolutions*, in which the women advise: “There are two important things to remember about the coming revolutions. The first is that we will get our asses kicked. The second is that we will win.”

BLACK & PALESTINIAN SOLIDARITY

*Marcia Smith and Rami Nashashibi
Moderated by rashid shabazz*

“Culture is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves,” said the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Many Americans might think of global conflicts as something that “happens over there,” therefore, outside of the realm of complicity. However, this mindset misses the reality of our interconnectedness, as Al-Hurra described in her poem. For example, the dehumanization of Palestinian and Arab people that has allowed the ongoing genocide in Gaza also set the stage for the dehumanization of migrant communities in the US, and the ongoing erosion of civil liberties for all Americans. Documentary has the power to dissolve perceived boundaries, allowing us to understand that the oppression of one people is the oppression of all people. The films we make to counter colonialist narratives,



ultimately also counter all violent colonial narratives. The conversation between IMAN Executive Director **Rami Nashashibi** and former Firelight Media President **Marcia Smith** took a more personal turn, with Smith and Nashashibi discussing how to sustain organizing and social justice work, as well as how to prevent exhaustion and despondence. Nashashibi shared, with raw openness, the crushing feeling of having to prove his own humanity again and again as a Palestinian American.



“For me, as a young Palestinian, I was being mentored by a Black Panther who introduced me to people like Ali Jeddah. I was learning about myself and seeing myself differently as a Palestinian through the eyes of a Black Panther.”

– Rami Nashashibi

TAKEAWAYS FROM BLACK & PALESTINIAN SOLIDARITY

The word “solidarity” can suggest that there is an inherent distance between people of different backgrounds that has to be bridged. We are all implicated in every justice movement in some way, whether we are aware of it or not. “What is happening in Gaza,” said Nashashibi, “this is not a proxy war, these soldiers are armed with American weapons, and we allowed it to happen. So for two years, we’ve internalized the mechanisms of dehumanizing these people.”

A film like *The Voice of Hind Rajab* which used the harrowing audio from a phone call between the young Palestinian girl under siege and the medics trying to save her, transforms a headline into a living, breathing person. Film has the power to dissolve perceived boundaries, so that we understand that the oppression of a people is the oppression of all people.

Like solidarity, the idea of ‘impact’ has existed in our circles for a long time, but often gets packaged and stripped of meaning. Smith says it is really as simple as, “If you see a film that moves you, teaches you something, and opens you up in some way, what do you do with that? How do you put the new ideas into action in your life? How do you make that actually work in the world?” She believes that this type of impact work is essential.

It is important to create and distribute stories with community in mind; what decisions can artists make at every stage of the process that ensure that the people you make your story with and for actually have a chance to benefit from it?

While there is great pain and difficulty in our current moment, Nashashibi also believes there is a “spiritual coalescence; a recognition about what connects us now in ways we have not seen in our lifetimes. Documentaries now have an opportunity to tap into that, and so to resonate in transformative and revolutionary ways.”

SOLIDARITY ROUNDTABLE

*Kristen Lovell · Nicole Solis-Sison ·
Karim Ahmad · Assia Boundaoui
Moderated by Loira Limbal*

The final discussion of the day provided an opportunity for film workers to reflect on and synthesize thoughts that had arisen regarding the meaning of solidarity, community, risk, and power. Filmmaker **Nicole Solis-Sison** discussed the importance of genuine care as a necessary precursor to solidarity, noting that many people skip this step, which makes their proclamation of solidarity feel hollow.



Mutual responsibility, consistency regardless of who is watching, and long-term commitment were also named as indicators of true solidarity.



Another form of solidarity within our communities is sharing strategies for continuing to make meaningful work during a time when anti-capitalism, anti-fascism, and anti-Zionism are being criminalized by the State, and when some of our most revered institutions have betrayed us. Comrades need to share how they are making films on half the budget they may have once had, where resources are still available, and to keep building networks for distribution and impact rather than waiting for the world to come around.

TAKEAWAYS FROM THE SOLIDARITY ROUNDTABLE PANEL

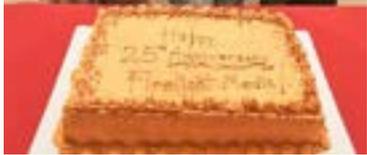
This is a time where allyship and solidarity seem to be slipping all around us, especially given that many groups have to limit public-facing work and operate in a more underground way in order to survive.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the power and impact that we, as filmmakers, have to change the narrative. If we did not possess real power, there would be no backlash.

We want to make work that helps dismantle the structures that are oppressing us right now, so we need to de-center colonialist sources of power and money, and try to work with values-aligned partners. This might mean stepping outside traditional paths, such as seeking support outside the US or organizing communities to understand how they reach their audiences, among other approaches.

Risk is crucial to our commitments to one another and to our work, because the role of artists in times of crisis is to hold power accountable and imagine what the world could and should be. While people need to be mindful of their safety needs at this time, it is important to find, within those constraints, where it is still possible to disrupt and upend systems of oppression.

Apparently, by the year 2050, this country is expected to have a majority of people of color. However, that won't mean anything if we don't build together, stay in community with one another, have each other's backs, and say *it's all of us or none of us*. Otherwise, we will simply replicate the white supremacist and patriarchal systems that have been thrust on us.



PHOTOS BY JOSH MOCK PHOTOGRAPHY



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLAUD LI AT IMAGETHINK



ABOUT FIRELIGHT MEDIA

Firelight Media's mission is to support the creation, distribution, and impact of documentary media by and about communities of color in all our vibrance and complexity. By providing filmmakers mentorship, funding, and creative development, we seek to advance the art of nonfiction storytelling to realize a more just and beautiful world.

Learn more at firelightmedia.tv

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