CHAPTER 15

Aesthetics from the Interstices. The Making of a Home in a Palestinian Refugee Camp

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the making of a home as a 'minor practice'. It focuses its attention on a family I met in a refugee camp in the West Bank and the ways in which they make space that acquires a certain permanence of home. How to make a home in a refugee camp suspended between different temporal and spatial worlds? Caught between the expulsion of Palestinians due to the 1948 Nakba or 'catastrophe', referring to the flight of Palestinian during the Arab-Israeli war, and the hope for the right of return, this essay aims to show how this refugee family, exiled in their own country, makes a home that, inspired by the Palestinian concept of *Sumud*, allows them to determine their own fate and joy despite the Occupation. I will take the reader on a tour through the house, in the same way as I was shown around in it, to demonstrate how the family generates their own space and home despite being haunted by trauma and memories of the Occupation, for example through the cultivation of a garden on their roof terrace. In this way, I will show how possibilities can be created from a liminal and marginal space such as the refugee camp and house in it through the 'minor practice' of home making, vectorising an everyday aesthetic-political quality that makes life *felt*.

Keywords: Aesthetic-politics, Palestine, Deleuze and Guattari, Sumud, Refugee camp

1 Introduction

After the 1948 Nakba, the year of the Arab-Israeli war that displaced and uprooted hundreds of thousand Palestinians from their homes, generations of refugees have been living in densely populated refugee camps in Palestine's neighbouring countries and Palestine itself. Many scholars have already pointed out the fact that these refugee camps are

spaces in limbo (Petti 2015); located in an Orwellian 'endless present' (Weizman 2007, p. 228); or between temporary and permanent (Abourahme 2015, p. 203). However, these refugees should not be regarded solely as victims stuck in the liminal as they are making their own opportunities. Indeed, these semi-autonomous spaces allow for re-inventing the social and political space through what I would call minor practices, after Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1986) formulation of the 'minor'. These are practices that open "many spaces of betweenness from which to imagine, act, and live things differently" (Katz 2017, p. 597) by producing their own terms within the major practices and thus generating new subjectivities and forms of life (O'Sullivan 2005, n. p.; Guattari 2006). The efficacy of these practices therefore lies in creating subtle shifts in life generating conditions for change (Manning 2016, p. 1) – able to "improve their everyday life without undermining the exceptionality of the camp" and that renders the camp in a constant state of becoming (Hilal and Petti 2018, p. 18).

This chapter gives an account of the family of Fatena and Omar – exiled in their own country – and the house they inhabit. I met them during my visits to the West Bank as part of my PhD project on the reconceptualization of aesthetics and politics in Palestine, and was welcomed into their home in Balata refugee camp, in the north of the West Bank, where we talked about their life and their history. The layers of memories and stories of three generations of refugees were reflected in the different rooms of the house, whose displacement moved beyond a temporary uprooting. Fatena – my main interlocutor – has been able to make a home there where it seemed impossible due to the transitory nature of the camp. By taking the house of Fatena and Omar as the main locus, I attempt to pay attention to the layers of meaning in, around, and on top of the house. In particular, I will relay the modes of meaning that populate the house and that were shown to me by the family, with specific care for the making of home and its everyday aesthetics through consideration of their rooftop garden especially. My overall aim is to contribute to research on aesthetics and the everyday by discussing what I shall refer to as a minor practice amid the many liminal spaces of the refugee camp, and the way this kind of practices 'improve everyday life'. In this regard, I will make reference to the Palestinian concept of sumud (translated as steadfastness and resilience) whose minor affects inform a particular art of life.

Importantly, the story I will describe is not a replication of some kind of visitor's gaze of a refugee house, but rather a way of telling the

story of displaced refugees and the ways in which they produce meaning from the cracks of inclusion and exclusion, a site of conversation by doing research *with* rather than *on* (see Al-Hardan 2014). I will start by providing a brief background to the spatial context in which the house is erected and introduce the main concepts I engage with in this chapter, such as *sumud* and the art of living. I will then attend to the house and its various rooms to understand what it means to live in limbo. This tour also includes the very upper level of the house, which is where Fatena's rooftop garden is located. Finally, I will attempt to show how "making a home" can become a minor practice with its own aesthetic-political dimension through which a new art of living is constituted.

2 From Land to Camp

As some scholars have already pointed out, the refugee camp constitutes an in-between place, "a 'space in suspension', a place in limbo, held within the 'normal' spatial and social order of a territory" (Petti 2013); between imaginary and real, "oscillating between two discrete, yet interconnected, temporal and spatial worlds" (Bshara 2014, p. 15); a contradictory place with sites of "terror as well as remarkable creativity" (Peteet 2005, p. 1). As urban geographer Nasser Abourahame (2015, p. 203) argued: "The camp constantly spills over into the 'symbolic-political' realm producing a set of irreducible paradoxes – between the temporary and the permanent, nation and refugeehood, the camp and the originary village, past and future – that are simultaneously created and (re)negotiated at the level of everyday life."

I would like to 'think with' this notion of the camp as 'a space in between', firstly because it resonates with my own observation in Balata camp and secondly, because it will allow me to understand creativity, aesthetics, and minor practices as grounded in everyday life. In this way, I can devote my attention to the ways in which they create meaning from the interstices of the camp.

The refugee camp is a liminal space on multiple levels. In the first place, the principle of the right of return traps the inhabitants of the camp between their status as refugees and the hope to return to the villages and cities they were once expelled from. Indeed, the very concept of a camp denotes a temporary form of shelter that is not supposed to last for decades. In the second place, the camp "excludes through inclusion" serving as a "space in suspension, within which to confine all those who do not belong" (Hilal and Petti 2018, p. 214). Refugees in the West Bank are not full citizens, as Abourahme (2015,

p. 211) explains: they do not participate in municipal politics, nor do they vote, pay tax or other service fees, which prompts them to create their own municipalities, decide "on their own terms" and a carve their own niche within the space of exclusion. Finally, the spilling over of public and private spaces forces the refugees to renegotiate their own living space in-between (Peteet 2005, p. 119) resulting in what architect and anthropologist Khaldun Bshara (2014, p. 26) defines the making of the camp as a "social space."

In an attempt to understand what happens between the cracks of the Occupation in the liminal and social space that is the refugee camp and to intensify the aesthetic-political dimension in everyday life, it seems useful to refer here to the Palestinian concept of *sumud*. As Marie, Hanning and Jones (2018, p. 20) explain: "It is […] a socio-political concept and refers to ways of surviving in the context of occupation, chronic adversity, lack of resources and limited infrastructure." I especially appreciate their description as it puts emphasis on ways of surviving rather than ways of resisting, as other scholarship has pointed out (see e.g., Johansson and Vinthagen 2015; Nasasra 2020; Ryan 2015), which seems particularly relevant since resistance in the context of Palestine has often been romanticized (Abu-Lughod 1990).

More precisely, I will employ the notion of *sumud* in its designation as the active pursuit of happiness, a way of living life to its fullest potential (see e.g., Richter-Devroe 2009; Ryan 2015; Marie Hannigan and Jones 2018). Attending this conception of *sumud* in minor practices can inform how we conceptualize everyday aesthetics in a way that might aid inhabitants of e.g. a refugee camp to "retain a sense of humanity, dignity, and resilience" (Saito 2017, p. 19). Allied with this notion of *sumud* is what I call the 'art of living.' Drawing on Alfred North Whitehead's (1971, p. 8) "art of life" striving forward towards an increasing satisfactory life, through John Dewey's (1980) postulation of the practice of living as an aesthetic practice, to Felix Guattari's (2006, pp. 20, 101) "new art of living in society" erected on the "aesthetic power of feeling" capable of promoting "new modalities of subjectivity," the art of living in this chapter is understood as a mode of existence nourished by everyday aesthetics that allows to inhabit the world – and thus the refugee camp – differently.

With the camp as a liminal space in mind, another significant notion to understand the importance of the domestic space and the role of the house in the life of the refugee is the notion of home. Abourahme (2015, p. 215) underlines the significance of this space and its "immense

political - even existential – resonance", where violence and the house are inextricably bound together. Consequently, the demolition of a house not only signifies material destruction, but perhaps more significantly of the home and of the memories and affective relations it entails. The home itself and its domestic spaces, therefore, contain a multiplicity of meaning. With the thin and sometimes fluid borders between private and public within the camp, along with its dense and congested spaces, "the interior space of the refugee home has become the refugee's cosmos, and 'what really counts'" (Bshara 2012, p. 94). If the refugee home is its own cosmos, and if the home is the place where meaning can be found, then turning our attention to the home would make it possible to uncover the ways in which meaning is created. To look at the making of home where "home" is not possible, is indeed to look at the persistent composition of life in spite of its ongoing displacement and political negation.

3 Fatena's Home

In what follows, I will detail my visit to the camp and the house of Fatena's family in particular, in order to address and the ways of making in a minor mode that can be found in their home and the affective relations attached to it. After some strong Arabic coffees and home-made sweets, Fatena showed me around the house, which animated the stories, memories and hopes she disclosed to me. From the living room, she led me downstairs to another family room. The small sitting area looked cosy, but it turned out to be the backdrop of the Israeli military entering private spaces to terrorize and humiliate Palestinians into submission. Fatena described how, during the Second Intifada, the whole family was pushed into the room and held at gunpoint, while other soldiers searched the house. The younger children, Fatena said, are still affected by this intrusive invasion. In general, these "surprise visits" scar the inhabitants of the camp deeply. As architect Eyal Weizman emphasised (2007, p. 194), "[t]he unexpected penetration of war into the private domain of the home has been experienced by civilians in Palestine, just like in Iraq, as the most profound form of trauma and humiliation."

My attention was drawn to the embroidered pieces on the right-hand wall forming a symmetric composition of four rectangle frames with embroidered compositions. The juxtaposition of these "home"-themed pieces in relation to the map caused me to reflect on its significance, since, although the pieces are quite generic, it echoed the importance of home in their lives, in its multiple interpretations. Omar's sister pointed

at the map and indicated Haifa – where they are originally from – the outline of the West Bank, and what Palestine constitutes according to her. She indicated the borders of the whole map and said, 'but this is Palestine'. It became clear to me that this embroidered map was not just a decoration but contained deeper meanings. It seemed to me a memory of the past and future at once: a Palestine that was and a Palestine that might yet be otherwise still.

Figure 1: The composition of the embroidered pieces on the wall.
Source: Photo by the author

The map on the wall therefore represents its own temporality particular to refugees. In a study investigating the stitched narrative of embroidered Palestinian maps, Hagar Salamon (2016, p. 19) argues how "a lost past and utopian future, in which Palestine will replace Israel just as Israel replaced Palestine, appear together in the embroidered map." The map of Palestine thus functions as a relic of the past to not forget where Palestinians come from and as an artifact of the future that allows the viewer to connect, or remain connected, to the lost space that all the more highlights the positionality of the refugee family as stuck between those states.

Thus, what appeared to me to be a simple sitting room, in fact went beyond the mere presence of objects and memories. The space was actually haunted by spectres of the past, of the trauma and humiliation

of the home invasion, of the memories of the homeland and the hope to return. The room felt heavy once in it, a saturated space of memories, emotions, trauma and hope, even though there was physically not much in it. What the space harboured then were the flows and forces of the lives that inhabited the space and rummages through the lives and souls of the family. But without succumbing to these powers, without being victimized by them, Fatena and her family have intensified these flows and forces and made them productive for the creation of their own space and place in their minor practice of the making of a home.

Figure 2: Omar's sister showing the outline of 'her' Palestine.
Source: Photo by the author

4 An Oasis amidst the Concrete

Fatena suggested enjoying the rest of the evening on the rooftop and showed me around the garden. We continued our way upstairs and ended up on the roof. I was blown away by the view and the warm orange sky. What I saw on the roof truly seemed like a different world, an oasis elevated from the refugee camp. All kinds of recycled materials, such as plastic buckets, tin cans of all sizes, broken kettles, teapots and even shoes were used as planters in which she sowed a wide variety of plants,

flowers, and vegetables. The vegetables she planted are used for feeding her family and, when she has enough, she offers the surplus for free on Facebook to the local community, because she knows that money is tight in the camp as well as the fluctuating food supply. The flowers are not only to be found on the roof, but they also decorate the outside walls of the house, hanging from windows all around the house, "to make the house beautiful." Flowers are more expensive to buy, she explains, and "need lots of love." But it is worth having them, "because I give them love and they will give me love back."

Figure 3: One of Fatena's ingenuities: broken kettles as plant pots.
Source: Photo by the author

Indeed, the rooftop garden seemed to constitute an oasis with lots of green, elevated from and in contrast to the grey concrete camp. The minor practice of Fatena's rooftop gardening therefore contains a spatial element that produces space within the camp, allowing her to inhabit the camp as an interstitial space with a new meaning. She created her "own dimensions" (Pignarre and Stengers 2011, p. 110) by activating the space as a rooftop garden, populating it with plants and flowers that at the same time secure a certain sense of self-reliance. Moreover, the very act of gardening and the existence of the garden on top of Fatena's roof,

I ould argue, contain a, if not multiple, political dimension(s). As political geographer Adam Ramadan (2013, p. 67) argues: "spatialising the camp, understanding how it is constituted and functions spatially, is a way of grounding geopolitics in the everyday" and indicates how a spatial practice such as gardening is a way of implicating politics in the everyday life of the refugee. The spatial politics governing the area, with its built environment, rising prices of land, and overpopulation, effected a lack of land in the spatially-constrained camps where the only option to expand living spaces, is to build upwards (Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska 2017, p. 165). It is indeed the lack of land around the house and the spatial politics that have pushed the garden on the roof, which makes its very existence on the house political in nature. In her major study on space and mobility in Palestine, Julie Peteet (2017, p. 98) describes: "Israel expands the territory of the state, which, in effect, shrinks the territory vital to a contiguous Palestinian state. Yet Palestinians still produce place even in these confined spaces." It is thus from this minor position of the Palestinians described by Peteet (2017) that people like Fatena are nonetheless able to create space. In the case of Fatena, she employs her minor practice to evoke, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983, p. 27) write, a "creative line of escape." This minor position, "existing in a narrow space", a cramped camp encapsulated by military occupation, makes Fatena's practice "plugged into the political" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 16).

The casting of this creative line of flight from the interstices resonates with the Palestinian philosophical and political concept of *sumud*. Through the making of life and space, by planting seeds and cultivating food, Fatena has created from the cracks of the camp despite the Occupation. The *sumud* contained in this minor practice thus means to act upon the possibilities available in the context of the Occupation, such as the use of recycled materials as planters or using her roof as a garden. Then, the cultivation of plants and herbs is a way of enacting *sumud* as it provides the family and community with food and promotes resilience from fluctuations in the import and prices of fruits and vegetables subject to Israeli interventions. When food or money is scarce, they can always fall back on their own produce and remain resilient.

It is not only the mere practicality of the garden that encourages *sumud*, but perhaps more so the joy and happiness it brings to the family. Looking over the roof to the valleys, Fatena told me with a smile: "we must celebrate every day, we must be happy." Indeed, what contributes to that celebration is the gardening and the plants and flowers that make

them happy and enjoy life when they sit on their roof. The making of a home through for example Fatena's cultivation of a garden, is what I call a minor practice that creates a subtle shift in the lives of Fatena and her family, a new subjectivity that is informed by *sumud*.

Figure 4: The garden as a contrast to the grey and cold concrete of the camp. Source: Photo by the author

This shift bolsters joy and allows her to determine her *own* fate despite the ongoing political oppression and trauma and instead of letting the military or any other determine it for her (Ryan 2015, p. 312). It is not enough to live, but what Fatena aims for is to live *better*. When I asked her what kind of world she imagines her children to grow up in, she answered: "we hope to be better than now." An interesting intersection between the 'Western' and the Palestinian philosophy then occurs when we look at this lure of living better. As we will see in the next section, there is an overlapping between Whitehead's (1971, p. 8) notion of *an art of life*, meant as an aspiration to live, live well, and live *better*, and the notion of *sumud* understood as an 'art of living' directed at both surviving and thriving while under Occupation (Marie et al. 2018, p. 29). Fatena's minor practice can then be approached as an art of life that brings forth new ways of being and inhabiting the camp, rendering life worth living.

Figure 5: Fatena on her rooftop garden looking over the valley.
Source: Photo by the author

5 Aesthetic-Political Implications

The aesthetic-political implications of Fatena's minor practice are manifold. Elevated above the camp, looking over the valley with the sunset in the background, I almost forgot I was in a refugee camp where trauma and memories are haunting the streets and houses. Fatena told me: "The garden makes us happy, because the camp area is so small." The garden is then aesthetic in the traditional sense that relates aesthetics to feelings of pleasure, which are not located in the realm of art, but in the realm of everyday practices and life. It was John Dewey (1980, p. 28), among others, that promoted the idea that aesthetics cannot be solely found in art, but perhaps more so in the natural environment, where it can also be "absorbed" in nature. However, this aesthetic feeling is not only experienced when perceiving nature, but also and prominently in the act of making, as Dewey (1980, p. 25) argues: "[…] man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life […]." Almost in a literal way, we can see how Fatena is using nature by means

of planting, sowing and cultivating to expand her life, that of her family, and even that of the camp community.

Following this, we can understand how gardening gives more space to people's existence, especially with the camp being such "a small space", allowing one to look beyond the reality of the camp. The rooftop garden therefore provides the family with a sense of freedom, especially since gardening can stimulate a sense of ownership of a space, as research on urban agriculture in refugee camps has argued (e.g. Perkins, Adam-Bradford and Tomkins 2017, p. 46). Owning a space stimulates a kind of "creative autonomy", as philosopher Isabelle Stengers and writer and activist Philippe Pignarre (2011, p. 125) describe, which "signifies the creation of spaces" opening up to the possibility to make people "think, imagine, object." On Fatena's roof, it is indeed the creative freedom in gardening and organizing the space according to *their* wishes that allow the family to have an aesthetic experience, to sit together with mint tea, to imagine other realities and object to the reality of the camp and the politics enmeshed in it.

Inherent in these implications is thus the creation of possibilities. Creating from the interstices resonates with what feminist scholar bell hooks (1990, p. 341) described as sites of marginality, or what critical theorist Homni Bhabha (1994) would roughly call a "third space", that can be a site of radical possibility (and creativity) such as the camp and the house in it. Following philosopher Brian Massumi (2014, p. 106) in his exploration of creative practices and aesthetics, Fatena and her family create their own spaces and their own politics in a way that is both creative and generative, both political and aesthetic. Taking ownership of the camp and of her house, Fatena creates what Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 177) would call a "universe", "that constructs its own limits" from the interstices, or, in other words, a universe of the possible. Within her universe of the possible, Fatena "invents" (Massumi 2011, p. 54) a new life of potentials, both human and non-human, the life of her and her family, community, and the life of nature.

It is thus the *making of life* that takes centre stage in Fatena's minor practice, from the cracks of the Occupation, despite the trauma and memories dwelling in the house, in which "life from the empty spaces" (Debaise 2013, p. 102) is given shape in an aesthetic-political manner. In a literal sense, she is making life through sowing and gardening and caring through which natural life can come into existence. In a figural sense, she is making it possible to *live* in the camp and in their house, despite the adversities that threaten their existence on a daily

basis. However, it is not just the making of life that the minor practice brings forth, but, as I mentioned earlier, the making of a *better* life, one tapping into the philosophy of *sumud*; actively pursuing happiness despite the Occupation, the invasions and the lived reality of refugees, and thus articulating an aesthetic-political quality of the everyday.

Echoing the art of life, the making of a home seems to inaugurate a better life that diverges from some of the lived experiences dwelling in the house and camp, such as the home invasion. Grasping this metamorphosis of life that is felt through the very making of the minor practice is a direct and intimate experience that is an *aesthetic* experience: *feeling* the life-to-be-lived transforming into concrete existence, where making results directly in *feeling* a better life (Souriau 2015, p. 225) or as Dewey (1980) would say, in 'consuming' a better life. Aesthetics in this sense relates to feelings of happiness and enjoyment and is defined in an expanded way as an experience that is not something we possess, but more so an 'an object or a hope' (Souriau 2015, p. 220). The political quality in the practice, in turn, is mutually implicated in the aesthetic dimension insofar life is inherently political in Palestine. With *sumud* in mind, this generates the vivid creation of (a better) life where aesthetics is then a political end in itself. The aesthetic-political dimension should therefore be considered tightly interwoven in Fatena's minor practice and in the life-to-be-made it pursues in its art of living.

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