

Comment

Necropolitics and the arts of the occupied

Ahlam Shibli was born and works in Palestine, and Tanya Habjouqa was born in Jordan and works in East Jerusalem. I begin, rather unfashionably, with these biographical details because, in these cases, the much-abused academic phraseology so dear to literary and cultural studies students, ‘the politics of location’, has been literalized, realized and embodied by these two women photographers. The two have produced photographic biographies of a space that is perhaps the world’s most famous space of dispossession in their series *Unrecognized* and *Occupied Pleasures* respectively.^{1,2} The series represent iconic work in the visual register of dispossession. Shibli’s series is set in ‘Arab al-N’aim, a Palestinian Bedouin village in Galilee, and Habjouqa’s in the West Bank area. What follows is a set of responses to these highly acclaimed artists.

Shibli and Habjouqa map the necropolitics³ of West Bank: life not necessarily extinguished but *exposed to death* on a daily basis. Necropolitics is the denial of conditions of life even when it does not seek

immediate annihilation. In the violent geography of West Bank, Gaza and ‘Arab al-N’aim, we see an apparatus devoted to the assertion of power over life with the possibility of the production of death.’ ‘Exposing’ life to death could be in terms of everyday life lived under constant sniper fire, exposure of entire groups of people to inclement weather and denial of food and water, raids and random arrests, starvation and inad-



Ahlam Shibli, *Other Quartering*, from *Unrecognized* series, ‘Arab al-N’aim, Palestine/Israel, 2000, chromogenic print, 60 x 91 cm, courtesy of the artist, ©Ahlam Shibli.

quate safety and horrific working conditions, among others. It is important to note that neither photographer focuses on death but on life, yet these are lives *at risk of obliteration*. It is a genocidal logic that we see operating in the denial of conditions of life, and which the two artists capture through their lenses. In response to the necropolitics, both Shibli and Habjouqa underscore the possibility of life. The arts of the occupied are devoted to an aesthetics of minimal life in the zones of death and dispossession.



What is immediately riveting about From Tanya Habjouqa, *Occupied Pleasures*.

‘Occupied Pleasures’ and ‘Unrecognized’ is the nature of everyday life in the midst of a space governed by necropolitics. People living here experience the state of exception as a regular feature of their lives. By ‘state of exception’ (Giorgio Agamben’s well known term) I refer to the state of emergency that inscribes the lives of people in the West Bank region. The brooding wall, the checkpoints, the searches, the mass graves of their dead, the arrests, occasional firing and of course the absence of electricity and one source of water (this in ‘Arab al-N’aim) constitute the space of living. These are places where known laws governing life and liberty do not apply. Living bodies here exist on the verge of destruction, or disappearance. What Shibli and Habjouqa, however, underscore is that even in this state of exception, everyday life is lived. In sharp contrast to cultures of adventure tourism that seek great heights or depths to experience the sensation of living on the edge of annihilation, people in these places do not need to travel anywhere: annihilation is a few meters away on any given day. Shibli and Habjouqa, however, call attention to the apparent routineness of children playing, women

dressing up to party, young men relaxing in such contexts, as though the state of exception is no longer an exception and has been incorporated into their everyday lives.

The astounding focus on the Israeli wall in both series suggests the very inverse of town planning. It represents what geographer Derek Gregory following Michael Shapiro calls an ‘architecture of enmity’, shaping the social and cultural imaginaries through fears.⁴ It reminds the dwellers of the West Bank of exclusion, of threat and the experience of deprivation on a daily basis. Categorized as threats to the Israeli state, the dwellers in these ramshackle sheds are the strategic presences who help the state define itself. That is, it is the very statelessness of the Palestinians, captured by Shibli and Habjouqa, created and maintained in that form, that helps the state across the wall declare its statehood. Without the making of such a state of statelessness and exclusion, there would be no logic of inclusivity, as the wall reminds the West Bankers.

The sheds and the temporary structures are not temporary because people have been living in them for years now. In ‘Unrecognized’, the photographs are of people – Bedouins – who have not been allowed to build new houses after Israelis bombed their village and destroyed their homes. Thus they live in transit- or refugee- camp-like conditions, a state of permanent transit.

The photographers capture with a distanced subjectivity – more on the lines of the documentary rather than the merely aesthetic – the Israeli attempt to create a *lebensraum* (‘living space’). The *lebensraum* was Nazi Germany’s driving concept which argued that vast European lands need to be annexed to create adequate living space for Germans. In surely what is now an extraordinary instance



Ahlam Shibli, *Water Filling*, from *Unrecognized* series, ‘Arab al-N’aim, Palestine/ Israel, 2000, chromogenic print, 60 x 91 cm, courtesy of the artist, ©Ahlam Shibli.

of historical irony, the concept plays itself out in the West Bank's reorganization of space, the rhetoric of security (for Israeli citizens) and the concomitant rhetoric of threat (from Palestinians). Gregory in his use of this frightening term to describe Israeli occupation defines it as creating a 'scattered, shattered space of the exception' (136), and thereby points to the occupation as inherently exclusionary and life-threatening.

Both photographers by showcasing in their photographic biography life in the West Bank demonstrate the existence of a precariat public sphere. By 'precariat public sphere' I mean a public sphere made up of 'precarious lives'.⁵ It is a public sphere constituted by a sense of precarity that haunts a vast majority of Palestinians, whether this precarity is embodied in the multiple checkpoints, rockets or absence of proper drinking water. This public sphere is made of lives easily dispensable or untenable because they might be annihilated at will.

When Shibli titles her series 'Unrecognized' it refers to the rendering invisible this precise state of precariat public sphere of an entire population. Not quite refugees, not quite citizens, existing in a limbo where they are stateless except for being in a state of exception, the people of West Bank are people without an identity, being 'unrecognized'. In his celebrated essay, 'The Politics of Recognition', Charles Taylor proposes that recognition is a kind of respect conferred depending on the worth of the individual or group.⁶ But this presupposes a power equation – of somebody who seeks recognition and somebody with the power to bestow that recognition. Taylor does not ask: who confers the power to confer this recognition? His theory proposes that there is a subject who possesses this power, and an object who might or might not receive

recognition from the subject. The politics of recognition is, therefore, the politics that enabled one group to *acquire* this power. It is global geopolitics that enables the Israel state to acquire the power to confer or deny recognition. 'Unrecognized' is a comment on the *structures* that allow a one-way gaze of the subject, and which chooses to not see the other.

'Pleasures' in *Occupied Pleasures* is an act of documenting courage in the extreme everyday. Just as the quest for recognition in Shibli's work is embodied in the residents of 'Arab al-N'aim, pleasure is embodied in Habjouqa's West Bank. The focus of both photographers is on bodies exposed, vulnerable – precarious. By transforming these bodies into sites of pleasure (perhaps best seen in the photographs of the girls dressing up and the bodybuilder young men in Habjouqa), however minimal and temporary, Habjouqa documents the endless possibilities of the human. The logic of politics in the area is a biologic, but so is the pleasure.

In the process of documenting life lived in the shadow of death and dispossession the highlighting of graves and mourning in both artists gestures at the mobilization of memory and mourning in the making of community identity. Personal memories of the loss of family members – through death or arrests – are merged with the collective memories of the community.

In the final instance, both Shibli and Habjouqa are photographic biographers of lives of occupied zones, states of exception and extreme everyday because they *find* people denied dignity, recognition and rights, asserting to their utmost their right to live. Whether this finds expression in the luxuriating armchairs in the shadow of the wall or a toddler carrying on her mindless game in the 'courtyard' of a shed, Shibli and Habjouqa document both, a geography of violence and a geography of resilience. Unsustainable environments, self-sustaining lives.

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1. Shibli (2000), <http://www.ahlamshibli.com/Work/unrecognised.htm>
2. *Occupied Pleasures* (Habjouqa 2014), <http://habjouqa.photoshelter.com/gallery/Occupied-Pleasures/G0000baUmyAvOgBM/>
3. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics' (trans. Libby Meintjes), *Public Culture* 15(1), 2003, pp. 11-40.
4. Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2004.
5. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, London, 2004.
6. Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994.



Ahlam Shibli, *Old Woman and Child*, from *Unrecognized* series, 'Arab al-N'aim, Palestine/Israel, 2000, chromogenic print, 50 x 76 cm, courtesy of the artist, ©Ahlam Shibli.