

Refugees as Archiving Subjects: Between the Researched and the Researcher

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Writing from the dual position of the *researched* and *researcher*, I maintain that we should pay special attention to positionality and the directionality of the gaze, and how these complicate understandings of the dynamics of research in the field of refugee and humanitarian studies. As a Palestinian refugee who was born and raised in Baddawi refugee camp in North Lebanon, I have both been interviewed by others, and have myself interviewed residents of my own home-camp and other camps across the Middle East. Amongst other things, in my work I have reflected both on being ‘the subject’ of research and the process of being *subjected* to research, but also the potentialities of writing and

researching in ways that disrupt, rather than reinscribe, the status quo. I have on multiple occasions heard from my mother, who has lived her entire life as a refugee (in two different camps), that you have to accept your destiny: as a refugee in a camp you are there to be researched, to be interviewed, you are there to be recorded, and you should be grateful to be asked. In response to my mother, to whom I will return throughout, I would like to start by sharing a poem from my collection, *Writing the Camp* (Qasmiyeh, 2021), which comprises two sections, concerning our encounters as camp-residents with researchers, mainly anthropologists, who would come to visit/study us in Baddawi camp:

Anthropologists

I know some of them.

Some of them are friends but the majority are enemies

Upon the doorstep you observe what they observe with a lot of care.

You look at them the way they look at you, curiously and obliquely.

You suddenly develop a fear of imitating them whilst they imitate you.

You worry about relapsing into one of your minds while sharing mundane details with them.

Sometimes I dream of devouring all of them, and just once, with no witnesses or written testimonies.

All of us wanted to greet her.

Even my illiterate mother who never spoke a word of English said: Welcome!

After spending hours with us, in the same room, she left with a jar of homemade pickles and the three full cassettes with our voices.



I use this poem as a starting point to suggest that we must critically reflect on the process of capturing the voice, while at the same time not overlooking the silence, perhaps also the pain and discomfort, that those (of us) who are being researched often conceal.

Here we must explore and offer alternative ways of engaging with 'voice' or, more pertinently, as I have argued elsewhere, 'to embroider the voice with its own needle: an act proposed to problematise the notion of the voice; something that cannot be given (to anyone) since it must firmly belong to everyone from the beginning' (Qasmiyeh, 2019: n.p.). I propose this dialectic as an exploratory principle in the Creative Encounters section of the *Migration and Society* journal for which I am editor (Qasmiyeh, 2020c), precisely to problematize the notion of the voice as it is often perceived and mobilized in relation to refugees and migrants: a medium offered to those in need of (their) voices rather than as a prior state

of being that is initiated by and therefore intrinsically belongs to the individual herself. In this vein, 'to embroider the voice with its own needle' is to see the voice within its owner, as a given and not to be given, through tracing the thread as it touches the needle eye to go through it and in so doing ushering in the embroidering that will come. Indeed, embroidering the voice is writing the intimate, the lived and the leftovers in life into newer times as imagined by the writer himself; it is writing without a helping hand from anyone but rather through continuously returning to the embroidered (and what is being embroidered) and its tools, notwithstanding how incomplete and fragmentary they are.

We must, throughout, recognise that research encounters are multidirectional, and the gaze is reverted upon the researcher (the anthropologist in the eponymous poem above), the journalist, the humanitarian worker:

In Anticipation

What we did, my brother and I, was clean outside our house and sprinkle water on the walls in anticipation of those walking past us with an open camera.

What they photograph is not us but a version of those who wish to be left alone and for whatever reason can no longer speak.

A photograph alone can counter existential surplus.

Under our breath: *Archiving our life begins with parting company with the stones in our lentils.*

To Wait Is to See

From the beginning, we were asked to wait. Expected to summon time over and wait, and be grateful for what comes our way, from anywhere. Or what runs away beyond our sight. To wait for God appearing bare. For his eventual intervention and the heavens he scaffolds for various conditions and states. To wait for those who reach us through the moans. Who suspect that because of hunger people growl; they become beasts, ciphers, ferocious and benevolent at once. They are here to help. To rescue us from our selves and to teach us what it is that should be sought for day and night. To be visited by those we call guests, by those freckled and white ghosts who enter and exit us with the barest of sounds.

I remember spotting them from their height, their healthy tummies. Not too bloated. Not too concave. Full tummies covered in handsome clothes. Coloured bodies, unlike ours. Always resonant. Always present despite our absence. We would get up for them. Sweep the roads. Decorate our temporary walls and sit silently awaiting their sacred statures.

We wait to see. This is precisely what we were taught in our language. Waiting is seeing. Cognates of the same site and time. A root for rootless memories. Never in the dialect but in the purest of registers. To wait is to see. Seeing as a contraction for waiting. A contraction giving birth to bigger, anticipating eyes. A birth. A wound. The eyes to see while all waits.

In my work, as a poet and as a researcher on a number of projects pertaining to refugees' own responses to displacement across the Middle East, I have sought to contribute to ongoing debates revolving around the question of 'who writes the archive', and what position

and role refugees themselves/ourselves embody in relation to processes of researching and documenting (archiving) displacement. In my interjections to this debate, and in particular through my work examining the intersecting roles of writing and archiving in relation

to, and through, my home-camp, Baddawi camp (Qasmiyeh, 2020a, 2021: 61; also see Qasmiyeh, 2020b), I have conceptualised the camp as a living archive and I have enacted my commitment ‘to document[ing] the lives of its residents in both life and death through processes that privilege the ordinary and the everyday at the expense of the extraordinary and the unique’ (Qasmiyeh, 2020a: 53). In so doing, I have sought to expand the parameters of the archive by centralising the active and intimate involvement of camp residents, provocatively positing that ‘[o]nly refugees can forever write the archive’ (Qasmiyeh, 2020a: 55).¹

Such a provocation does not intend to claim that refugees have a *monopoly* on the archive, which of course both runs the risk of creating new forms of exclusion and of reifying and reducing certain figures to be defined solely through their refugeeness. Instead, I have argued (Qasmiyeh, 2020a: 56) that:

inviting an act of writing from within does not necessarily imply a *uni*-writing, which is based upon one ‘narrative’ or on a language that claims absolute entitlement to the future by virtue of having been born in/to the camp. On the contrary, it is the direct opposite of such an archival monopoly.

Recognising refugees as archiving subjects, rather than merely as archived objects, simultaneously rejects the archival monopoly held by those who have historically ‘archived’ us, in the official sense, while also seeking to acknowledge that refugees’ narratives and archival practices exist alongside those of others. Here and elsewhere I thus take as my starting point that refugees are active participants in the archive (not merely a trace therein), playing a pivotal role in determining what is deemed significant and worthy of inclusion, alongside the acknowledgement that refugees’ archival practices are often fragmentary and dissonant in nature.

In *Eating the Archive* (Qasmiyeh, 2023a), I suggest that the refugee camp is itself a living archive and that the intimate in archiving must be acknowledged as part of a broader constellation of archival processes – by positing that the archive is not merely a collection of items that are held to be revisited for later use, but is instead part of that which is *produced, sampled* and *consumed* by displaced people. On the one hand, it could be argued that the rations that my and other families received from the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Baddawi camp, alongside the

food that we dried and preserved ourselves, could be viewed precisely as objects to be stored and kept for another time. On the other hand, however, I offer an alternative, and relational, reading of both food and eating through identifying the preservation of food – through means which enable ingredients to be preserved and *resuscitated* at a later date – as being intrinsically bound to the preservation of refugees’ own presence and existence: ‘dried vegetables marking the continuous nature of our presence’ (Qasmiyeh, 2016: 304); ‘[i]n the camp, time is hung like threads of dried okra’ (Qasmiyeh, 2021: 67). While emphasising the intimate and private in such processes, such materialities in turn may travel to the public sphere through different means, as I note in the encounter between the refugee and the anthropologist in the refugee camp (Qasmiyeh, 2021: 17), as cited above:

After spending hours with us, in the same room, she left with a jar of homemade pickles and three full cassettes with our voices.

Drawing an equivalence between the preservation/consumption of food and of refugees’ voices, I seek to highlight the complex power dynamics at play in processes of so-called refugee representation, suggesting that as part of refugees archiving back (following Ashcroft *et al.*, 2010) and archiving afresh, the gesture of gifting our (intimately) preserved food to the (non-refugee) ethnographer who has assigned herself the role of ‘preserving’ our voices in interviews (for subsequent consumption by the researcher and her readers), positions refugees and researchers on a par in spite of the extractive process underpinning the encounter. In this regard, the rations ‘gifted’ to us by the UN, prepared by us for our own (immediate or deferred) consumption in the private sphere, have been transmuted into a gift which we (as the researched) have offered to the ethnographer, with the intimate travelling (or being taken) from the home to the public sphere – from the domestic to the international.

Through invoking ‘eating’ in relation to the archive, I do not intend to suggest a form of ingestion that leads to the consequent *disappearance* of the archive’s constituent parts, but rather to assert that it is through the *process* of consumption that such components are themselves transformed and in turn become an *integral part* of the refugee-as-consumer-and-producer themselves.

Time Is a Swelling

The past, out of all times, is what can be seen in eyes long gone.

To see the past as a happening in its shade, my mother would carefully sift our UN-gifted grains: the dry for us and the hovering bits for birds that never were.

What we ate was what she planted in secret under her pillow: remains of nothing in the shape of distant prayers.

I was not alone.

My mother, with a cane and poor eyesight, was to my right

[Nothing to our left]

Now I hold her by the hand like a drifting sound

heart to heart, throat to throat

to walk together

Bodies hung in thin air

the sweat of old age and time

suspended returns to the eyes that once saw.

You say to the clock hung adjacent to all religious things in the room: *My time is a swelling, my mother's yeast for the aged bread left aside as proof for time.*

Nothingness, hide not in imagination. Nor ascend the psalms of night. What is left, for you and me, is the suspicion in suspicion.

When the sky is just a crow, with air raids as infinite as their ruins, the body's task is to ponder its body: here, in this place, people ascend to normality on crutches.

A body alone feasts on the body.

I shall imagine my tongue drowning in languages that are not mine so as to speak in water.

Seeing is the thing's substitute. What is deferred in seeing is the thing for its only time.

To pretend not to see what is amassing in your hands while you carry a heart barely attached to your body. To pretend all is well for once while they prod you in the back to remind you that it is time to look.

I ask – a question for me: *What it is in writing that has no such thing as a present but is written – solely written –, for a future subject to many pasts?*

They would normally write their names in graphite so they would rub them out and write them again as names for suspected names.

I begged her to take me with her. Then, I could see what she could do to her eyes in wakes: tears in the aftermath of tears, her veil slowly unravelling, two loose ends caressing my grandmother's dead face.

What the eyes could see was not all. There were many. Some carrying what they could in haste: sponge mattresses, plastic bags stuffed with memories, children on backs and in slings ... It was in the dead of night when almighty shrieks were heard. As recounted by my mother, it was my father who first ran to find out. When he returned, sweat pouring down his face and elapsed body, he uttered no words. Instead, he pulled the bed sheet over his face to sob alone.

Whose eyes are forever stones?

Tombstones are witnesses to the never witnessed.

Tears are gifts to the blind.

The bird that lost its way into the camp was chased by screaming children until it was lost again.

The same bird was not announced dead. For it to become permissible to eat, it is to be slain in the future.

To this day, in the camp the word *origin* is used to allude to a distant tense.

In those distant and near origins, time pronounces its face in the absence of a body.

It is the camp that makes Palestine near. When I say the camp, I say what it is that is not the camp.

To become a camp is to come and become simultaneously.

In poetry, the wound is continuously postponed.

Offers

To eat the UN flour

To swallow what comes your way

The nod of the lack,
of what it is that is being gifted;
from tins to thoughts;
from roofs susceptible to fall
to concrete grounds flattened in haste.

The flour equally-halved between us and insects
roaming the place.

To suspect
as you look at what lingers on the plastic mats
where meals and quarrels are had between hungry mouths
that the cooked equates to the edible and
that the things necessarily made
of what is left of the leftovers
are ours in the first place—
the eternal gift.

There, history dictates kissing the hand.
A white, clean hand stretching out from one time to another,
feeding, cutting, wreaking havoc on the imagination
as the pot bubbles over on our makeshift fire
made of everything new and old.
From half-full notebooks
signed with donors' names
to sticks and twigs
collected from all grey corners.
Flour to repel our sight,
as my mother would say.
The dough as a war.
The baked as fire
for the blasphemous.
We sit as norms dictate
munching away
at the scraps
of tomorrow.

If we continue to dwell on the process of consumption, and re-turn to the term 'decolonising' which is at the core of much critical discussion of the future of refugee-related research, I would like to suggest that the term

itself is not consumed as a reaction, or as a reactive proposition to something that is there, because we have to ensure that, within decolonial frameworks, knowledge is produced, not just knowledge *in response*

but knowledge *afresh*. This would also take me back to the refugee camp when we think about the production of knowledge: it is both a *co-production* of knowledge and a *co-sharing* as well, where the refugee is not just the

interviewee or just the quotable, the person who features at times in transience, but also the analyst, the critical thinker, the theorist.

Writing With My Mother

My mother
 the rood so I hang in there
 staring at my own falls

For all she knows
 All she does not know.

We write together –
We co-write despite the tongue

For each other's sake

In the hope of seeing in lamenting
 memories the shape of a cask

To them we set sight

To co-see

Because honing the kitchen knives is never a thing,
 she awaits the lack as it is

Because the heart is born old, it hardly leaves her sight

The beats it now shepherds

The worries she hands to me with a trusted hand
 nothing is normal
 nothing is a constant tense

We scrub the sound with a *loofa* grown inside our house
 cut
 dried
 deseeded across the neighbour's wall.

We scrub the skin–
 What we call dead,
 The cracks in history and in the flesh
 to clasp that metal inside

She in voice
 Dialectal patterns

I with what I heired of words
 to convert the voice into religion

My Mother the Philosopher

I have always wanted to deputise my mother in my conversations or even present her as a philosopher whose philosophical reflections should not be taken lightly or listened to transiently.

The aim has always been to guide myself, at the expense of my mother, into a place where only people with loud voices are allowed to exist.

The voice was completely mine but the echo was always hers.

I needed her to bring me to the surface, to the realm of being as my mother who enjoyed doing so without questioning my intentions.

From trying to teach her how to write her name into transforming her into a benign philosophical voice, the distance is vast but hers, nonetheless.

Note

1 For engagement with and responses to my work on this topic, see Saber and Long, 2020; Stonebridge and Qasmiyeh, 2018; Stonebridge, 2015, 2018, 2021.

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