



4

Writing the Refugee Camp: A Southern–Southern Correspondence

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

I

Classically, the act of writing, *kitāba*, as the Arabic language contends, is premised on thinking through processes that are normally within the remit of *the far*, and for *this far* to be bridged, constant grasping is necessitated so the written would one day replace the discerning eyes as a witness. In this sense, writing is ultimately witnessing, not in order to monopolise the seen (and the scene) but rather to archive afresh what was and will be. *Writing the Camp* is then archiving by writing the refugee, myself and others, as both the observer and the observed, the guest and the host, the researcher and the researched in equal measure. The correspondence inherent in writing, the writing for and about, crosses many times of significance but also sustains its own time, that of writing in the aftermath and in anticipation at the same time.

Y. M. Qasmiyeh (✉)
University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
e-mail: Yousif.qasmiyeh@ell.ox.ac.uk

E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh
Department of Geography, University College London, London, UK
e-mail: e.fiddian-qasmiyeh@ucl.ac.uk

II

This writing from the South reaffirms the refugee as a *time-maker* and not just a *time-seeker* in search of other times. In making time, time is sought, pondered and reassembled and not just found. For time to be made, it should be hunted down in sites where refugees are not mere *wait-ers*. The refugee camp is one of those sites where times are constantly remembered, conserved and, if necessary, resuscitated at later times. Thus the refugee is never a passive *wait-er*, or a self-proclaimed acceptor of temporal indistinctness. Far from it, the refugee in writing as well as in thinking retains the initiative to exist despite existence and survive from the position of the writer with or without language. The illiterate mother is also a writer, a re-teller of her own voice, always suspicious of aid and aiding for the sake of just survival. To eat is not to consume. It is above all to dictate and calibrate the pace of the interior to match the texture of the exterior.

III

In *Writing the Camp*, ‘refugees ask other refugees: who are we to come to you and who are you to come to us?’. This active engagement between refugees reaffirms what could be called *a solidarity beyond time* where suffering is not the denominator at all but instead it is humanity that has become suspicious of its humanness for spitting certain people out. To ask is to assume and in turn trigger an answer. But since it is the refugee who asks and the one who is expected to answer, both the question and the answer become embedded in their own body so much so that the coming echo, in this case from the camp’s corners, is also that of those who were and will be there at one time.

IV

Since this writing is an acknowledgement *from* one South (*al-janūb*) of another, as complex sites and times, in this instance, embodied in this refugee-refugee correspondence, it percolates borders and on its route it gathers the will-be-written. While difference revives, the different creates *this* difference and in doing so belongs and becomes *in* difference.

V

Yes, they are seen but they can also see. Let us remember: The refugee eye is both water and narration.

The following poems were originally written and published as part of the Refugee Hosts research project, and subsequently in Yousif M. Qasmiyeh's collection, *Writing the Camp* (Broken Sleep Books, 2021).

Writing the Camp

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh

What makes a camp a camp? And what is the beginning of a camp if there is any? And do camps exist in order to die or exist forever?

Baddawi is my home camp, a small camp compared to other Palestinian camps in Lebanon. For many residents, it comprises two subcamps: the lower and the upper camps that converge at the old cemetery. As I was growing up, it was common for children to know their midwife. Ours, perhaps one of only two in the entire camp, was an elderly woman, who died tragically when a wall collapsed on top of her fragile body during a stormy day in the camp. The midwife was the woman who cut our umbilical cords and washed us for the first time. She lived by the main mosque—*Masjid al-Quds*—that overlooked the cemetery. She would always wait by the cemetery to stop those whom she delivered on the way to school, to give them a kiss and remind them that she was the one who made them.

The camp is never the same albeit with roughly the same area. New faces, new dialects, narrower alleys, newly constructed and ever-expanding thresholds and doorsteps, intertwined clothing lines and electrical cables, well-shielded balconies, little oxygen and impenetrable silences are all amassed in this space. The shibboleth has never been clearer and more poignant than it is now.

Refugees ask other refugees, who are we to come to you and who are you to come to us? Nobody answers. Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis and Kurds share the camp, the same-different camp, the camp of a camp. They have all come to re-originate the beginning with their own hands and feet.

Now, in the camp, there are more mosques, more houses of God, while people continue to come and go, like the calls to prayer emanating at

slightly varied times from all these mosques, supplementing, interrupting, transmuting, and augmenting the voice and the noise simultaneously.

Baddawi is a camp that lives and dies in our sight. It is destined to remain, not necessarily as itself, so long as time continues to be killed in its corners.

Refugees Are Dialectical Beings

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh

Only refugees can forever write the archive.

The camp owns the archive, not God.

For the archive not to fall apart, it weds the camp unceremoniously.

The question of a camp archive is also the question of the camp's survival beyond speech.

Circumcising the body can indicate the survival of the place.

Blessed are the pending places that are called camps.

My father, who passed his stick on to me, lied to us all:

I slaughtered your brother so you would grow sane and sound.

My mother, always with the same knife, cuts herself and the vegetables.

The eyes which live long are the ones whose sight is contingent upon the unseen.

God's past is the road to the camp's archive.

We strangle it, from its loose ends, so we can breathe its air.

Without its death, the archive will never exist.

In whose name is the camp a place?

It is the truth and nothing else that for the camp to survive it must kill itself.

The transience of the face in a place where faces are bare signs of flesh can gather the intransience of the trace therein in its multiple and untraced forms.

The unseen—that is the field that is there despite the eye—can only be seen by the hand. After all, the hand and not the eye, is the intimate part.

Green in the camp only belongs to the cemetery.

The veiled women crying at the grave are my mother and my sisters. Once, my mother wanted to bring the grave home with her.

In the solemnity of the place, faces fall like depleted birds.

In belonging to the camp, senses premeditate their senses.

The aridity of a camp presupposes the aridity of life.

The concrete is barely permanence. If you pay attention you will see the cracks in their souls.

At the farthest point in life—the point of no return—dialects become the superfluous of the body.

Camp (n): a residue in the shape of a crescent made of skin and nothing.

Time, when killed, has no mourners, only killers.

The camp has its own signature.

What it signs and countersigns is never the permanent.

The camp is what remains when the meadows of the instant desert us.

The foot without a trace is a god.

Those who are arriving at the threshold are not one of us. It will take them time to know who they are.

Nothing is as old as the archive that is yet to be written.

The archive is always written in the future. (After Derrida)

Were I in possession of an archive, I would bury it by my side and let it overgrow, upon my skin and inside my pores.

The enmity in the archive is the enmity of the intimate. By detailing the body, the archive loses its sight.

I am absent or deemed absent. The fingers that I am holding before you, in your hand—a sullen hand—are mine and nothing else.

I wish it were possible to write the camp without the self.

In the camp, we surrender the meaning of the camp in advance.

The camp is the impossible martyr attributed to the meaning of ‘dying for’.

In the camp, going to the cemetery is going to the camp and going to the camp is going to the cemetery.

In Baddawi, reaching the camp only occurs through the cemetery.

Is the cemetery not another home, host and God?

In entering the camp, time becomes suspended between dialects.

The dialect that survives is never a dialect.

The dialectical subtleties in the camp are also called silence.

For the dialect to become an archive, no utterance should be uttered.

Who is the creator of dialects? Whose tongue is the shibboleth?

The dialect is a spear of noises.

Ontologically, the dialect is a being in the shape of a knife.

Only dialects can spot the silent Other.

My cousins in Nahr Al-Bared camp have always defended their dialect to the extent of preserving it in their fists.

I used to be asked to raise my voice whenever I opened my mouth. As if voices were ethereal creatures with an ability to rise.

Voices are the earthliest of creatures. Not only do they wreak havoc on earth, they remain silent in death.

What is it that makes a dialect a knife?

Is the dialect not a mythology of the silent?

To exist in the singular means the death of the Other.

'Dialects' is not a plural; it is the anomaly of a condition that should have never been one.

A ladder to God is the green in the cemetery.

In the camp, deserting the camp means summoning the certainty of the certainty. To this day, nobody has ever managed not to return.

Only in the camp do dialects outlive their people.

The untranslatability of the camp... We write it on parchments of time evermore, so it remains intact as a spectre when it is no more.

The dialect that survives on its own is that of the dead.

Dialects when uttered become spectres of time.

For us to hear ourselves we sign the covenant of the dialect.

A dialect always has a face—disfigured, a face nonetheless.

Where is the mouth in the testimony?

Those who come to us are never themselves in the same way we are never ourselves. When dialects descend upon the camp, the camp wails and ululates at the same time. In the presence of dialects, nobody knows what to do but to listen to the penetrating noise of the coming.

Is the dialect not the unavowable Other?

Refugees are dialectical beings.

Anthropologists

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh

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 three full cassettes with our voices.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

