

The Archive and the Work of the Present

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In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant raises the problem of what she calls “the impasse of the historical present” (2011: 259) and asks about the extent to which optimism, and hope, can be ‘cruel’: “an obstacle to your flourishing” (2011: 1). Berlant’s space of investigation is the neoliberal United States, but much of what she argues resonates strongly with conditions in colonial, increasingly authoritarian, neoliberal, occupied Palestine. Certainly the political projects of the past and many of the political engagements of the present seem costly in precisely the way she describes. Investments in both endless negotiations about a “peace process” that promises little chance of achieving justice and an international aid system that seems destined (and perhaps intended) to deepen inequality and inhibit political possibility look very much like ‘obstacles to flourishing.’ Faced with these conditions, some people have turned from cruel optimism to a state of pessimism: and in many ways you can’t blame them. Across Palestine, though, there are efforts underway to create possibilities for something different. In this paper I consider one such effort.

Specifically, I want to explore the extent to which the process and practice of archiving might be able to work to disrupt this dynamic. Can the archive be a common space, and archiving a work of commoning, that can generate new possibilities for “inventing life together” and for conceiving of political possibility in the present? This proposition may seem counter-intuitive (though perhaps not to this particular gathering). Even when thought of in political terms archiving is commonly thought of as capturing the past and possibly as making visible experiences from the past that ordinary hierarchies of knowledge obscure. Critical archival work,

that is, can be conceived of as part of the work of giving “subjugated knowledges” (to use Michel Foucault’s term) a space in discourse, of pushing back at the “silencing of the past” (to reference Michel Rolph-Trouillot) that makes certain actors appear “fundamentally nonhistorical” (Rolph-Trouillot 1995: 7)

What I want to consider here is the extent to which the practice, the labor, of archiving can be a work of the present. And I mean this in several senses. I reference, of course, Foucault’s suggestion that critical historical work can be – should be – about writing histories of the present. And that these histories can then help us think about this present (and future) differently. And not only to think about it differently, but to engage in action that can remake it. In a similar vein, I want to consider the extent to which work now to collect, produce, curate an archive of the present and past can reshape not just our understanding of the present, but our experience of it: our ways of living in it.

This project entails not only genealogical labor, though I think it goes along with such genealogical work, but perhaps more an affective endeavor. Can the work of archiving, that is, not only permit a critical re-thinking of the conditions of our existence, but also generate a new “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) that changes how people feel? Cruel optimism, as Berlant describes it, entails “maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (2011: 24). Can archival work – not just the archive itself, but the practice of archiving – help to change those attachments? Ann Stoler’s (2004) attention to the importance of the management of sentiment in colonial rule – not as “window-dressing” for its reasoned machinations, but as a central part of its operations – points us to some of the stakes of remaking feelings. If Palestinians are currently experiencing what Anne Allison terms an “affective malaise” (2012: 367), as I think they are, then practices that can rework the “emotional economy of the

everyday” (Stoler 2004: 18), to return to Stoler’s arguments, may be vital for remaking political possibility. Involved in this effort to reconfigure “sustained sensibilities” (Stoler 2004: 17) is also a reworking of spatial orderings. In fact, it may be precisely through creating new relationships with space, new vantage points on everyday places, that affective reworking is made possible.

Thus far I’ve made a number of propositions about what I think the work of archiving in the present might be able to do, but I haven’t yet said how I think this might work. How might archiving reshape an affective terrain and reframe a spatial order in ways that might produce new political possibilities? To get at this “how” – and I should underscore that my suggestions remain provisional – I now turn to the specific case that pushed me towards this line of thinking in the first place: the Campus in Camps project based in Dheisheh refugee camp.

Campus in Camps as an experiment

Campus in Camps is an experimental project in a number of senses. It is funded by European donors as are many projects and NGOs (in this case by GIZ, a German development fund). It operates in cooperation with the UNRWA camp improvement program and is affiliated with Al-Quds University, as part of its program with Bard College. It is unusual in the aid landscape that saturates – one could say smothers – the West Bank in that, unlike most donor-funded activities it does not seek to “help” nor to “train.” Rather, as conceptualized by its founders Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal, Bethlehem-based architects, it aims to provide opportunities for the participants to develop new forms of critical engagement with the categories that structure their lives (categories such as refugee, camp, education, etc) and then to imagine and embark on new kinds of initiatives in the camps where they live – initiatives that do not conform to the aid paradigm.

This program is genuinely experimental, which means that its outcome is also genuinely uncertain. Uncertainty is also part of other, more traditional humanitarian and development projects, but in these other cases the uncertainty is fundamentally one of purpose. In circumstances where it is so difficult to have a positive impact, to make a significant change in the conditions of people's lives, or the horizons of possibility available to them, humanitarian actors struggle a great deal with defining a purpose for their presence. The existence and persistence of need compels the organizations to come and to remain, but the difficulty in envisioning or enacting a substantive outcome gives their presence a tinge of hopelessness. In the context of Campus in Camps uncertainty has an entirely different valence. Here uncertainty emerges not from lack of purpose, but from the genuine openness of the project to a range of possible outcomes (few of which could be measured by any standard metrics). Because the project is not framed as one of helping, training, empowerment, or uplift, it is to a considerable degree freed from the constraints that bind aid projects. Rather than hopelessness, here uncertainty expresses possibility. As I have been doing research across what is currently a fairly bleak landscape of opportunity and imagination in Palestinian refugee camps across the Middle East, I have found the program and its participants a source of optimism and inspiration.

The basic format for Campus in Camps is as follows. It is a two-year cycle, with the first year focused on critical engagement, unlearning, and relearning. During this year a number of outside visitors did lectures, seminars, and learning cycles with the participants (and I did one myself). The key product from this process was a series of booklets they called a "Collective Dictionary." Each booklet is organized around a keyword: common, participation, well-being, citizenship, and sustainability among them. Participants engaged these words through readings, discussions, and – most centrally – through interactions with the people and places of the camps.

Rather than offering a dictionary style definition, the booklets present images and writings from this process.

The second year of the program focused on developing and implementing what were first called “projects” and what are now termed “initiatives” in the camps. The aim of these initiatives is to find forms of engagement in and with the camps that break the mold of the usual donor-driven, development industry inspired, largely unproductive, NGO projects. People all across the West Bank are intimately familiar with the NGO industry which developed in the wake of the Oslo Accords. These NGOs are often referred to derisively as *dakakeen* [stores], reflecting the widespread belief that many of them exist primarily to chase donor money and to enrich their directors and employees. The explosive growth of this sector over the past twenty-years has had a profoundly negative impact on popular politics – as many people who used to be political activists turned instead to the good salaries of the NGO world (and you can’t necessarily blame them) – and limited discernable positive impact on the political or economic landscape (not all NGOs are the same of course, but by in large they haven’t accomplished much). So Campus in Camps starts by rejecting this model and venturing into an uncertain terrain of “something else.”

The Collective Dictionary as an Archive

In the remainder of my time, I want to focus on the collective dictionary as an archiving project. I want precisely to consider how this process might constitute a work of the present in the way I described above: prompting an affective reworking, a spatial reordering, and a production of political possibility. And I want to highlight both the process (the work of archiving) and the product (the archive as object).

As I noted, the Collective Dictionary process involved an engagement with the spaces and places of the camps and their environs. The participants conducted interviews with camp

residents and spent time walking in the camps, looking at these familiar spaces with new eyes. They took pictures and wrote texts. None of them approached the camp from a standard or expected starting point. They began from the boundaries, from the unused spaces, from the outside, from the un-imagined, and even from what might seem like the opposite and tracked new kinds of pathways through the camp experience. From these journeys – some actual, some conceptual – participants seem to have found themselves in new relationship with places that are the most familiar to them. At it appears to have been from this new vantage point, this new embodied perspective on the camp, that they were able to first produce new kinds of definitions of familiar terms and then embark on initiatives that engaged these spaces in new ways.

This was a process of deliberative ‘being in the camp’ with the aim of producing new sorts of documentation that not only capture something about the past and present experience of life in the camp, but that also intervene in that life: not with the aim of “development” or “improvement” (despite the connection to the camp improvement program), but rather with the aim of reorienting perspectives – both spatial and emotional. From this reorientation it can become possible to re-imagine possibility.

Let us consider a particular term to see how this works – as process and product. I’ll take the common – المشاع – as my example: in part because this term has proven central to the work of Campus in Camps more generally. Participants have produced two booklets on the commons. Let’s take a look at the booklets so you can get a feel for their form, and then I’ll spend a bit of time on their content. Campus in Camps has a fantastic website which I would encourage everyone to check out: it constitutes an archive of the entire project. **[look at Common 2 booklet]** The two booklets on the common constitute a reconsideration – and therefore a reconfiguration – of the camp (in this case Dheisheh, but other booklets take up other camps

more centrally) in relation to both its exterior (that which is not, or does not appear to be, the camp) and in relation to its interior.

“Common 1” gives particular attention to the camp in relation to that which lays beyond it – in this case the municipality of Doha. Doha is on the other side of the main road from Dheisheh and is populated largely by refugees (mainly from Dheisheh, but from other camps as well). The dictionary puts the camp in relation to the city through a visual comparison [**show photos - p. 30**], an institutional comparison [**slide - p. 24**], and through extended reflections on the meaning of these spaces [**slide - p. 40**]. All of these comparisons are part of the work of thinking about what the commons was, is, and might be in the camp experience.

In so doing, the dictionary reorients space in several ways. 1) It refuses a clear boundary between the camp and the not-camp. Even as the pictures and text highlight differences between Dheisheh and Doha, they put them together as part of the same spatial world of refugees. 2) It works to deterritorialize the camp as a political space, suggesting that the movement to Doha does not have to be a movement away from the political possibilities that emerge from refugees living together – not just in the same place, but in common. 3) In part by highlighting some of the deficiencies in Doha now – lack of community organization and sociability in particular – it reworks an evaluation of the camp as a space of deprivation (a humanitarian space) to thinking about the space of the camp as the space of possibility (the camp as a space of political invention).

This work of spatial reordering is closely connected to the affective reconfiguration that is also part of this process. And here I should say that the affective labor that I see happening here is not just about transformation, but also is – following the classic archival imperative – a work of collecting and preserving the range of emotions refugees experience about the camp (its

past, present, and future). The texts of the collective dictionary are filled with statements of and about emotion: “I think that living in Doha is better than living in Dheisheh . . . You can have private life in the city more than in camps” (p. 23); “Living in the camp was not easy for your grandfather . . . he wanted a different life for me and my siblings” (p. 19); “in the camp you can feel this warm condition with the people” (p. 40); “I can’t feel like myself in Doha” (p. 42). This collection of emotion confirms how complex people’s feelings about the camp are and how important this space is to people. In capturing these affective conditions, the dictionary also creates possibilities for transforming the “affective malaise” (Allison 2012) that leads many Palestinians (in the West Bank and beyond) to see little political possibility in the present.

By giving attention to camp interiors, “Common 2” can work to reorient emotion in part by changing how people think about the past and in part by contemplating the future in different terms. This booklet describes common features of the camp, many of which no longer exist, thereby presenting a different sense of the space of the camp. In describing these past features – the shared bathroom, the feeding center – along with existing ones, such as the school, the dictionary ascribes a different emotional valence to the days of “sadness and suffering” (p. 21). About the *mat’am* [the feeding center], the dictionary states: “the restaurant was [not only] a place where refugees share eating and drinking . . . but a place to meet and talk. Maybe the only thing that they owned at the time was gathering, feelings, emotions, beliefs and the idea of their return. But from the other side it was more participation and common” (p. 20).

We are all aware, I think, of the challenges of nostalgia in recounting the past. And there does seem to be some nostalgia in these accounts of the early days of the camp. It is interesting to me that in this case – and I have found this same phenomenon in my research – it is the camp, not the *balad* that is the object of this kind of memory. Still, the recounting of the past commons

of the camp that appears in the collective dictionary is not just nostalgic. I see in these texts efforts to grapple with the co-existence of extreme difficulty and greater collectivity. A text on the shared bathrooms that were a feature of the camps early years includes the words: pain, suffering, patience, participation, cruelty, unite, and hope. Portraying the complexity of emotional experience – not just of the people who lived through these days, but of youth looking back on them now – is a key feature of the collective dictionary. And one of its possible effects is also to change people’s affective response to this complexity. A key question for young people in the camps (and outside the camps as well) is how to live today with the past experiences and choices of their grandparents and parents.

This is an affective question, but it is also a political one. So now I want to turn to consider what kinds of political possibilities are embedded in the work of the collective dictionary. And I should say that it is precisely “possibility” rather than a political program that I am interested in. What I want to consider is the extent to which the work (process and product) of the collective dictionary – its spatial and affective reordering – might offer a way out of the impasse of having to choose between “cruel optimism” and unremitting pessimism. Berlant emphasizes the costs to people of maintaining attachments to these problematic objects and also the costs of losing them – that is partly why she calls the attachment cruel and not (just) tragic. The loss of hope is not the opposite of cruel optimism, it is one of its outcomes.

So how can the archiving work of the collective dictionary – the production and compilation of memory, experience, materiality, and analysis – intervene in this impasse? Precisely by participating in creating a new “emotional economy” (Stoler 2004: 18) – new ways of experiencing the past and the present – this archiving permits new sensibilities about the future. I’ll give one example from the Commons booklet (one which resonates across all the

activity of Camps in Campus): the refugee right of return. This is a huge matter (whose complexity I cannot address here); let me just note that the collective dictionary begins to articulate a vision of the right of return that is future, rather than past oriented and that is collective rather than individual. This is a vision not just about the reclamation of private lands and houses, but of the future availability of the collective space of Palestine – the sea, the commons. And it relies not just on the recognition or granting of that right by formal bodies, but on the efforts of people to find ways (small though they may be) to enact it. I see in this inchoate expression of new political possibilities echoes of what Berlant describes as the “something else that is always being encountered and invented among people inventing life together, when they can” (2011: 263). And this perhaps is the most important work, not just of the collective dictionary, but of Campus in Camps more generally: the commitment to creating spaces and possibilities for inventing life together.

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