

## Chapter XX

### Affective Witnessing: [trans]posing the Western/Muslim divide to document refugee spaces

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#### Documenting the Undocumented

وما الذي أسعى إلى تدوينه؟ دغل جغرافي له رنين، مزيج مركّب من زمان ومكان، ماض وحاضر، حيّزٌ ماديّ وروحيّ تختبر فيه الذات نفسها لتتعرّف على موقعها، وشروط وجودها، وطاقتها النفسيّة والأخلاقيّة. (عاشور، ٢٠١٩)

I do not know what I am aiming to document ... a mixture of space and time, past and present, a physical and metaphysical space where my self tests herself so she understands where she stands, the conditions of her existence, and her psychological and ethical capacities<sup>1</sup>. (Ashour 2019, 73)

Seeking out affect in the exceptional zone of the refugee camp, this chapter follows a method of “documented witnessing” of undocumented migration. Written by two academic scholars who share a belonging to feminist posthumanist thought and a Muslim upbringing, it draws attention to the everyday violence of the border regime in the hope of developing an architectural research methodology for working with precarious lives. Such work is often situated within spaces that have been deemed “exceptional”, such as those of refugee camps and borderzones (Agamben, 2005). While being heavily mediated by state agencies, international NGOs and other gatekeepers that limit the types of relations we are able to cultivate, these exceptional zones demand ethical forms of engagement. To undertake this work, we provide a decolonised epistemology that displaces the colonised hierarchies of doing fieldwork as academic work. We aim to question the one-way flow of ideas from the west to the east, and instead activate the cultural, intellectual, and religious inheritance that shapes the

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<sup>1</sup> The excerpt is translated by one of the authors. Radhwa Ashour was a postcolonial literary critic at Ain Shams University in Egypt who passed away in 2014. This book was published posthumously by her husband and son in 2019 both of whom are internationally renowned Palestinian poets. While Radwa’s text in the book is presented as a practice of witnessing, publishing her work posthumously represents a poetic will that is eager to document her testimony after death.

way questions of affect can be applied in non-European contexts. We explore how embracing, as well as understanding, certain Muslim ethics has allowed us to implement posthumanist practices in spaces where we share a sense of “belonging” (Yuval-Davis 2006). We understand such spaces as environments composed of the constitutive relations between bodies, objects, and materialities.

A question that animates this chapter is how to register our affective witnessing, basing it in a politics of belonging as distinct from the approaches of humanitarian NGOs whose professionalised practice of witnessing is often a strategic exercise designed to produce evidence within institutional or legal contexts (Ristovska, 2016). We discuss how a different form of witnessing that foregrounds the affective, as produced with and through spatial relations, can intervene within the highly problematic context of international migration and its attendant academic industry. We explore these issues through an engagement with Za’atri refugee camp in Jordan. Here we think through the production of borders and the affective importance of documenting the undocumented, as well as the question of access in relation to people designated as highly vulnerable, yet treated as easily disposable within the unequal politics of migration and refugeehood.

### **Witnessing as spatial practice**

The lives of refugees and the undocumented are often touched by the kinds of violence that NGOs deem necessary to witness. Yet, who can be considered a witness and which acts should form part of a process of witnessing, are fraught questions. Some emphasise the “reflexive process of becoming a witness” (Givoni, 2016, p. II) as being fundamental to the act of witnessing, whilst others have highlighted the responsibility embedded within such acts and the distinction between witnessing and bearing witness (Tait, 2011). Perhaps what is most significant to our argument is the relationship between witnessing and recognition. How can we witness that which we do not recognise, or imagine the possibility of witnessing beyond recognition (Oliver, 2001)? For Kelly Oliver this requires a move beyond poststructuralist modes of subjectivity that are still rooted in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. Following Frantz Fanon, she notes that “the desire to be seen, to be recognized, is the paradoxical desire created by oppression” (Oliver, 2001, 24). For Fanon, a politics of recognition is based around a

preconceived (and racialised) idea of the human in relation to which Black and other “others” should be defined (1986 (1952)). If witnessing is to take place from the position of those that are “othered” then it should displace fixed definitions of who counts as human and the very act of witnessing should expand notions of who or what could be considered a subject worthy of recognition. For Oliver this means that the process of witnessing is an act of subjectivation, producing intersubjective relationalities that are embedded within an affirmative, disruptive, and affective politics. It is a process through which the witness practices her subjectivity and implies the expansion of her capacity to become address-able as well as response-able (Oliver, 2001). Considered as an ethical practice of subject formation, witnessing has the ability to displace well-entrenched hierarchies embedded within notions of recognition, as well as an ability to displace the centrality of certain forms of vision-based biases that emphasise sameness. Vision is instead considered a “proximal sense” (Oliver, 2001: 12) and we follow this lead in our own work to consider how the process of witnessing as subjectivation can be mobilised beyond an emphasis on vision towards embodied spatialities.

Speaking from our positions as academics who are invested in the methods offered by the discipline of architecture, our approach to witnessing is embedded within an embodied spatial practice. Such a practice follows a feminist lineage in emphasising the centrality of the body alongside an investment in the way emotions circulate across difference producing what we term “affective witnessing”. We share Sara Ahmed’s unease with certain strands of scholarship on affect that have minimised the role of feminist and queer theory by often dismissing the vast literature on the role of bodies and by side-lining emotions in favour of a more abstract concept of affect (Ahmed, 2004, 2013). Whilst many may not be fully invested in Brian Massumi’s bold claim that affects are “prepersonal”, they would nonetheless follow a general line of thinking that considers feelings as personal, emotions as social and affects as something beyond in the realm of the virtual (Clough, 2007; Massumi, 1987; Shouse, 2005). These are scholarly arguments beyond the scope of this chapter but suffice it to say that we think with Ahmad that affect circulates between subjects, objects and their environments and accrues value over time. “It is the very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surfaces of collective bodies” (Ahmed, 2004: 128). Affective witnessing would take part in this circulation that produces what Ahmed

terms “the surfaces of collective bodies.” This results in a very different form of witnessing through the methods and discipline of architecture than the other more famous work within our discipline, that of Forensic Architecture, which is situated within the idiom of the juridical and through an investment in certain forms of evidence producing unquestionable truths (Weizman, 2019). Affective witnessing can only ever produce a contingent account but one that takes the conditions of its production as equally important and is invested in the production of affect across collective bodies.

Our proposed methodology for producing such a practice of witnessing to the violence of the border regime is called “border materialities” (forthcoming Awan and Musmar, 2020; Awan 2016a). It is a way of approaching geopolitical borders that takes spatial relations as a basis for considering their environmentality (Agrawal, 2005). Rather than foregrounding biopolitics, that is the management of populations, we prefer to think through the spaces and subjectivities of forced migration in order to show, for example, how affect circulates within and through the space of the refugee camp. Unlike acts of witnessing often attended to by actors connected to the border regime, we do not conceive of border materialities as mere juridical “evidence” by which we register our testimony to injustice. Instead, border materialities allow us to work with the possibility of an intersubjective process of witnessing that accounts for the political subjectivities of racialized others, whose suffering we are presumed to witness. We perceive them as socio-political constituents of the milieu that mediates our testimony and therefore cannot be separated out from it (also see Awan, 2016b). We argue that, through this milieu, we share something with both refugees in Za’atri refugee camp and undocumented migrants, which is a certain quality of being othered. While there are many differences between our more privileged lives and those of refugees, the otherness to which we are referring here has to do with the “racialisation of Muslims” (Garner and Seldom, 2014, 9) that not only shapes refugee’s and migrant’s encounters with humanitarian NGOs but also our own experiences as Muslim women of colour in a predominantly white academia (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu, 2018). As Muslim women, we are intensely affected by processes of racialisation that take place at an institutional level and determine what is considered worthy of research, how it can be conducted, and by whom. The colonial foundations upon which the “University” paradigm rests in the global North and its monopoly over knowledge resources has produced a world-wide gendered research culture that is racially exclusive. It is a

culture that is intensified within the unequal politics of international migration research where academic work often becomes directly implicated in the perpetuation of the border regime and its racialized politics.

We suggest that sharing this certain quality of “being othered” affects the environment that encompasses our fieldwork. This environmentality conditions the relationships we make with refugees and migrants in the context of the border regimes that govern their spaces. Building on Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, Arun Agrawal coins the term environmentality to bridge between the technologies of power (practiced by the government) and the self (practiced by the governed). He suggests that these joined technologies “are responsible for the emergence of new political subjects” (Agrawal, 2005, 161). We think of refugees and migrants as political subjects that shape and produce multiple forms of spatiality (see Musmar, 2017), and therefore assume our fieldwork is mediated between refugees and migrants, humanitarian governance, and our universities, as part and parcel of the environment through which they become political subjects. We are interested in exploring how our affective transpositions between the multiple positions we find ourselves occupying or performing expand our capacities to witness the border regime and its effects.

### **[Trans]posing across difference**

We maintain our ethical attentiveness to the differences between our experiences and those of refugees and migrants and the unprecedented suffering they face due to their legal status. By juxtaposing our experiences alongside theirs we do not assume that these experiences are similar, rather, we argue that this shared otherness witnessed as an affective relation has the capacity to mobilise and facilitate a multitude of emotions that expand our critical capacities. We partially share an affective world that in another language could be considered a margin that we are compelled to inhabit. We think of our fieldwork as providing such a margin that is both uncomfortable and yet a space we choose to work within (hooks, 1991). Inhabiting such a space is neither easy nor without consequence, but it allows us to transpose between worlds that would otherwise be unable to apprehend each other. We follow Rosi Braidotti’s conceptualisation of transposition as a theoretical and epistemological approach towards intersubjective

relationality (2006). Braidotti argues that due to the “complexity and paradoxes of our times [...] there cannot be only one political frontline or precise strategy” that addresses and responds to this complexity (ibid., 134). She appeals to the necessity of new concepts and values that allow for non-unitary subjectivities that account for, as well as acknowledge, the multiple positions that we occupy. We think that the complexity to which Braidotti’s transpositions attend is particularly necessary for our affective witnessing. While the positions of the coloniser and the colonised have been shown to be deeply entangled (Fanon, 1986 (1952); Bhabha, 1994), Braidotti’s articulation of subjectivity as non-unitary and occupying multiple positions through nomadically moving from one to another, speaks not only to the complexity of our own positions, but to the need to constantly negotiate between them. Transposition underlines the importance of affective relations in the negotiation of these differences that are constitutive of the becoming of subjects. We, as racialised Muslims and academic scholars operating within neo-colonialist structures, find ourselves negotiating between these and other positions related to class and privilege as we enter refugee spaces and are transformed by them.

For us, the basis for our transpositions are the affective dimensions we share with others, and one context in which we have explored these together, was through teaching an architectural design studio on borders and refugee camps. Our students were from diverse backgrounds: China, India, Iran, Turkey, Oman, composing part of the so-called internationalisation of higher education, but really just the product of its neoliberalisation. We knew, and they knew, that we were inhabiting a two-tier system of education, with “home students” who were overwhelmingly white, middle class and privileged on the one side and racialised international students on the other. The way in which space and resources were divided amongst these two groups who were educated separately tells its own story (see Vandrick, 2009). Within this context we sought to create a pedagogical space for working across different cultures and in a margin that both teachers and students felt they had been pushed into. We decided to make this margin a productive and affirmative space for us all. As part of the pedagogical design studio we visited three different refugee camps in Jordan: Irbid refugee camp for Palestinian refugees established in 1951; Za’atri and Azraq refugee camps for Syrian refugees, established in 2012 and 2014, respectively. The conversations we had with refugees, camp managers, Jordanian humanitarian workers, governmental

representatives, architects and students during this field visit informed the resulting architectural designs that revealed the work of transposing across cultural, social and political boundaries. They enacted a multiplicity of spatiotemporalities that materialised in response to the negotiations taking place amongst governmental, nongovernmental and refugee agencies. Here we discuss one project that emerged from the studio, which we think could only have been possible in the very particular affective context of two Muslim women teaching together on a course considered primarily for its financial contribution that did, paradoxically, provide a space of freedom from the usual constraints of a conservative and traditional architectural education.

We understand, however, that this studio setting could be criticised as a colonising practice that is not good enough (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019, RSC 2007). Maysoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock argue that subcontracting academia between north-based universities and south-based research bodies emphasises the north-south divide that is rooted in colonialist histories and racialized privileges. The studio setting is deeply entangled in the unjust political economies of research that allow such field visits and research practices to be conducted (ibid.). Furthermore, the disciplinary traditions of refugee studies stipulate that a good ethical practice in research with refugees should strive for a “do no harm” principle (Hugman et al., 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2007) and research should be carried out “with” refugees rather than “about” them (Hyndman, 2001; Krause, 2017). We may not have breached the first principle, but the field visit and the application of a distant studio might be evaluated as simply not good enough regarding the second. And yet, the very conditions of access to Za’atri refugee camp, regulated through UNHCR and the Jordanian Interior Ministry, meant that this may not be possible. Our access was facilitated through Aya Musmar’s position as a community mobiliser within the camp and we made a decision early on to privilege the in-between narratives of Jordanian NGO workers over those of international NGOs and to also limit student exposure to and demands of refugees (Musmar, 2020).<sup>2</sup> We believe that exposing students to the camp environment as it was mediated by the affective

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<sup>2</sup> In her PhD thesis, *Witnessing as a Feminist Spatial Practice*, Musmar centres the experiences of Jordanian humanitarian workers. Refugees’ experiences, however, were not pushed to the margins, but were speculated on by thinking the affective transpositions that Jordanian humanitarian workers have explored through their precarious positions within the humanitarian industry. Their extensive experiences of working in the refugee camp through its different phases were crucial for our studio explorations. They helped us comprehend the emergence as well as the decay of certain spatial prototypes and their relational and political meanings.

witnessing of Jordanian humanitarian workers was crucial. They shared a cultural and religious background with Syrians in the camp, the majority of whom came from towns and villages just across the border. We also think that our own positionality as Palestinian-Jordanian in the case of Musmar and Pakistani-British in the case of Awan meant that we could facilitate a shared encounter with the camp's inhabitants, its governance and spatiality in a way that would not have been possible for others. In the example of the studio project described below, the gendered space of the camp was interrogated through the positionality of Muslim women who understand all of the ways in which our religion has been used as a way to "civilise" us. Our aim was not to make the subaltern speak but to show how we can attune ourselves to listen (Spivak, 1988).

Yet, we are aware of the ethically precarious position we occupied that may not have completely resolved the power dynamics implied in the north university-refugee camp encounter. We argue that in the case of our studio this encounter should not be perceived as dualistic but implies many positions, and therefore, many encounters that can challenge and complicate normative understandings of the two terms, "colonising" and "good ethical practice". Our position may sound self-contradictory when observed from the lens of certain research traditions but it is the same lens that sees in our academic positions within the north-university an unprecedented privilege that we would not have accessed normally as racialised others. We must be grateful and careful when we address our positions and speak out our transpositions; if we had not already acquired these privileges, we would not have been heard. Yet, it is at the heart of this critical paradox where our methodology of affective transpositions lies. Just as years of postcolonial theory have taught us that there is no "post" to the colonial encounter, despite the overwhelming use of the term "decolonisation", we are aware that there is no decolonised future awaiting any of us. What we can commit to are difficult ethical encounters from our deeply entangled and compromised positions that constitute an ongoing process of decolonisation; or to put it another way, it is a commitment to an anticolonial politics.

The assemblage of fieldwork knowledges, methods, readings and critical discussions mobilised through the seven-month design studio reinforces our claim for a decolonised affective witnessing. Our methodology not only accounted for the power dynamics implied in north-university refugee camp encounter, but also invested in the architecture



of the refugee camp as a “political ecology of things” (Bennett, 2010) to identify and introduce difficult ethical questions that are often camouflaged by traditional generalisations about ethical good practice. For example, one of the methods we used in the design studio was scenario games. On the one hand, designing a scenario game necessitates a critical and speculative reading of what takes place in a certain environment. On the other hand, the role-playing mode allows students to shift their positions and perform the multiple roles that constitute a certain scene in the everyday life of the refugee camp. The studio followed a critical feminist approach to architecture and students were encouraged to view design as an open-ended question that is continuously negotiated within the camp’s human and non-human environment. To design for refugees was not considered an interventionist undertaking that aimed to change people’s lives for the better. Instead, the studio provided a space in which students could experiment with more complex questions that thought of everyday designs in relation to a comprehensive infrastructure of social relations, political arguments, and legislations that shaped their lives in the refugee camp as demonstrated in the example below.

### **“How to help her?”: Disrupting *Madafah* as a gendered space**

The project “Honourable Spaces” was conceived by Chong Fu, He He, Kan Wang, and Si He, as part of their master’s in architectural design. The design aimed to explore how notions of honour weave through the power relations that constitute the everyday lives of refugees in Za’atri camp. The students started by thinking about the *Madafah*, a living room of sorts in which people in the Arab world host guests. Within Za’atri camp the *Madafah* became a space where refugees were able to perform their political subjectivities, but it was also a territory where “other” political subjectivities were excluded; for example, it was a gendered territory to which women had limited access. Culturally, it materialised as a platform where masculinity was staged as a way of claiming authority over the administration of the refugee camp. Refugee men mobilised this space to help others as concerned individuals, as well as to mediate the humanitarian help being provided for those in need of it. The space allowed them to

claim a certain authority in order to be publicly recognised as “sheikhs”.<sup>3</sup> The Madafah became an important space where representatives of NGOs in the form of community mobilisers visited daily for news of each neighbourhood, including their needs, problems and conflicts. Much as the sheikhs used the space of the Madafah to gain power, so did the NGOs, as the information they collected would, sooner or later, allow them to exercise their authority over the refugee camp’s streets and districts. However, women in these negotiations were assumed to play a passive role and were pushed to the margins of community mobiliser’s humanitarian work horizons.

The group of students approached the Madafah as a space in which humanitarian work (or help) is gendered. While engaging with scholarly and humanitarian debates that are concerned with refugee women’s empowerment, they placed the question: “How to help her?”, at the centre of their design inquiry (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). By undoing the gendered character of the Madafah, they suggested that refugee women would be allowed the opportunity to claim a certain visibility and would be able to reach out to other women in their streets and districts for help. This visibility would form part of a process of witnessing that might assist refugee women in building their own networks that could empower them to enhance their living conditions. In order to do this, students worked with an assemblage of methods, visuals, narratives, and parametric models that allowed them to comprehend how different power relations unfold in space and time in the everyday life of the camp. In the studio, their initial, albeit short, first-hand observations were expanded through the scenario games (Bunschoten et al., 2001) they designed to attend to the nuances that produce the social relations and spatialities of the camp. Focusing on mapping the circulation of economy and honour in relation to the accumulation of privilege and power within the camp districts, the patterns that emerged in their maps revealed the Madafah as a territory in which money and honour were crystallised. This crystallisation endowed the Madafah with a certain visibility and students referred to it as an “honourable space”, whereby “honour” is mobilised not

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<sup>3</sup> (Sheikh/ شيخ) in the Arabic language cites a person who has been publicly recognised in his tribe for the knowledge and the experience that he has acquired throughout his life. Whereas this recognition is conditioned by the Sheikh’s morals and morale, it is also associated with his age. Sheikh denotes a category of elderly people who have reached their 50’s. In Islamic terms, Sheikh also means a person who has studied one of the branches of Islam and has therefore become an expert in its field of study.

only to achieve public recognition as honourable men, but also to claim moral authority over others.

By locating “honour” in the Arabic context, students analysed the gendered character of the Madafah in relation to the restrictions that the territorialisation of honour enforces on women’s bodies. Salam Al-Mahadin suggests that Arab males in the contemporary Arab world organise their spatiotemporal activities around women’s bodies (2011). Honour in Arabic culture shapes the vector according to which masculine territories are moved and transformed in relation to feminine bodies. Honour works like this: The less your women (mainly first kin women) are exposed to the public, the more public recognition you have as an honourable person. To dismantle the conditions that lead to the arrival of the Madafah as a territory where masculinity is performed, students mapped the spatiotemporalities of men and women. Depending on the stories that they collected about everyday life in the refugee camp and the other stories that they generated by speculating on the activities conducted by men and women, students drew two timelines that illustrated how spaces inside and outside the house are occupied by men and women at different times of the day. This exercise allowed them to identify the possibility for women to access spaces which they would not normally have access to.

Concerned with the question “how to help her?”, students navigated through the times when the Madafah would be vacant so as to help women occupy it when men were not present. Their intervention was designed to help women reappropriate the space of the Madafah as their own “honourable space”, whereby they could claim some sort of authority over their own lives and engage with activities that would empower them. They planned their intervention in two phases. The first phase included mapping the materialities of women’s spaces that facilitated their engagement with certain activities (childcare, chatting, working, etc.), while the second phase simulated the way in which these materialities could be deployed in the vacant Madafah. Their design intervention was a structure called the “fold wall” that could be made and assembled by refugees themselves. Based on the proportions of the caravans in which they were housed, and with reference to the materialities (or uses) that this design is assumed to simulate, the fold wall could be used in multiple ways so as to appropriate the space of the Madafah for hosting other activities. Madafah could become a classroom, a shop, a gathering space, or a workshop. The careful analysis and attendance to refugees’ everyday life

narratives, allowed students to challenge gendered practices through tactical spatial interventions. While they did not aspire to deconstruct the concept of honour, they worked towards dismantling the ways it was being practiced spatially in order to enable other alternatives.

### **Affective Witnessing**

The project, Honourable Spaces, was a form of affective witnessing that emerged from a shared experience of being othered. These experiences were of course very different and had varying degrees of intensity, but the conjugation of the border regime, racialisation and the neo-colonial university system produced for us a space in which we could begin to think architectural design differently. If for an humanitarian NGO the witnessing of violence is a way of validating its presence through the production of testimony as evidence, then this chapter asked: What does witnessing mean for spatial practitioners? What kinds of violence can/should we bear testimony to, and what role does such witnessing play in relation to the postcolonial borders that produce the spatial violence endured in refugee camps and in the circulatory movements of the undocumented? The standard mode of architectural engagement with refugee camps produces projects that aim to transform the material conditions of life within them. These could certainly make day-to-day life more bearable for its inhabitants and we do not rule out such modes of engagement; the project described above also had this dimension. But as we have attempted to outline in this chapter, this project was one moment in a much longer engagement that foregrounded the question of witnessing. This allowed us to address the important question of how our work might intervene within the circulation of affect and the production of subjectivities in relation to the border regime.

As Oliver suggests, witnessing has a double meaning: it is understood both in the juridical sense of bearing witness to that which you have seen, this is the mode in which evidentiary practices operate, but also in the religious sense of bearing witness to that which you believe. We place our concept of affective witnessing in this realm; not necessarily as an act of faith but as a relational practice of inhabiting that marginal space which is the result of our shared otherness. In this sense, affective witnessing is

not concerned with the production of truth but with the possibility of an architecture that could reconfigure spatial relations in order to reimagine, with those who are subject to violence, the very conditions that underlie it. For us, this meant that addressing the spatial violence of the border regime included making active links between the so-called hostile environment of UK migration policy (and the way in which universities compel all of us to act as border guards for the home office by policing international students), the unequal and racist learning environments that these students endure, and how the same politics of international migration produces temporary refugee spaces as permanent. Weaved into this narrative was the cultural and religious inheritance that many of us shared through our Muslim upbringing, but there were also other cultural relations that we discovered along the way without the pressure of whiteness as datum.

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