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Campus in Camps. Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of Un-learning

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Abstract

This paper addresses the topic of educational pedagogies in the Global South, analyzing Campus in Camps, an educational program founded in 2012 by Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal to activate critical communal learning in the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem, Palestine. The program reflects on refugee camps undergoing a process of social and spatial transformation. The paper raises two main questions: how does the Campus in Camps program decolonize knowledge construction methodologies in relation to camp life? How does it activate processes of embodied pedagogy in which knowledge is grounded in action and emerges as a group effort accommodating subjects born from interaction between participants, tutors and the broader social context? This article will first focus on the issue of conceiving the camp as a site of history and knowledge. Secondly, it will enquire into the pedagogical strategies, research methodologies and participatory design methods implemented in order to "decolonize knowledge" through collective un-learning practices.

Keywords: Collective Learning, Decolonial Pedagogies, Decolonizing Knowledge, Decolonizing Design, Emancipatory Politics, Microhistories, Un-learning.

Introduction

This paper analyses the Campus in Camps initiative, an educational program designed to activate critical communal learning in the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem, Palestine. The program was founded in 2012 by architects Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal both of whom also founded Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR). The initiative emerged from an interest in the exceptional nature of Palestinian refugee camps which are undergoing a process of historical, political and spatial transformation and developing into relatively autonomous social spaces. Campus in Camps aims to provide a protected context in which to accompany and reinforce complex and crucial changes in social practice and representation. The program aims to pose the following questions: how can the camp be represented and divorced from past conceptions without normalizing the status of Palestinian refugees as people in exile? How is it possible to de-colonize methodologies of knowledge construction in relation to camp life? How can the refugee camps – set up more than 70 years ago – start to be perceived as sites of history and knowledge?

This paper will first focus on the contentious issue of conceiving of the camp as a site of history and knowledge. Secondly, it will reflect on the pedagogical strategies, research methodologies and participatory design methods implemented by Campus in Camps in order to "decolonize knowledge" through exercises in collective un-learning. The analysis focuses primarily on the first two years of Campus in Camps activity – 2012-2014 – representing a complete study program cycle.

Whilst a few articles on Campus in Camps have appeared in the media, especially after it was presented at various biennials, almost no academic attention has yet been paid to this case-study. This paper will elaborate on the research interviews conducted by Silvia Franceschini with two of the program's coordinators, Isshaq Al-Barbary and Diego Segatto, and on texts written by the program's founders. Additional literature on social and historical conditions in the camps and the politics of knowledge production was also analyzed.

The camps as site of history and knowledge

To start a debate on camps as site of history and knowledge we have to draw attention to both material and immaterial culture, the preservation of social and identity structures and the negotiation of contested spaces in which national identities are built and demolished. The effort to foster a perception of camps as site of history and knowledge is not solely a matter of a camp's image from an outsider's point of view. More problematic is fostering a different perception of camps from the inside, amongst camp inhabitants whose vision of their own environment has been shaped by decades of humanitarian intervention as well as external colonization of ideas and cultural knowledge alteration.

People who lost their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 war found themselves excluded from legal, economic and political frameworks. The camps for displaced Palestinians are areas of exception where, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben has put it, the law has been suspended by the sovereign (Agamben, 1998)[1]. As Palestinian displacement has protracted over many decades and through multiple generations, the broad trajectory of the refugee experience has gone from acute crisis to chronic need (Feldman, 2016). The very concept of temporariness has been distorted by a condition which has continued for sixty years: provisional shelters have been replaced by permanent buildings, often self-built ones. The provisional nature of camps is visible in its social condition and, indeed, refugees see any improvement in the physical fabric of the camp as an attempt to normalize their condition. The precariousness of camp structure is the material and symbolic embodiment of the principle that its inhabitants be allowed to return to their place of origin. However, this attitude denies needs that are becoming particularly urgent today especially for the younger generations, such as common space creation and improvements in living conditions.

Moreover, an on-going political and cultural erosion of the Palestinian territories is leading to loss of cultural specificity processes accelerated by encroachments by economic neoliberalism, Western life-styles and Western visions of culture, productivity and success. Although this process is a global one, in Palestine Diego Segatto has argued that it has taken specific forms: the liberation of Palestine must thus be an act of cultural liberation, a decolonization of minds and knowledge[2] . Isshaq Al-Barbary, continuing in this vein, has described the colonization of knowledge in the case of Palestine as a form of colonization which has been profoundly internalized by its people and is more toxic than its physical form[3] . Finally Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti insist that colonization is a frame of reference for an understanding of the political status quo in Palestine, accepting decolonization as necessary: "Decolonization, in our understanding, seeks to unleash a process of open-ended transformation towards vision of equality and justice[4] ".

The unlearning efforts made by the Campus in Camps program are oriented in this direction: transforming the perception of camps from marginalization spaces to sites of knowledge and drawing up a new form of camp and refugee representation which overcomes traditional victimization, passivity and poverty labels. What is at stake is the potential for participants to implement emancipatory action inside camps without "normalizing" their conditions. Campus in Camps thus represents a school in the form of a heterotopia: a university in a refugee camp where the main subject of teaching is the campus itself, its sediments, processes and discourses.

Pedagogies of Unlearning

Although Campus in Camps is basically grounded in the university concept and despite its initial partnership with Al-Quds University/Bard College, its pedagogical methods are radically different from those of a traditional university. "Our approach is devoted to the formation of learning environments where knowledge and actions are the result of a critical dialogue among participants and in direct connection with communities where the interventions are taking place. The Arabic word used describe this egalitarian and experimental environment is Al jama3ah. Translated to English as "the university", the literal meaning of Al jama3ah is "a place for assembly". As such, this educational approach aims to create a gathering space and pluralistic environment where participants can learn freely, honestly and enthusiastically and get involved in active knowledge formation based on their daily lived-experience"[5] . The first group which joined Campus in Camps in 2012 numbered fifteen people. The group was assembled by means of an open call within refugee camps, mosques and by word of mouth. As Alessandro Petti has specified: "there has not been a real selection, instead a series of meetings allowed us and the applicants to understand if we all shared a mutual interest in embarking on such an experimental project"[6]. The participant group was made up of young men and women from various West Bank camps and backgrounds[7] . In return for their engagement in the program as active co-producers of contents and initiatives, participants received a stipend. Isshaq Al-Barbary cited contradictions emerging from the diverse perspectives participants had of the places they came from and the way they connected with the reality of the camps. It was for this reason that the project's first goal was to collectively rethink a specific language suited to describing the reality around Campus in Camps[8] . This was connected to the learning process: "At the beginning of Campus in Camps we started something that we called the "unlearning process. The idea was to reflect and look through the information and knowledge that we receive from the space we live or from the school or university"[9] . As Nora Sternfeld has written, unlearning dominant knowledge has been repeatedly discussed as an important way of challenging a value-encoding apparatus from inside a knowledge production structure. If learning, for Gramsci, is the result of hegemonic relationships, "unlearning", notes Sternfeld quoting Gayatri Spivak, encompasses processes actively interrogating powerful divisions and always-already known power relations (Sternfeld, 2016). Unlearning thus constitutes a set of concrete resistance and epistemic uprising strategies. Within the Campus in Camps program the discursive and theoretical process takes place in a form of communal learning called mujaawarah meaning communication and gathering in old Arabic. As mathematician and philosopher Munir Fasheh has noted, mujaawarah refers to any group of people who freely decide to meet regularly in a quest to understand and act on an issue in their lives with no internal or external authority. A fundamental aspect of mujaawarah is personal and communal freedom to learn and act in accordance with a group's inner dynamics. Mujaawarah are often considered forms of para-institution or underground network: they can happen anywhere, around a table or a tree (Fasheh, 2014). In this pedagogical spirit participants and other community members can become teachers and activate community-based discussions around topics chosen in accordance with their needs. In this way, cycles of teaching and learning usually structured as twice weekly meetings for a minimum of one month, are collectively decided. This means that the Campus in Camps program is constantly reshaped to accommodate interests and subjects which emerge from the interaction between participants and the social context at large. Its tutors are professors and intellectuals from Palestine or abroad generally speaking not used to operating within camps. The pre-requisite of Campus in Camps is that rather than coming to teach they are here to learn together with participants in the program. The cycles focus on issues balancing theoretical enquiry with practical experience. Some attempted to sharpen understanding of potential tools of political agency in the Palestinian context e.g. the "International Law and Human Rights" cycle[10] which worked performatively with publicly available governmental documents. By confronting another history and reality, in the "Autonomy in Global Perspective. The Zapatistas and the Other Campaign" cycle[11] students discussed how autonomy may be relevant to the Palestinian case. Other cycles tended to focus more on the development of community work tools such as "Agri-Culture and Resistance"[12] exploring the relationship between agricultural practices, food production and political power through a combination of readings, fieldwork and interviews with families and local farmers. Similarly, the "The Opaque Document: the Poetic and Political Dimension of the Everyday" cycle[13] focused on the politics of re-presentation of everyday life through a collective and open exercise involving recording everyday life using mobile phones.

Language and Power: The Collective Dictionary

The first Campus in Camps collective project was an on-going editorial task, The Collective Dictionary, managed by the participants together with Munir Fasheh.This series of publications in English and Arabic modelled on dictionary format has proposed new definitions for such terms as "common", "sustainability", "well-being," "participation," "responsibility", "ownership", "relation" and "vision" – the notions that participants felt the need to reshape according to their experience of life in the camp. The books are heterogeneous and contain different material registers: written reflections on personal experiences, interviews, excursions and photographic enquiries.

The Collective Dictionary is an attempt to delineate a discursive space, to frame and structure the epistemological area in refugee camps which is dominated by the humanitarian organization discourse. Moreover, the dictionary counters the established Western hegemony of thinking on social organization. This ongoing series of publications is encouraging people to think about themselves and for themselves, generating words and utterances designed to start a process of analytical discursive appropriation which is always introduced spatially, historically and intellectually from outside the camp.

Some terms felt to be meaningless, such as "sustainability", were deconstructed and reconstructed through personal experiences and narratives. This method echoes the idea of "microhistories" used by Carlo Ginzburg and a wider group of Italian historians in the 1970s and 1980s as a new historical paradigm based on fragmentary individual knowledge rather than macro narratives. The micro-historical method enhances the procedural and generative nature of historical contexts constructed by intertwining partial visions, limited rationality, provisional transactions, conflicts, negotiations and group dynamics. The "exceptions to normality" bring out reality and regulatory system inconsistencies (Grendi, 1977). Some of The Collective Dictionary booklets emerged from specific experiences such as "relation", which was written after a two day walk following traces of an ancient Roman aqueduct. The volume dedicated to "vision" was the outcome of a seminar entitled "Camps of Knowledge" at which participants presented their future vision of the camps in 40 years' time.

The fact that the booklets are in both Arabic and English demonstrates an attempt to work on the productive translation space between two languages to reformulate the meanings of words into a new camp language. Issues related to language use politics are often discussed and made into questions within Campus in Camps initiatives. For instance, the "Language and Power" workshop consisted of a study of Arabic and English versions of the book Orientalism by postcolonial theorist Edward Said. Some of the questions raised by the program were: what is the connection between wanting to learn a hegemonic language and the struggle for more rights within the camp? Can learning a new language become a mechanism by which to reflect and construct new forms of representation?

In this respect, The Collective Dictionary establishes a view of pedagogy as a political engagement, a conversation and a process of collective discovery rather than an act of masterly revelation. Broadly speaking, it aims to generate new meaning constellations.

Decolonizing Design

Departing from the dictionary's conceptual basis the program's second step was dedicated to initiatives focusing on sites within the campus such as "the garden", "the municipality", "the suburb", "the pool", "the stadium", "the square", "the unbuilt" and "the bridge", as the titles of these workshops suggest. The initiatives analyzed the history and present condition of these specific sites. The main idea underlying these interventions was that it is participation which generates the site rather than vice versa.

In the case of "The Pool" in Al Arroub refugee camp a series of activities were carried out around a pool built in Roman times to supply Jerusalem with water. The first action was to walk from Al Arroub to Solomon's pools in Irtas near Bethlehem city tracing the trajectory of the aqueduct system. The second was the cleaning of the pool to prepare the site to become a common space for future events related to Arroub and other camps. These voluntary and participatory actions aimed to rethink an important historical site thus re-activating it in contemporary life. Cleaning the square was a gesture of reappropriation, ownership and care. In fact, this apparently banal act demonstrated a sense of collective ownership and community.

In another project, a 510 m2 public square in Fawwar refugee camp in the West Bank[14] , questions emerged on how the space would be used and by whom, if women could use the plaza and what activities were socially acceptable for them in this space. In 2012, Campus in Camps's female participants began to organize discussions and events in the square ranging from cooking together to gardening involving women from different camps. These laboratories were followed by the "Gender and Public spaces" learning cycle aimed at boosting thought and debate around women's role in public space: their common struggle to redefine their identity within the camp community, the role that architecture and space play in gender equality and empowerment in refugee camps. The dialogue process carried out seemed to help women to inhabit the space for their activities such as, for instance, learning English.

As philosopher Achille Mbembe has shown, decolonization of public spaces, such as spaces for learning, is an ownership issue if such spaces are a common good: "Decolonizing the university starts with the de-privatization and rehabilitation of the public space, the rearrangement of spatial relations. It starts with a redefinition of what is public, what pertains to the realm of the commonand as such, does not belong to anyone in particular because it must be equally shared between equals […].The decolonization of public spaces is inseparable from the democratization of access […].It has to do with an expansive sense of citizenship itself indispensable for the project of democracy, which itself means nothing without a deep commitment to some idea of publicness […].We need to reconcile a logic of indictment and a logic of self-affirmation, interruption and occupation. This requires the conscious constitution of a substantial amount of mental capital and the development of a set of pedagogies we should call pedagogies of presence"[15] .

In Campus in Camps design methodologies design is considered an act not of building the new but rather as an act of profanation, reuse and subversion of sites' originally intended use in order to generate new potential. This means shifting the nature of engagement, combining research and practice and using practice to provoke politics and act upon it. It is an attempt to produce a space in which to operate now, but with a radical long-term transformational vision[16] . In the form of a counter apparatus to restore the common use of certain spaces, such efforts could also be defined as a form of decolonial design. As the founders of Campus in Camps have asserted: "Decolonization is not bound as a concept, nor it is bound in space or in time: it is an ongoing practice of deactivation and reorientation understood both in its presence and its endlessness"[17] . In this sense Campus in Camps is itself a public space undergoing formation. Design is thus understood as an ontological tool capable of transforming the social and cultural condition, as Madina Tiostanova has argued. Thus, decolonizing design means reactivating the peripheral and semi-peripheral spaces in which alternative versions of life, social structures, environmental models or aesthetic principles have been invariably dismissed[18] .

The legacy of these alternative approaches to everyday living in the camps is what Campus in Camps also tries to revive through projects which involve a significant personal storytelling component. "The Shared" initiative projected printed images of private memories about camp life onto the public walls of different camps thus constituting a form of resistance against concealment of collective memory. "The pathways", a workshop about reframing narration, started from studying and preserving camp wall graffiti in the camp as a means by which to unfold and communicate the several layers of political and urban history embedded into these.

Conclusions: Towards a Border Pedagogy

After two years of work in West Bank refugee camps, Campus in Camps has expanded its confrontation to dislocated projects. Together with Brazilian art collective Grupo Contrafilé a "tree school" in Bahia was set up[19] which brought together activists, artists, Quilombo intellectuals, landless peasant movements and Palestinian refugees in discussions on forms of life and meanings of knowledge production within marginalized social sectors. In 2015 Campus in Camps conducted a workshop at BAK, a space for art, knowledge and activism in Utrecht together with the members of We Are Here, an organization of refugees caught in legal limbo in the Netherlands. This series of workshops taught by the refugees considered the question of representation within art and politics related to their struggle. Together the two groups developed a new issue of The Collective Dictionary dedicated to the topic "Political".

These joint projects help to build bridges for common struggle between organizations and experimental pedagogical programs emerging at different global latitudes to face up to critical issues affecting civil society. This international dialogue, often activated on art and design terrain, is potentially a way of collectively articulating undercommon forms of study and learning (Harney, Moten, 2016) in connection with other refugees and people displaced by extraterritorial experiences without the right to teach in academic institutions. These spaces – amongst which Ahmet Öğüt's Silent University might be included[20] – are a potential starting point for new agencies independent of a "border pedagogy". As cultural critic Henry Giroux has put it: "Border pedagogy stresses the necessity to provide students with the opportunity to engage critically the strengths and limitations of the cultural and social codes that define their own histories and narratives […]. Students engage knowledge as a border-crosser, as a person moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power. These are not only physical borders, they are cultural borders historically constructed and socially organized within maps of rules and regulations that serve to either limit or enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms. In this case, students cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten as the codes and regulations which organize them are destabilized and reshaped. Border pedagogy decenters as it remaps"[21]. The crux of border pedagogy, drawing upon Freire concepts of conscientization and subaltern pedagogies, means giving students the opportunity to speak, locate themselves historically and become subjects in the construction of their own identities and society at large. It means redefining learning processes in ways that allow students to draw upon their own experiences as real knowledge. As an emancipatory education initiative, Campus in Camps attempts not only to give people the opportunity to emerge as subjects but to critically engage and participate in the production of alternative forms of culture within the camps. This happens both in The Collective Dictionary and in the collaboration with other "undercommon" public spaces as a form of collective action reshaping places and producing knowledge. In all these examples, attention is being shifted towards dominant forms of knowledge as a means to the creation of new epistemologies emerging from microhistories, fragmented narratives and new experiences.

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Cycle led by human rights lawyer Tarek Hamam, February/April 2012.

[11] Cycle led by scholar Linda Quiquivox, June 2013.

[12] Cycle led by writer and photographer Vivien Sansour, September 2012.

[13] Cycle led by visual artist Valentina Bonizzi, April/May 2014.

[14] The square in Fawwar refugee camp was designed by the UNRWA´s Camp Improvement Programme starting in 2007 using a participatory, community-driven planning approach. It was inaugurated in 2012.

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[19] The Grupo Contrafilé partnership was developed on the occasion of the São Paulo Biennial in 2014. In the Campus in Camps definition, the "Tree School" is a device that creates a physical and metaphoric common territory in which ideas and actions can emerge via critical, free and independent discussion between participants.

[20] The Silent University, initiated by artist Ahmet Öğüt in 2012, is an autonomous platform for academics who cannot share their knowledge due to residence status. It is a solidarity school created by refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who contribute to the program as lecturers, consultants and researchers. It proposes a new institution freed of the restrictions of existing universities, migration laws and the other bureaucratic or juridical obstacles many migrants face.

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