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Beyond Victimization and Normalization: On Questioning Situations and Studiers' Obligations

This chapter starts with a little displacement or, more precisely, a *relay*. Returning to the experimental university of Campus in Camps, the question now is what the *obligation* of their practice of study is, and which activities this obligation requires the studiers to perform. It is important to note that Campus in Camps does not understand its own practice from the perspective of study. Instead, the concept of study practice is deployed as a conceptual tool to disentangle the requirements and obligations of this experimental university and to shed a different light on their work. At its turn, the study practice of Campus in Camps will provide new commencements and open new ways of thinking about the future of the university to be developed further in the next part.

To that extent, the connection between the activities of Campus in Camps and the concept of study practice can be understood as a mutually generative binding that affords both more than what they could achieve separately. Nevertheless, it is interesting that Campus in Camps calls itself a university (*Al-Jame'ah* in Arabic), and therefore, in light of the previous analyses, the notion of study practice is perhaps not all too far-fetched to deepen Campus in Camps' reflections about the meaning of the university.

Starting from Stengers' conception of a practice as a reciprocal capture of requirements and obligations, this chapter aims to grasp the obligation of the study practice of Campus in Camps. The chapter intends to pinpoint what makes the participants of Campus in Camps study, the source of their hesitations and collective stammering in front of the questioning situation that started their thinking processes. In the next chapter, I will shed light on the requirements of the practice of Campus in Camps, the activities and ways of doing that this obligation demanded them to perform, and which, conversely, allowed for the obligation to be felt, so that something might start to insist on their ways of thinking and open up another future.¹

A Questioning Situation

Dheisheh, the refugee camp where Campus in Camps performs its activities, was established in 1948, in wake of the Nakba, when Palestinians had to flee their homes. In his reflections on the camp, the Italian legal and political philosopher Giorgio Agamben understands it as a state of exception, a temporary suspension of the juridical-political order by the sovereign, a conceptual figure denoting those in power, that grants the sovereign the possibility to freely transgress the limits of the very juridical-political order it represents.² However, speaking about the temporariness of the camp—its exceptionality—would sound somewhat strange nowadays to those who have lived in a camp for more than seventy years, or for those who were both born in and have raised their children there.

This tension between the exceptionality of the camp (the excess of violence that brought it into being) and the camp's decade-long endurance (its transformation into a habitat for different generations of refugees) confronted the younger inhabitants of the camp with a problem. Historically, the main narrative of political resistance against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas puts the so-called right of return, the right to go back to the houses from which the Palestinian refugees had been expelled, central. To the children and grandchildren of these first-generation refugees, such a right seemed quite abstract, since they were mostly born in the camp and spent their whole youth there.

As such, this tension raised the question of how they, as inhabitants, could relate to the camp and imagine its future. Intuitively, to most of the refugees, it seemed desirable to persevere in their struggle to do away with the camp, to remedy this historical anomaly, and to end this state of exception. However, others hesitated before this suggestion and objected to it. Throughout its long existence, the camp has grown as a space of communal life that, despite its precarious conditions, has been a living environment for all who lived and grew up there together. Hence, putting too much stress on their victim status while claiming the right to return to their original houses would even do an injustice to the history of the camp and the communal life it fostered. Put differently, they felt that these strategies would be a betrayal of their own experience.

The questioning situation, to quote Souriau, the problem before them that incited thinking, feeling, and acting in order to be realized, or the possible that required to be instaured (as a work-to-be-done) had to do with decolonization: how to decolonize the camp and find other ways of living there, inhabiting its ruins?³ Decolonization here does not only mean the returning of lands that had been taken by the Israeli settler-colonists, a territorial decolonization, but it also

(and especially) means a process to unlearn and get rid of the colonial logics and mentalities imposed on the lands and their inhabitants, a decolonization of the mind.⁴ In that sense, decolonization “not only means resisting territorial occupation and violence, but also transforming institutions, cultural products, approaches, and values. Moreover, in the context of pedagogy, ‘decolonization’ basically signifies a non-institutional education where knowledge is produced and shared collectively.”⁵

For Campus in Camps, speaking in terms of decolonization is doubly appropriate. First of all, it concerns the very material question of inheriting the legacy of settler-colonialism and the different claims that it has made and continues to make on the spaces and places in and around the camp. Think, for instance, of the debates about the future of The Crow’s Nest, whether it should be demolished or reused. Secondly, and here its educational dimension comes in, decolonization raises the question of how to unlearn the logics and mentalities of the liberal-democratic nation-state imposed on them *ex negativo* via the relation of the ban—the exile required for the foundation of the state of Israel. Most pertinently, perhaps, decolonization raises the question of how to initiate processes of collective learning in order to inhabit the camp differently, to learn anew.

Decolonization, as a questioning situation, a work to-be-done that requires thoughtfulness and inventiveness, is traversed by three tensions. The first, as already hinted at in the Introduction, is the tension between the narrative of decolonization as a revolutionary event on the one hand, and the narrative of decolonization as a solution to a problem on the other hand. Whereas the first posits decolonization as a radical breakout of violence against the oppressing powers in order to liberate the oppressed, the second sees it as the result of a problem-solving procedure. Due to the use of violence, within the first narrative, decolonization risks to shape itself exclusively in the face of its enemy, and hence to mimic the very oppressing strategies it aims to oppose. The second narrative, on the contrary, can be questioned for its lack of radicality and the risk to compromise to the colonizing forces. Therefore, in the end, for Campus in Camps, both narratives had to be omitted.

A second tension, particularly relevant to inhabitants of Dheisheh, concerns the question of whether they were willing to understand decolonization as a past-oriented struggle that aims to reconquer the houses they—or rather their ancestors—inhabited a long time ago (the right of return). Or that they, on the contrary, might take it as an opportunity to think in new ways about their predicament and possible interventions, in ways that are different from

an effectuated right of return, to learn anew and create a future that is different from the ones that present themselves as obvious or necessary.

Thirdly, and again taking up the two tensions mentioned above, they are confronted with the dilemma either to understand decolonization as a counterforce against the colonizers, risking to assimilate themselves to those who they vehemently oppose, or to resist such a temptation and conceive of decolonization as a long-term transformative process made possible by the production of an interstice—a small yet radical shift in perceptions that opens up alternative futures and different trajectories.

Campus in Camps has chosen this second path to wager on the possible production of an interstice that would allow the studiers to relate differently to the camp and its inhabitants—to learn anew. It required that the studiers would not start with readymade solutions, from futures already known, but that they tried to give both the camp itself and its inhabitants a voice in the imaginations of their shared future. Moreover, it required that in and through practices of study, they would become susceptible to the obligation of their practice, which would make them hesitate before the camp and its future, instead of abolishing it, as would have been justified based on the right of return.⁶

Creating a Shared Language

The first year focused on the establishment of a common language and approach to understand and discuss the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugee camps. *The Collective Dictionary* is a series of publications that contain definitions of concepts the studiers deem necessary to think about the issues and challenges that come with inhabiting a refugee camp, more specifically, the improvement of living conditions without normalizing the exceptionality of the camp.⁷

In small groups, the studiers conducted interviews, wrote reflections on personal experiences, undertook excursions, did photographic investigations, and analyzed documents in order to get a better grasp—which means here: more grounded in the everyday experiences of the inhabitants of the Palestinian camps—of their communal ways of life. In addition to working in the small groups, guests were invited to participate in biweekly plenary discussions on citizenship, refugee studies, humanitarianism, gender, mapping, and research methodologies. Many events were open to the public to reinforce the connection between the studiers and the other inhabitants of the camp.⁸

The studiers published *The Collective Dictionary* at the end of the first year. In each of the eleven booklets, they developed one key concept. In alphabetic order, the different concepts included citizenship, common, knowledge, ownership, participation, relation, responsibility, sustainability, vision, and wellbeing.⁹ Throughout the different publications, it became clear how much the right of return was still a topic of debate among the inhabitants of the camp. In almost every booklet, studiers asked themselves how it was possible to shed a different light on the right of return, when concepts such as citizenship or ownership would be rethought outside of a colonial liberal-democratic framework and what they could mean when conceptualized from the perspective of those who had to create new communal ways of living together in the camp—the state of exception where the liberal-democratic order is suspended.

In the following paragraphs, the series of publications of *The Collective Dictionary* will be read from an interest in the pressing contradiction between the strong claim of the right to return on the one hand and the more affirmative reflections on communal life in the camp on the other hand. The understanding of the right of return as the right of individuals to return to their former private house can be read most actively in the booklet *Vision*. In the process leading to this publication, the participants were asked to reflect on the lives of camp inhabitants in 2040. It was one of the first exercises, taking place in March and April of 2012, aimed at making an inventory of the different views that were held concerning the right of return. As such, it differs from the other booklets that were the result of group work on a concept, and that were finished almost a year later, in January 2013. The booklet contains an array of perspectives on the reality of refugees in 2040. Participants individually expressed their ideas on the right of return through a narrative, a simulation of a guided tour, a proposal, a declaration, or a media conference.

Some of the contributions to the booklet assumed an effectuated right of return, telling stories about people who will have returned to their original villages, leaving the camp behind as a ghost town. One even proposed to transform the desolate camp into a museum that would provide an account of life under the settler-colonialist occupation. Others have expressed a mix of a deep despair concerning the possibility of returning on the one hand, and the optimistic hope that return will be effectuated on the other hand: “In 28 years, I expect the camp will be as it is now, but with more buildings and an increased population. [...] However, I hope there will be no camp in 28 years. I hope that we will be back, back to our destroyed villages.”¹⁰

Another contribution that voices a pessimistic stance toward the possibility of return underscores the ongoing engagement and struggle of the inhabitants of the camp in claiming the right of return. One participant outlined a vision in which the living conditions in the camp have been improved so much that the exceptionality of the camp has been normalized—that the camp has become almost like a city. Nonetheless, the camp dwellers still hold on to their right of return:

Despite the development of the camp, and despite all its strong social relations, our young generation is still insisting on the idea of return. All this development will not change the fact of our catastrophe and the beginning of the camp. We still remember our lives in the tents. We still remember the cold of winter and the heat of summer. [...] I insist that we will never lose our right of return even if we achieve all the possible development of life.¹¹

In some of the later entries in the dictionary, similar sentiments can be noticed. In *Citizenship*, for instance, one of the participants explains the importance of the land and the sense of belonging it elicits in order to understand what it means for a Palestinian to be a citizen: “The portion of the refugees who live in West Bank refugee camps define themselves as ‘temporary residents.’ They are waiting to return to the land where their roots belong to.”¹² In another booklet, *Knowledge*, a participant argues why the experiences and memories of the older refugees in the camp are so valuable. She explains that the later generations of refugees have no experience of life before the Nakba and that, hence, the stories told by the first-generation refugees are the only access they have to this knowledge: “I found out how much the people love and hold on to their land, their stories, and their houses, so I found the first generation of refugees to be the most important source of knowledge in the camp.”¹³

Put differently, the speculative exercises bundled in *Vision* show how much the participants seemed to hold on to the right of return at that time. Moreover, due to the divergence of opinions on the matter (some assuming the impossibility of return, others speculating about the consequences of an effectuated return), these initial discussions made clear that the right of return, how it can be understood, and what different understandings imply for related aspects of life such as citizenship, participation, and responsibility, is an issue with no easy solution and over which often opposing standpoints confront one another.

The publications after *Vision*, however, written in the course of what Elzenbaumer called the third phase (in which the participants did different fieldwork exercises), generally advance a more positive view on life in the camp. Instead of starting from the not-yet of the right of return or the no-longer of the

camp, the studiers here tried to come to terms with the specificity of their living conditions in the camp and the social relations they foster and sustain.

In *Common*,¹⁴ for instance, a studier compares her life in Doha—a small village next to Dheisheh where wealthier refugees can buy a plot of land or an apartment—with the life in Dheisheh. From her experiences in Doha, she has learned that the city misses the common traditions and habits of the camp, since there were no “original” Dohan people. All residents are new and do not know each other very well. She praises the strong social relations in Dheisheh and the shared culture they have built throughout the years: “It may be familiar to you that life in a city would be better than in a refugee camp, but to me, because of the camp’s social relations, I prefer the camp. Perhaps that is strange to you.”¹⁴ Other participants agree with this positive appreciation of the durable social fabric of the camp. One of them writes: “Sharing is a precious concept that is represented in every small detail of our daily lives. We share all that can serve our community and our world.”¹⁵

In many publications, the word *Mujaarawah*—a verb that can be translated as “neighboring”—is used to grasp the social commitment to the community of the camp. The verb expresses the practices of sharing that take place between the different inhabitants of the camp. It includes not only the sharing of food or materials, but most importantly, knowledge and experiences. One of the participants writes about how the recipe of maftoul, a traditional Palestinian dish, is shared through collective practices: “Even maftoul itself is a knowledge transferred between the generations. We learned how to make maftoul from our parents, and they learned that from their parents and so on.”¹⁶

Next to the social ties in the camp and the practices through which knowledge and experiences are shared, the infrastructure of the camp is also conceived as a shared space. Because the architecture of the camp was never intended to last long, houses are very close to each other, which creates a network of tiny alleys throughout the camp. One of the participants explains that the constructed environment of the camp is experienced as one living milieu, instead of as a concatenation of individual houses, and that the walls constitute the collective consciousness of the camp:

For us, and for the other inhabitants of the camp, the walls are neither public nor private property. Many people consider them common. The paintings tell our stories of refugeehood and daily life to visitors of the camps. They are part of a process of communal participation, creating collective emotions.¹⁷

In other words, whereas the publication of *Vision* expressed the desire of return, including all the hopes, fears, dreams, and doubts related to it, the publications

written while doing fieldwork in the camp attempt to come to terms with the actual ways of living together in the camp in a more affirmative way. In contrast to *Vision*, these publications are thoroughly grounded in the living conditions of the camp, having emerged from very concrete and specific ways of engaging with these, and of studying the camp. In that sense, a contradiction can be distinguished in the dictionary between the right of return that gives a *de iure* justification of returning to the former private house and the *de facto* experiences of living together in the camp that are affirmed at various other moments.

Sometimes, a particular concern or question is raised via which this contradiction acquires a very powerful presence. In *Responsibility*, for instance, the following statement can be read: “This point came out of our talks with the community group we met: their biggest concern was how we were going to do something in the camp without changing its exceptionality through normalizing it.”¹⁸ A similar tension is voiced in *Participation* in the form of the following question: “Is it historically acceptable to think about the public space of a temporary camp?”¹⁹ Creating a public space in a camp is understood by its inhabitants as a strong political act that risks normalizing the camp and to turn it into a town or a city, a decision which would ultimately delegitimize the right of return. Put differently, affirming the camp as a convivial space with strong bonds of solidarity seems to involve the risk of undermining its meaning as a temporary location of precarity and exclusion, a state of exception, and, hence, the possibility of claiming the right to return. This debate is echoed in nearly all of the conceptual speculations collected in *The Collective Dictionary*. Analyses of *The Initiatives*, the publications that were written after a series of practical experiments within the camp, will show how the studiers tried to come to terms with this dilemma.

Turning Contradictions into Contrasts

The second year of the program focused on knowledge creation through specific activities such as gatherings, walks, events, and urban actions. These activities were not only situated by the camp but also directly engaged its various conditions. Informed by the reflections and discussions that took place while working on the dictionary, *The Initiatives* aimed to intervene in the spatial ordering of the camp without normalizing its exceptional status or blending it into the fabric of neighboring cities, for instance, via focusing merely on the improvement of infrastructure or the optimization of urban qualities.²⁰ The

studiers selected nine sites within the camps and their immediate surroundings to investigate (interventions also took place in neighboring camps), and to inquire how these sites constitute what they have suggested to call an *urbanity of exile*. According to them, the very existence of these so-called common places—a desolate pool, the small alleys, the pedestrian bridge between Dheisheh and Doha—begets new spatial and social configurations, that enable conceiving of the camp beyond its crystallized image as a locus of marginalization, poverty, and political subjugation.

In June 2013, the participants published nine booklets, one for every site (with the respective camp in brackets): *The Garden. Making Place* (in Dheisheh), *The Square. Learning in the Common Space* (in Fawwar), *The Bridge. Challenging Perception* (between Dheisheh and Doha), *The Pool. Re-activating Connections* (between Arroub and Solomon's Pool), *The Suburb. Transgressing Boundaries* (next to Dheisheh), *The Pathways. Reframing Narration* (in Dheisheh), *The Stadium. Sustaining Relations* (next to Arroub), *The Municipality. Experiments in Urbanity* (in Doha), and *The Unbuilt. Regenerating Spaces* (in Dheisheh).

In the first part of every booklet, the studiers present the site with photographs, maps, descriptions, and a short history of its use. The second part displays the research process, offering an account of the activities undertaken (document analyses, interviews, fieldwork, focus groups, urban action, photography, and walking exercises) in order to grasp the current state of the site and how it is being used. Lastly, the third part of each booklet suggests interventions that allow us to envisage new uses of the different sites.

Throughout *The Initiatives*, the contradiction between the right of return and the affirmative accounts of communal life in the camp re-emerges in three different ways, manifesting in problems that run throughout the different interventions. The first problem concerns the issue of public space within the camp. The second problem has to do with the refugee identity of those who live outside the camp. Lastly, the third problem concerns the representations of both the camp and its inhabitants. Although the problems of public space in the camp, the meaning of the refugee status, and representation are highly interconnected, it can be argued that in every initiative, one of them prevails over the other two. In the remainder of this section, the different initiatives will be presented from the perspective of the problematic situation they deal with.

The first problem concerns *the creation of public space* in the camp. Since the camp is constructed according to the most pressing social and spatial needs, public space is almost absent. Houses are built immediately next to one another, leaving barely any space where people could gather or hang out. Due to the risk

of normalizing the camp's exceptionality, and thus undermining the claim of return, public space is a highly contested issue within the camp. In almost all of the different interventions, the question of public space was a crucial problem to confront.

In *The Garden*, for instance, the studiers developed a proposal to redesign the old and overgrown garden next to the Al-Feniq center. They wanted to create an appealing place where they could organize different kinds of activities. Therefore the participants, first of all, proposed to move the entrance and perforate the walls to increase accessibility and visibility. In addition, their proposal comprised a playground, an open-air cinema, a space for seminars, and a barbecue in order to attract different people from different ages to the garden. Thirdly, they proposed to install a system of awnings of which the colors could be changed easily. In this way, the screens would not only provide sun protection but could also announce upcoming events. Each type of event, whether a movie screening, reading seminar, or a discussion, would have its own color. Fourthly, small spatial interventions, such as a climbing wall, would increase interactions with the space of the garden. Lastly, and this point is the least elaborate, they were considering a safekeeping and maintenance system devoid of cameras and locked gates.

Overall, the suggestions made concerning the future of the garden were understood as a challenge to "the assumption that upgrading implies normalization or permanence. Improving living conditions in the camp is not undermining the struggle for the right of return, rather it reaffirms refugees' capabilities in envisioning and realizing."²¹ This statement forcefully makes it clear how building in a camp is an act with strong political connotations, which hence requires careful consideration. In this case, the design of *The Garden* attempts to avoid both a normalization of the camp condition on the one hand, and a neglect of the need for public space in the camp on the other.

Not so much the design, but rather the use of public space was central to the initiative of *The Square*. In 2007, the UNRWA²² Camp Improvement Program started the conversation about the creation of a public square in Fawwar—a refugee camp with a rather conservative reputation. At that time, the women of the camp especially raised questions about the creation of such a place because they presumed they would be the last to benefit from such a project. Consequently, it instigated a discussion about the presence of women in public spaces, and more generally, about the uses of a public square. Many questions were raised, such as:

What activities would be acceptable in such a place, who would take care of the space, which community members should be using it, what should be the role of

women in this space, and finally what should the space look like and what would be its impact on the surrounding context?²³

In the course of this initiative, the studiers experimented with different usages of the square by organizing a joint cooking workshop, followed by an English class in the square. On one early morning, the women of the camp assembled to clean the square and to install the cooking equipment. During the day, they prepared several Palestinian dishes, and afterward, there was an English language class, as the women had expressed the desire to learn the language.

In the booklet published after this intervention, the concerns raised before the event were placed side by side with the reflections uttered afterward. The studiers argued that the square cannot be open or public in and of itself, and that no square can be public in the sense of “for everyone,” but rather that through shared and collective practices, such as cleaning together, cooking, eating, and learning a language, the square could be *made* open or public. Therefore, they argued that rather than a permanent state of affairs, the publicness of the square is an achievement to be obtained, time and again.

The Pool also dealt with the question of reactivation: here, however, not of an empty public square, but of the abandoned Solomon’s pool, near the camp of Arroub. In the Roman era, this pool had been an essential node in the water supply network for Jerusalem. In 2012, it was a desolate site that, during the winter, gathered water which would not evaporate until summer and that throughout the whole year gathered garbage from passers-by instead, which in combination turned the pool into something like a swamp for most of the year. Nevertheless, because of its historical importance and its geographical location, the studiers deemed the Solomon’s pool an exciting site to reactivate as a node between different camps. Throughout the booklet, they explored the spatiotemporal network of which the pool is part of. Both its historical value and the aqueducts that situate it in a long-gone water supply network were brought to the fore. Again, the participants reclaimed the pool by cleaning it, increasing its accessibility by building a small bridge, and organizing a few activities there. In this way, they aimed to draw attention to this forgotten site and to invite people to take care of it: “We started cleaning and collecting garbage to bring attention and a sense of concern to the space.”²⁴

The last initiative in which the issue of public space in the camp takes center stage is *The Unbuilt*. During this initiative, the studiers investigated the history of land possession in the West Bank and the emergence of the camps. Often it is not clear who owns the land, and notwithstanding UNRWA’s rules, land is continuously being sold, swapped, and passed on, which complicates things

even further. This initiative aimed at mapping the so-called camp common, understood in a double sense. On the one hand, it denotes the open spaces in the camp or the debris of devastated buildings. On the other hand, the participants use this concept to describe the strong social fabric that is both the beginning and end of practices of sharing and neighboring (*mujaarawah*). “Open spaces can be considered a body or material, while the social relations, or well-being, are the soul—both of them reinforce and build each other to create the common.”²⁵ The participants mapped the unbuilt spaces in the camp and attempted to trace who had owned these spaces previously.

In sum, the first problem in which the contradiction between right of return and camp experience emerges is that of the creation of public spaces, including questions of the design of public space, the making public of space through use, the re-activation of abandoned sites, and the generative interdependency of social and spatial relations. Public space is a highly debated topic in Dheisheh, and many of the participants held quite diverging opinions on the matter, ranging from a plea for the creation of public space in order to have places to hang out and meet, to a complete refusal of public space since these would ultimately undermine the right of return by normalizing the camp’s exceptionality.

The second problematic situation had to do with the meaning of the refugee status in relation to the camp, or, more precisely, the *relation between refugees living inside and outside the camp*. Increasingly, inhabitants of Dheisheh moved—provided they had the means of course—to the direct surroundings of the camp, most notably to the Qatar-sponsored village of Doha. This increasing emigration of Palestinian refugees who go to live in the neighboring city, together with the urban sprawl around the confines of Dheisheh, raised the issue of what it means to be a refugee when living in a city, instead of a camp, and whether it transformed the sense of belonging to the camp. Moreover, it required to reflect on the meaning of return when refugees dwell in more ordinary places such as a village, and again, how one might relate to the threats this poses given the normalization of the exceptionality of the refugee status.

In *The Bridge*, the studiers investigated the meaning of the desolate pedestrian bridge between Dheisheh and Doha. Initially, the bridge was built by the inhabitants of the camp and Doha. It afforded children the possibility to cross the street while going to school safely. As such, the participants understand it as exemplary of the refugees’ resilience and their capacity to accommodate their own needs. Moreover, they view it as a symptom of how the culture of the camp infects its neighboring areas:

The importance and reality of building bridges and connecting camps with the surrounding areas, like the case of Dheisheh and Doha, led to opening new perspectives to influence and combine the existing cultures of cities and villages with those that exist in the refugee camps.²⁶

By 2012, however, the bridge was not used anymore and had instead become a garbage belt. In order to reactivate the use of the bridge, and to open it up to new uses, the participants proposed some activities that could take place. “We decided to use the bridge to reinforce the relations between the families of the camp and Doha city through social activities that focus on reviving the social meaning of the bridge.”²⁷ Instead of using the bridge as a way to cross the street, they wanted to make it a meeting place between the camp and the city, where exhibitions, public events, social activities, or a market could take place. In doing so, the bridge could also become a space for encounters between the inhabitants of Dheisheh and the city-dwellers of Doha again.

More than proposing any real interventions, *The Suburb* presents an extended reflection on the move of refugees to Khalid Cave Mountain, next to the camp of Dheisheh. Based on a historical overview of the uses of the mountain, a problematization of land ownership in the camp, and interviews with people who moved to the suburb, the booklet brought the varieties of a sense of belonging to the camp amongst those who decided to live outside it to the forefront. One of the interviewees proclaimed: “I believe that the place where I am living does not have anything to do with my refugee status. I can keep my status as refugee no matter where I live.”²⁸ Via statements like this, the issue of what it means to be a refugee is taken away from the realm of law—where it is a question of legal documents and passports—to the realm of experience.

The Municipality has a similar structure and investigates the same topics. It takes its lead, however, from the city of Doha. Again, Doha is first situated historically, and then interviews were conducted in order to inquire about the people’s ties to the camp. A common remark is that the inhabitants of Doha have a stronger affinity with the social fabric that grew organically inside the camp (where they have lived for so long) than with the barely developed social fabric of Doha itself. People who live in Doha would spend much of their time in Dheisheh, and the majority of the social life in the area still occurs there rather than in Doha. Consequently, although the inhabitants of Doha no longer live in a camp, the camp remains a vital ingredient in the way they conceive of themselves and situate themselves in a broader network of relations: “What caught my attention during this research is that the refugees in this city are still

linking themselves to the camp. They continually present themselves as refugees from this or that camp, and they live in Doha.”²⁹

In short, regarding the problem of the relationship between refugees living outside the camp and inside the camp, the contradiction between right of return and camp experience appeared as a matter of identity and belonging. The initiatives undertaken voiced concern for the possibility of a shared refugee identity given the fact that some refugees already partially obtained a kind of return, or at least were able to leave the camp and live in a neighboring city. The studiers problematized this question not only in relation to official legal documents that grant an identification (e.g., passport, land ownership), but most importantly, also in relation to shared spaces that help to give shape to a shared sense of belonging to the camp despite physical and legal borders.

After the creation of a public space in the camp, and the relation between refugees living inside and outside of the camp, the question of representation is the third challenge that can be discerned. Not only does this problem have a powerful presence in both preceding issues as well (how to represent respectively the camp and the refugee beyond exceptionality and normality), it also acquires a significance of its own in the initiative that deals with the narratives about the Nakba and Palestinian resistance as they are told in the camp and made present via graffiti. In that sense, this last problem, the *representation of the camp and refugees*, spans the different initiatives, but becomes an issue of its own in *The Pathways*. This publication investigates and presents the drawings that were made on the walls that make up the small alleys of the camp. The central concern here is how to tell stories about, and to make images of the camp and the refugees without normalizing the exceptionality of the situation.

The booklet begins with a reflection on the role of graffiti in the coming into being of a collective consciousness in the camp:

Graffiti itself creates a cultural climate through paintings and words that mix life's bitter realities in the camp with the dream or future vision that is an awareness of future generations of refugees and the striving to create an acceptable present for the future.³⁰

Throughout the remainder of the publication, the studiers present different representational strategies for raising a collective consciousness of the camp (e.g., stories, social media, physical and digital fora, graffiti) and expand on what they call *Nakbaliterature*, the stories that were told by their parents and grandparents, with collective readings and writings about these stories as a way to represent the camp and the refugees.

In short, in this last problem, the contradiction that drives the activities of Campus in Camps resurfaces as a matter of representation. Questions dealt with as part of this problem were: how to represent refugees beyond the binary opposition of victimization and normalization, or repression and agency? How to do justice to all the small-scale engagements and forms of self-organization that take shape within the camp without normalizing its exceptionality? Referring to the graffiti on the walls of the camp and the stories that are told by the older generations, participants elaborated different narratives to communicate their experiences in the camp.

Return to the Common

This chapter has aimed to introduce the practice of study of Campus in Camps. Specifically, the focus has been on the driving force behind their practice, namely the tension between the legal-political claim of the right of return on the one hand, and the experience of living together in the camp on the other hand. In concluding this chapter, the main question concerns the *obligation* of their study practice. What is it that makes the studiers hesitate and think, instead of recognize and judge?

What is interesting when reading the different contributions to *The Collective Dictionary* is that at some points, the right of return is reconceived through the lens of the camp as a site of living together. It is at these points that both the right of return and the experience of living together in the camp are affirmed and taken up in a process of thinking that transforms both of the terms without reducing one to the other. At that point, the camp condition is conceived neither as precarious nor as normal, but rather as a site for collective experimentation in living together. Moreover, this process of thinking, provoked by the practice of study, allowed to conceive of both the right of return and the camp condition via different words and propositions.

In *Relation*, for instance, the right of return is understood as the possibility to roam around freely in the region around the camps of Arroub and Dheisheh:

It is a proposal for a *right of return* to the land, to move through a natural space, and to live in health. The way its green areas are used and shaped by the people provides a vision of a sustainable setting, a way of looking forward to the eventual end of military occupation.³¹

In *Common*₂, one of the participants reports on a journey outside the camp to contrast how the younger generation understands the right of return, with the ideas that the older generations hold:

When my refugee friends had the chance to go to the occupied territory of forty-eight, their priority was to see the Mediterranean Sea rather than the villages of their origins. Such an act explains and reinterprets the third generation's notion of returning to the common, while reflecting the spirit and idea of the evolving culture within refugee communities in the refugee camps.³²

The accounts mentioned above shed a markedly different light on the right of return. It is no longer understood as a projected return to a former individual home, but slightly turns the present experiences of the camp into an ingredient in the collective imagination of future possibilities.

In a reflection on this renewed attention for the common in the practice of *Campus in Camps*, Hilal and Petti strongly differentiate the common from the public: whereas the public is given to the people by structures of power, the common comes into being during interaction and communication. Therefore, common space is predicated on a people that invest time and energy in its production. Hilal and Petti argue that in colonial and postcolonial contexts, the public has often been used to expropriate the common. At the same time, refugee camps are sites where the categories of public and private become indistinguishable and where it is impossible to discern private from public property (e.g., the “possession” of the unbuilt spaces). In that sense, the refugee camp is a kind of anti-city where the liberal-democratic idea of politics that assumes the separation of public and private is being called into question. As such, Hilal and Petti conceive of the camp as “a potential counter-laboratory in which a new form of urbanism is emerging beyond the idea of the nation-state.”³³

In Stengers' idiom (as presented in the previous chapter), it seems that *life in exile* is the obligation that activates the practice of study of *Campus in Camps*. Life in exile, the fact that people have lived together in the camp for decades, is that what makes the studiers hesitate and think, drawing their attention to the common. It is what makes them discuss, object, and diverge while their opinions oscillate between the struggle for the right of return on the one hand and the affirmation of the experience of living together in the camp on the other hand.

Moreover, life in exile is what makes the participants of *Campus in Camps* hesitate before the three problems outlined above, and what renders these issues truly problematic: (i) how to create public space in the camp without normalizing its exceptionality?; (ii) how to relate to the camp as a refugee living

outside its borders?; and (iii) how to represent the camp? In contrast to the camp which reappears in all three of the problems, life in exile is absent from the very formulation of the problem, leaving the inhabitants of the camp largely insensitive to it and its ensuing experience of commonness until they started to study the camp. However, more than the camp in itself, it is the fact that people have been living in exile for decades—and thereby changing the nature of the camp and its exceptionality—that seems to constitute the obligation of the practice of Campus in Camps.

This means that even though the camp is the actual material condition that connects the problems of creation, relation, and representation, life in exile is what makes the studiers hesitate and think. It can be argued that the camp condition itself is too strongly connected with the right of return, which makes it easier to recognize it as an exceptionality and the refugee as its victim. The focus on the camp and its injustices as it is present in the publication *Vision*, for instance, seemed to divide the participants in two fronts: those who forcefully claim the right of return versus those who pay tribute to the durable social fabric of the camp. Put differently, the contradiction between the right of return and the experience of living together in the camp divided the inhabitants into two oppositional fronts.

Imagining the future of the camp during group discussions, however, did not seem to be a fruitful approach as the discussions continually revolved around this contradiction. It was only by *studying* the camp that the participants gained insight into what incited them to think. It was through the fieldwork exercises that a reciprocal capture came into being between the practitioners, the studiers on the one hand, and the obligation of life in exile on the other hand.

Stated somewhat differently, as long as the contradiction above dominated, the camp could only be the concern of a public debate or a political action, but could never become something that would make the participants think, as everyone had his or her reasons to argue for or against one of the sides of the contradiction. Due to the practices of study, the camp itself—that is, the fact that people had constructed their own way of living together there—could become an active ingredient in the discussions and could start to oblige, forcing the participants to hesitate before it and before their own existent dispositions.

Ilana Feldman, an anthropologist who was engaged in some activities of Campus in Camps, also raised this point. While reflecting on the initiative, she writes that the creation of *The Collective Dictionary* required an engagement with the actual spaces and places of the camp. Through interviews, walks, photographic exercises, and writing texts, the participants started to situate their

thinking in relation to the actual camp as a place of living together. She argues that because of these activities, participants were able to establish a different relationship with the places that were already so familiar to them. Moreover, she writes, it probably was “from this new vantage point, this new embodied perspective on the camp, that they were able first to produce new kinds of definitions of familiar terms and then embark on initiatives that engaged these spaces in new ways.”³⁴

In sum, the obligation of life in exile allowed turning the camp into an active ingredient in the thoughts of its inhabitants, make it an object of study that made the inhabitants of the camp think (“what is this place we are living in?”), instead of to recognize and judge (“the camp is unjust and should be abolished!”). Furthermore, this distinction between recognizing/judging on the one hand, and thinking, on the other hand, is an important one, as it is the effect of the production of an interstice, affording the possibility to *learn anew*. While studying the camp, it became possible to start to think about the camp—more specifically concerning the three aforementioned questions which all have a relation to the camp—beyond merely recognizing it in terms of either victimization or normalization. In other words, studying the camp—and the next chapter will further elucidate what this entailed—made it possible to turn the contradiction into a contrast by affirming both contradictory terms and transforming them in the course of the process of study, and to start to conceive of the right to return as a return to the common.