



The Alphabet of Dispossession

Ella Habiba Shohat

An English lesson. A glimpse into the daily practice of perseverance. A life-in-the-remaking, assembled virtually ex-nihilo somewhere in the in-between. As eager boys begin to master the sounds of a foreign language, women toil in the background, in the tented city outside the tented classroom. The English words on the improvised portable blackboard – ‘a city’, ‘a car’ – underline the pronounced chasm between the evocative words and the immobile, hemmed-in existence. English mediates the modernity of a distant world. ‘City’ and ‘car’ seem to perform as empty signifiers, lacking an immediate referent within the confines of the camp. Do the inscribed words capture fleeting memories of the vital cities of Palestine, or conjure up new worlds yet to be discovered in the twists and turns of diasporic reroutings?

It is the fifth lesson. Some routine has been established, suggesting a reassuring semblance of normality. At the same time, routine means a troubling extension of life in transit. Each day marks a happy progress in

A fifth-grade English class in an UNRWA tent school, Jerash emergency camp in Jordan after the 1967 war. Photo by George Nehmeh.

the schooling calendar, but it also registers additional weeks, months and years in the arithmetic of displacement. Each improvement – a blackboard, a desk, a chair – carries with it the anxiety of stabilizing a nowhere-ness, and the waning possibility of return. ‘Reading’ appears to be a mundane assignment written in chalk even away from home. Yet learning to read in exile is entangled in the queasy sensation of learning to read ‘exile’ itself.

The alphabet of dispossession spells out paradoxes. Dislocated Palestinians are handed food and medicine from UN institutions, from the very same organization whose partition plan set in motion the process leading to the dispossession. Those who claimed to be bringing modernity wrought only a shattering *de*-modernization. Prometheus brought not fire but ashes. The word ‘city’ reminds us of the cities, once but no longer ‘of’ Palestine, where standing brick and cement have given way to ruins, where residents now take shelter under makeshift cloth dwellings. Zionist discourse reads such images as a symptom of the disaster that Arabs brought upon themselves. The reading lesson here becomes that images can also lie when they are assigned to narratives that blame the victims. The visual archive of Palestine both documents the past and serves as evidence in the battle over the representation of partition and displacement. The moment of the English lesson in the tent is written into history, but for which historical tale will it be mobilized, and in the name of what vision?

The photograph records a Palestine away from Palestine. Refugee teachers, without schoolbooks or salaries, gathered the children and taught them in the open air. The camera captures the grammar of determination and affection. As a teacher, I resonate with this distilled act of love, and as a daughter of parents dislocated in the opposite direction of that same partition, I am reminded of the loss upon our arrival from Iraq to Israel when we were herded into the tents of the *ma’barot* (transit camps). We underwent an unusual situation where parents well-educated in Arabic in Baghdad ended up with children less educated in Hebrew than they had been, a decade later in Israel.

For those Palestinians *fil-dakhel*, ‘on the inside’, Hebrew followed English as a colonizing language. But is an English lesson in the refugee camp a submission to a colonial language – that of the past British colonizer – or is it the dream of a future, the linguistic means to yet another layer of diasporic life, whether in Europe, Australia, the Americas or elsewhere? Despite and because of its imperial status, English has granted a passport outside the Hebrew/Arabic conflict. It has become a language in which official and unofficial dialogue between Palestinian and Israeli was to take place. English was, after all, the language that partitioned Palestine, setting in motion disastrous consequences for Palestinian lives. English is also the language through which resolution after resolution will be reinstated, in attempts to undo the traumas of partition. Scattered lives, geographically discontinuous, can regain international

legitimacy within the domain of English, where their re-membered narrative will have a seal of approval. (Arafat, lest one forget, was obliged to 'renounce terrorism' in English.) The English lesson in the tent wraps together in one blanket the melancholia of a ruptured past and the possibilities of an unknown future. Yet, the class is also filled with the enthusiasm of young hands. The dwellings have since metamorphosed but the camps continue, still breathing dreams of life before tents and of a less barbarous future. And the eager children, who must now be in their fifties and sixties, to which diasporic palimpsest do they belong? What *mélange* of languages do they speak now? Can they write the word 'return' in English, and will they be allowed to inscribe it on a document of civilization?

Ella Shohat teaches in the departments of Art and Public Policy, Middle Eastern Studies, and Comparative Literature and the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at New York University. She is known for her critical approaches to the study of Arab-Jews and the Mizrahim. This essay will appear in the forthcoming book I Would Have Smiled: Photographing the Palestinian Refugees, edited by Issam Nassar and Rash Salti (Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2007).