

Campus in Camps
Collective Dictionary

OWNERSHIP

الملكية

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CAMPUS IN CAMPS

Campus in Camps is a two-year experimental educational and project oriented program, engaging the participants from the West Bank's refugee camps in an attempt to explore and produce new forms of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of victimization, passivity and poverty. The program aims at transgressing, without eliminating, the distinction between camp and city, refugee and citizen, center and periphery, theory and practice, teacher and student.

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The Collective Dictionary is a series of publications containing definitions of concepts.

The terms proposed are those considered fundamental for the understanding of the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugee camps. These words have emerged as a result of actions and active dialogs with the camp community. Written reflections on personal experiences, interviews, excursions and photographic investigations constitute the starting point for the formulation of more structured thoughts.

The Collective Dictionary is both the reference and conceptual framework for all Campus in Camps projects and interventions.

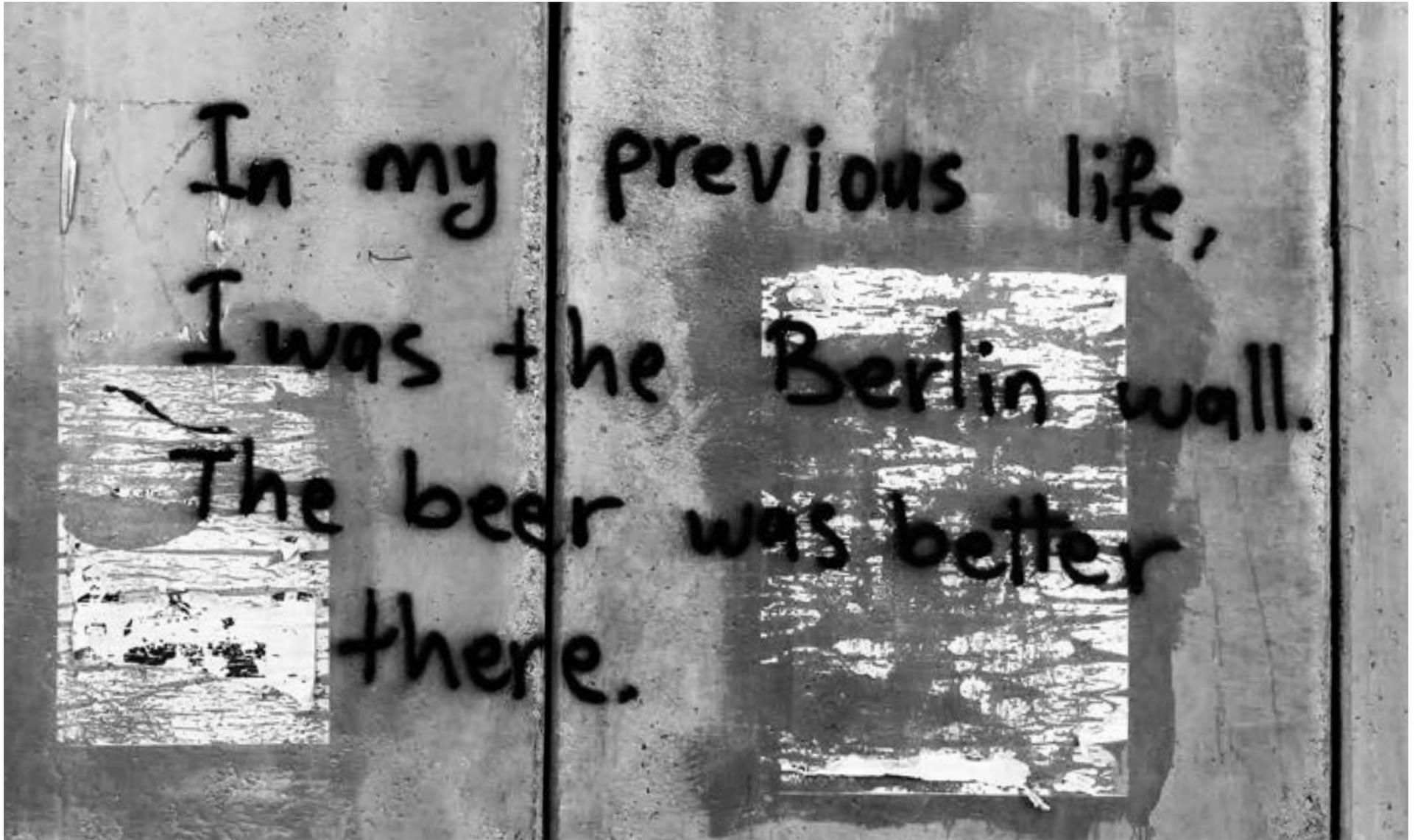
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Introduction

Giuliana Racco, Matteo Guidi

Catapulted into the reality of the camps, we listened to the participants as they presented the initial outlines of their interventions. One of the leitmotifs was the search to do “something new”, “something different”, “different from the usual NGO-style” projects. Could this mean something “exceptional”?

Our experiment with the Collective Dictionary began with the terms *ownership* and *domination*, two words that surfaced during our first meetings with the participants. Together we used these as filters to look for the exceptional in the daily life of the camps and their surrounding areas.



Bethlehem

– ph. Ibrahim Jawabreh

Is the camp an exceptional place?

Aysar Al-Saifi

Exception: a radical difference that turns rules and laws upside down, allowing things that are hidden, or that we don't know exist, to rise to the surface.

Is the camp an exceptional place?

In general, when we speak about refugees, by standard international definition we are speaking about marginalized cases with special status, for whom the laws of the state do not apply. But if we focus specifically on Palestinian refugees, we find that their situation is quite different from that of other refugees. Palestinian refugee camps not only play a decisive role within the Palestinian context, but they have the power to impose themselves in all political or social situations. For example, the social and political institutions within the camps are among the most powerful institutions at the national level.

Palestinian camps present a unique case. They have changed all the rules and laws to impose themselves as a force in the Palestinian political arena. This is

due to the cultural level that characterizes the people of the camps – as a result of their conditions –, in addition to the political parties that impose their presence on behalf of the camps.

Since the camps are places where the rules are reinterpreted and inverted, we attempted to read what in the daily life of the camps emerges as different from the norm, different from the rules, in short, exceptional.

Is there a link between ownership and domination?

I think there is a strong correlation: in terms of land, the more you own, the more power you have to dominate over others. So, ownership helps one become stronger in terms of family and power. If we look at the structure of the villages back in 1948, we will note that a family's social and economic strength was directly connected to the extension of its lands.

Exceptional ownership

Aysar Al-Saifi

Ownership should include feelings and emotions, convictions. Personally, I consider man's most important assets to be his convictions. So ownership is not limited to the ground or to material objects, but goes beyond these, extending to the intangible realm of ideas.

It was just an idea, nothing else

The idea was to give grey walls the chance to speak their hidden stories and to provide the streets with a sense of hope and new life. A group of young people decided to paint pictures in order to stimulate ideas in the minds of those who pass these walls as they walk through the streets of the camp. By regenerating their meaning, translated through painting, the walls become a way of learning for the local people and a statement for the Israeli soldiers when they enter the camp. So we decided to start by painting the faces of our martyrs and different characters, to make a sort of open-air gallery or museum.

Nighttime for painting, despite the possibility of encountering Israeli soldiers as they enter the camp for

nocturnal raids. Young people have more time in the evening and paint is more easily applied.

Through our work, we face a lot of difficulties; sometimes from the Israeli soldiers when they enter the camp. Some of us start throwing stones and others protect our materials. Then we all meet up to help each other operating as a community.

For us and for the other inhabitants of the camp, the walls are neither public nor private property. Many people consider them common. The paintings tell our stories of refugeehood and daily life to visitors of the camps. They are part of a process of communal participation, creating collective emotions with a greater value than that of the applied material. This is how the meaning of ownership is interpreted in the camp.



Fawwar refugee camp

— ph. Giuliana Racco, Matteo Guidi

Who owns the streets?

Alaa Al-Homouz

Ownership is a sense of attachment and belonging to the domain that surrounds you, along with the right to use and control it without any legal documents. This is the case of the refugee camp.

We were walking along the street near the Aida camp wall. All of a sudden, I saw this foreigner spray painting a star of David on the pavement, right in the middle of the street. At that moment, I felt that I owned the place, and that the guy had no right to invade my space and write or draw anything on the ground or the wall. So I went up and started asking him questions:

“What are you doing? Who gave you the right to draw on the wall? It’s OK. You can write, but I have one question for you. Do you feel you have the right to do the same thing in your home country?”

An expression of shock crossed his face. Maybe the guy was afraid, worried, I don’t know.

“Did I offend you?”, he asked.

“No”, I said “I just wanted to raise some questions.



Star of David painted in the middle of the street in Aida camp

Do you feel you own this place and can write whatever and wherever you want? And what does ownership mean to you? Would you mind trying to explain it to me, sir?”

“I just wanted to write a sentence by Abraham Lincoln, that’s all,” he replied.

“It’s OK if you want to write, but don’t you think that you should do so on the other side of the wall?”

“Why?” He asked.

“Because we’re the ones suffering from this structure, and so those on the other side should see what you’re writing, not us. Anyway man, I just had some questions for you, nothing more than that. So, thank

you and take care, and write whatever you want.”

As we left the place and began walking toward Beit Jibrin camp, I heard someone whistling. I looked back and saw the guy running after us. Maybe he wanted to ask another question, or needed some directions.

“I’m sorry, and thank you.” He said.

I was surprised that he was sorry. And he was thanking me? For what?

“I won’t write anything on the wall. I don’t have the right. It’s not mine and thank you for giving me some questions to think about.”

We started chatting with him. He wanted to know what we were doing. Then I started explaining about Campus in Camps and what we do there. He was astonished by the project. It gave him a few more things to think about. He introduced himself to us and said that he was a graffiti writer.

This is just a story about something that happened to us while we were walking in Aida camp, but I think it is a perfect example of how the simple suggestion to consider a term, in this case ownership, made a man reconsider his actions.

Who owns the hills?

Giuliana Racco

Within our context, the idea of domination itself oppresses and permeates everything. Like a roadblock or a mountain, it is difficult to circumvent. What follows is a simple yet powerful story – an inspiration – about how to level this giant.



Arroub camp aerial view

– ph. UNRWA

The story begins with a piece of Area C¹ land, a hill, close to Arroub camp.

¹The West Bank is divided in different areas called A, B, C. Area A is controlled by the Palestinian Authority; Area B is under Palestinian administrative control and Israeli security control; Area C falls under full Israeli civil and security control.

In January 2009, taking advantage of the lack of Israeli army presence in the area due to the invasion of Gaza, a team of approximately fifty men and three bulldozers, led by the head of the local committee of Arroub camp reclaimed the hill and began scaling and flattening it to make a stadium.

During a meeting hinging on ideas of creating models and setting precedences – that is, breaking the norms – the head of the local committee of Arroub camp stated that he wished the stadium could serve as an example, and in his opinion it had: many people had since begun building houses on Area C land². However, what remains striking about the endeavour is the fact that it was not created for private use, i.e. a house, but rather for collective use.

Despite three demolition orders, the seating area, surrounding fence and goal posts of the stadium near Arroub are being installed and an adjacent park is being developed. This story goes beyond questions as to who “owns” the land, looking at what kind of actions can be taken to make areas more accessible and enjoyable for the locals. It also demonstrates the power of persistence.

² A section of the official stadium belonging to the Majid Assad sports complex in Ramallah, was built on land which Israel claims as Area C. Construction of this stadium had been stopped and only resumed after international intervention.



Arroub camp panoramic view

– ph. Saleh Khannah



Arroub stadium

– ph. Saleh Khannah

It's not strange

Alaa Al-Homouz, Aysar Al-Saifi

It's not strange to see women without headscarves in the camp, as they go to the markets or sit on their balconies or roofs. These same women wear headscarves outside of the camp. It's not strange, it's part of daily life. But it is strange if we think that this means that they conceive of the camp as private/intimate space and what lies beyond the camp as public space, while they act within as if it is common space.

The women feel the entire camp is home and in a sense they own it. So, in this case, ownership for them is the feeling of comfort and freedom of choice.

Who owns the camp?

Alaa Al-Homouz

Nowhere else do I have the authority that I do inside the camp. This is because I am a part of it. When I walk between the houses in the alleys, I feel that we all share the camp, all of the people who live inside. I practice so much authority within the camp, but outside I don't have any authority.

I remember one incident that happened to me inside Azza camp (Beit Jibrin refugee camp), a strange man was driving fast inside the camp. Some friends and I were standing on the street. We stopped the man and approached him angrily, telling him off and asking: "What the hell are you doing? Are you crazy? Where do you think you are?" The driver was so shocked and scared that he said nothing. He couldn't do anything because he was inside the camp and the camp follows its own rules, no one else's.

In my camp, I do what I want. If you want to come inside, you must follow the rules of the camp. I couldn't stop the same man if he was speeding outside the camp. I guess I feel the camp is mine and what is outside is not. Ownership does not need proof or legal documents, it can exist through an idea, a belief or the attachment to a place.

Who owns the trees?

Ibrahim Jawabreh

I remember that until 2008 there was a tree in our neighbourhood. This tree was huge and all the neighbors loved it. After a hard day's work, everyone would come and sit under the tree. If someone had visitors, these guests would come and sit under the tree also and all the neighbours provided tea, coffee and biscuits for all to enjoy. Everyone came with his guests and his family and sat under the tree. Until, one day the woman who planted this tree died and her son came to cut it down in order to build additional rooms for the house that was now his.



The place became empty. Rarely can you find someone sitting there. The tree once brought everyone together – relatives and friends.

Now it is gone, everyone has been dispersed.

Image by Ibrahim Jawabreh

Who owns the media?

Giuliana Racco

When I first met Marwa, she expressed her interest in gender and opportunity. When I asked her to clarify her point, she spoke to me about the quota laws in Palestine which state that at least 20% of the positions in an electoral list must be occupied by women. It happened to be municipal election time throughout the West Bank and so I began taking photographs of the campaign posters and banners in Beit Sahour and Bethlehem in order to have a visual representation of this law...



Electoral poster in Beit Sahour (Bethlehem)

– ph. Giuliana Racco

...when speaking with Ilana about the relationship between the stadium in Arroub camp, where a playing field was actually physically leveled against the odds of both the occupation and nature, versus the metaphoric leveling of the playing field presented through the quota laws, Ilana had me note that what was different (aside from the obvious physical and metaphorical aspects) was the fact that though both have to do with the public realm (a public stadium and political parties, respectively), one is a sort of popular action moving from the camp for the common enjoyment of the people, while the second case is the application of an affirmative action theory imposed by those who rule (the law) within the governmental, thus non-camp, sphere¹. Therefore, they are diametrically opposed. When I discovered the existence of an all-female party in the conservative city of Hebron, led by Maysoun Qawasmi, what stirred my interest was how this went beyond the quota laws. This was an example of a pure exception to the rule through excess. Does this prove the rule or can it set an example, as is the claimed intention of the party? Furthermore, it is worth noting that these elections resulted in the voting of Bethlehem's first female mayor.

¹The inhabitants of the camps are excluded from voting in municipal elections

Does ownership mean freedom?

Ayat Al-Turshan

I remember every detail of that day. Everything that happened around me was pure imagination, which I came to understand only at a later moment. On that early morning, it was decided that we leave everything we own to go to a place that was not ours, but which, for a moment, became everything we owned.

We had to leave our houses – where we find our comfort and safety, where we are protected from the cold of winter and the heat of summer – and we went far away to that hill overlooking the camp in order to observe what was unfolding, to bear witness to a crime against which we were helpless, unable to offer any statement which could help the victim condemn the criminal.

The scene was terrifying – permeated by anxiety and waiting – the details of which still live in my mind, though I was only a child at the time. All those who lived near the house in question had to leave and gather in the chosen place so that they would not be in danger.

The house owner's crime was having fought for his homeland, having defended the prisoners of freedom

and rejected all kinds of injustice. And by the decision of a court, the stones of this house abandoned the owner and gave themselves over to his enemy. They gave the soldiers the right to hold the remote control and blow the house up.

I can still hear the sound of this giant explosion in my ears. I also clearly remember how the dust caused by the explosion covered the sky and obscured our vision, yet was unable to hide the clarity of the truth. The terrifying trembling sound, a scream for help, for protection from this dangerous force which was destroying everything: life, existence and survival. And the echo returned with the impotent answer: Sorry we can't do anything for you.

This story shows what ownership means to us Palestinians and how this concept is related to our daily lives in the camps. In general, this term implies the right to possess something and deal with it the way one wishes to, with proof of ownership.

But what I wish to explain through this story is that ownership means freedom. If you are not free, you do not own anything, not even your most intimate things; for a moment you feel your thoughts, dreams, and memories also are not yours.

Paradoxically, sometimes we feel that we own everything in the camp.

Cigarettes, please

Saleh Khannah

One night I was traveling with a friend by car. We were near Gush Etzion settlement when some soldiers flagged us down. Strangely, they did not ask for identification cards or documents, but immediately started checking the car, which obviously did not have a yellow license plate. After ten minutes of searching and interrogating us, one of the three soldiers stepped forward and asked for a cigarette. I didn't pay any attention to him, but my friend decided he had had enough troubles for the evening, so he generously gave him three.



— ph. Giuliana Racco

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