

The Jerusalem Of Things

In 1958, Abdelhafid Khatib's failed attempt at the psychogeographical description of Les Halles in Paris proved the weakness of the Situationist experiment *vis-à-vis* France's institutional racism and colonial state. During the colonial war in Algeria, Khatib, as all the Algerians residing in Paris, was banned from the streets after 9.30pm on the basis of racial discrimination – pending arrests, abuses and harassments from the police. Obviously, there was no chance for an Arab man to perform undisciplined walks or *dérives*, expressing Situationism's irreverent ways of being, moving, and living the city against the prism of order and discipline. Therefore, Khatib's experimental *derive* – aimed at flipping Paris's spatial boundaries – stayed incomplete, as he was arrested and made an outlaw.

On the basis of this story, after almost sixty years, it feels disorienting to shift to the colonial present and look at today's Jerusalem: the city that since the foundation of Israel in 1948 has progressively become the symbol of contemporary apartheid under colonial occupation. Under the 1947 UN resolution 181 for the partition of Mandatory Palestine between a Jewish state and an Arab state, Jerusalem was determined to remain an international zone, and belonging to none of the states in the aftermath of the 1948 war, was divided between Israel and Jordan, West and East. Jerusalem stayed divided up until its so-called "unification" under Israeli rule in the immediate end of the 1967 war, during which Israel also occupied the rest of Mandatory Palestine (and beyond). While the metropolitan area of Jerusalem developed as a matrix of encroaching settlement construction, the Palestinian side is left under tight political, military and administrative control and strict planning regulations that prevent its growth. The construction of the separation Wall in the 2000s and the expansion of settlements until this very day continue the physical separation – mobility for Palestinians is either put under heavy control or forbidden for West Bank residents – cutting off part of the Palestinian hinterland, previously part of the city fabric.

The suburb of Abu Dis, next to the Mount of Olives, is one of those areas. There, at the university campus of Al Quds Bard College for Arts and Sciences, educators and students (Palestinian from the West Bank, Jerusalem, and foreigners) have united and

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formed a working group under a common desire and goal: to tell the story of a denied-city, a city that while being just a few meters away, is still prohibited by a concrete wall and Israeli Law. A city that exists as the product of colonialism, an outlaw space, constituency and jurisdiction whose sovereign operates outside the parameters of International Law. But against such joint wish, the dilemma is brutally practical: how to extrapolate the everyday, get into the life of a city that you cannot see and never walk through, where it is not allowed to fantasise of Situationism or the “unitary urbanism” theorised by Debord?

Since 2015, the city has been going through the so called Third Intifada or *Intifada Al Quds*, witnessing a new wave of violent resistance, becoming – as it does cyclically – the epicentre of revolts and state repression: new restrictions on movement and barriers, flying checkpoints, closures and curfews have redefined the spatial syntax and grammar of the urban space and have proved Israel’s intention to implement new transforming spatial regimes that redefine the identity and the architecture of the city. Then, shifting boundaries, a proliferation of insecure spaces for Palestinians, implementation of new surveillance technology, unlicensed urban sprawl, lack of public spaces, and unsolved questions of refugees are part of the obvious outcomes of a municipal and national politics of segregation that deliberately aims at the preservation and creations of uneven geographies.

In this reality, for a group whose majority of members hold West Bank ‘Green’ IDs and hence are not given the privilege of freedom of movement as they are robbed of their most compelling subject – the city – Khatib’s story turned inspirational as it strengthens the link between imagination and resistance in a context of racialised and forbidden mobility. Under such premises a project of collective writing began, as the attempt to design a shared *lexicon* that could describe the life of a city stuck between status quo and violent encroaching transformations. Because of the forced alienation from Jerusalem, the group had to search for the means to connect and rearticulate the discourse around the city. Being physically excluded, had triggered imagination. Describing and narrating Jerusalem became suddenly possible without the physical presence of bodies at the centre of the stage, but using language and writing instead,

setting alternative spaces and tools to challenge ideological closures and fixity, and produce knowledge around the relation between coloniality and subjectivity through the everyday things of the city.

Following this stream of thought, the group decided to compose the lexicon through ‘headwords’, as if it were a real dictionary: ordinary and innocuous words associated with Jerusalem’s everyday things. After all, dictionaries and lexicons represent the most common entry point to the world, facilitating users, readers, and in general, the curious to access ruling structures and classifications. Then, while thinking of taxonomies and the order of language, Foucault’s account of Jorge Luis Borges’ “famous Chinese Encyclopedia.....” from the preface to *The Order of Things* came to mind, and with its provocative disorder, the destruction of syntax and the deliberate attempt to “[lear] apart the connection between words and things”, the analogies, in an attempt to set an alternative storytelling of Jerusalem became clear:

Language is indeed the operating table, as the group’s writing intervenes in the space that exists between things and their words, where the allocation of meaning happens. Things are here “aid”, “placed” and “arranged”¹ in a way that – unlike Foucault – they find a common locus of residence in the space of language. This shows that the mission is not about dissolving syntax, but on the contrary, aims to reuse and reactivate it, establishing alternative connections between language and those things that in the space of Jerusalem has definitively lost their innocence in the frame of colonial occupation. Can playgrounds be divisive, can traffic lights reflect racism? Jerusalem’s everyday things are weaponised while seemingly neutral spaces turn into battlefields: playgrounds become spaces of resistance and contestation, traffic lights tools of segregation, while colours embody the history of refugees. If things have lost their innocence, so do the words that give them meaning. Things and words that otherwise would look completely innocent in any other ordinary urban milieu or configuration.

The lexicon is an act of truth production. It implies that ambiguity, masquerades and camouflages have no place in the

1 Michel Foucault 1989, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London and New York: Routledge: xix.

storytelling of a city that has been transformed into a border military asset, an urban cocktail of segregationist practices (from concrete barriers, CCTV, flying checkpoints, metal detectors to less visible ones, such as planning restrictions, lack of facilities and services). Borrowing from Bernard Tschumi's "assault of meaning" which aims at deconstructing architectural immanent presence by performing an ironic "rejection of a well-defined signified"², the lexicon offers a reshuffling of Jerusalem's urban syntax. In opposition to ethno-national and settler paradigms. Against the diffusion of narcotised narratives, storytelling and representations, *The Jerusalem of Things* goes against descriptive acts of contemplation of the status quo.

This essay therefore epitomises a manifesto and an introduction to the project and to the peculiar nuances of the city. While – as every city in the world – Jerusalem functions through a network of actors (human and non-human) forming a clear structure, it does exceptionally juxtapose the larger structure of modern colonialism. This foreword to the project indeed presents the guiding principles to scrutinise a city that – while belonging to the colonial structure – exists through an assemblage of material configurations and linguistic manifestations: an assembly of things, words and signs that furiously and constantly collide with politics, making the colonial structure visible and intelligible. In this way, the scope is the reinvention of a series of linguistic practices, a transformation of the perception of environments and description of a territory, and a new activation of meaning.

The lexicon triggers a new methodology: *Hackritivation*, namely the un-authorised attempt to exploit and violate the existing 'security' system or network of language and things, by stimulating new perceptions around things, their words, 'signifiers' and 'signified'. It is a political act that creates shared experiences of a denied space. This is a linguistic tale, the re-conciliation between the Jerusalem of the imagination and the Jerusalem of things. The lexicon reinvents the city on the level of things and the stories that exist behind them, unveiling the intersection between stories from

² Bernard Tschumi. 1987. *Cinegram Folie: le parc de La Vilette*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press: vii.

the colonial past with those from the present, and let us immerse in the thick materiality of colonial reality. These will constitute in themselves an experience of "awakening". Walter Benjamin calls "awakening" the inception of every historical presentation, where the emergence of singularities, even if bound to the instant, determines lasting temporal effects. Whether interpreted in relation to the body as opposed to consciousness, "awakening" then turns into a spatial dimension through awakening/remembrance, where time and space eventually compress and generate historical experiences. Additionally, and more importantly, this collective work of documenting such experiences of awakening constitutes the certification of the multidimensional history of the struggle, as the lexicon functions as both history writing and narration of the resistance. Jacques Rancière writes that "Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the account that is made of this speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt."³ The Jerusalem of Things argues that beyond the sphere of speaking, orality and audibility, writing is the other function of language making it the foundation of politics. This exercise serves to make the group's members into witnesses, testifying against injustices. Writing thus becomes praxis, bearing witness and writing history. By applying old terms and things to new concepts, the lexicon will help not only to understand Jerusalem, but the overall question of Palestine.

"If you turn round suddenly, as in the children's game 'Mother may I?', they will be, looking innocent, as if they hadn't budged; here, on the left, are things themselves; there, on the right, is the free society of speaking, thinking subjects, values and of signs."⁴ With these words, Bruno Latour while thinking of the Moderns, makes clear how the idea of losing innocence is intrinsic to the practice of playing. The Jerusalem of Things is a project that exists because it is an act of playing in itself. Through playing,

³ Jacques Rancière. 1999. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. University of Minnesota Press: 22-23.

⁴ Bruno Latour. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Harvard University Press: 37.

we understand innocence until it finally gets lost. The act of playing is experienced – with Giorgio Agamben – as an irrelevant practice: “Children, who play with whatever old thing falls into their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to thinking of as serious”.⁵ The organising principle of the Jerusalem of Things is rooted indeed in the idea of playing, as it gives the chance not to fear “the incongruous”, geometries, laws or linking together things and words that might look inappropriate.

This is why *Playground* constitutes the entry point of the lexicon. While addressing questions of disparity between West and East Jerusalem, playgrounds represent a space for public creativity and imperitence which is intrinsic to playing. Only a playing area symbolically challenges a predefined and oppressive built environment. The disruptive power of playgrounds does not simply shift the attention to the question of free use, but it does so while emphasising the importance of communal and public space for community life. Therefore, the focus shifts specifically into the case of Sur Baher’s playground, an East Jerusalem neighbourhood where in 2016 its first playground was built – without a permit from Jerusalem’s municipality – with the support of UN-Habitat and the Belgian government: one playground – two slides, a carousel and two swings – for 40,000 residents. Sur Baher is also surrounded by two settlements, Honat Shmuel and Armon Hanatziv. Within a city where Jewish neighbourhoods have on average 30 times as many playgrounds as the adjacent Palestinian neighbourhoods, the act of playing directly confronts the ghettoisation of Jerusalem’s Palestinian areas, while playing areas resemble pioneer spaces for collective resilience and activism, celebrating the symbolic kinship between profanality, innocence and resistance.

Traffic Lights. Here, space and time are combined for understanding how segregation operates on multiple levels. With Modernity, space and time have become the main categories through which the human divide between colonisers and colonised, modern and non-modern, civilisation and barbarity



⁵ Giorgio Agamben, 2007. *Profanations*. Translated by Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books: 76.

have been represented and justified. Other spaces are not simply distant, but they belong to another time. Considering Johannes Fabian's theory of *chronopolitics*, colonial powers always rely on an ontological separation and distance between the Western subject and its other, based on the following assumption: "what makes the savage significant [...] is that he lives in another time".⁶ Accordingly, the archetypal construction of "otherness" in modern times expresses the distribution of humanity in the geographical space, where the discourse on civilisation, evolution and development starts with classification through spatialised temporal slopes.

In a geopolitical context where Palestinians already experience time as a weapon in the hands of the occupiers – people generally spend plenty of seconds, minutes, hours, and years waiting at checkpoints, borders, terminals, offices, applications for permits and visas, etcetera – the group decided provocatively to push forward this line of thinking and analyse time in the colony in its most controversial but rational manifestation: the organisation of time in relation to Jerusalem's traffic. Like in any other city, mobility is channelled into roads, tunnels and arteries according to a programmed time system. The time duration of traffic lights in liminal zones therefore separates Palestinian neighbourhoods from Israeli ones. According to a recent report that was published by Al-Jazeera, time-apartheid is also implemented at Jerusalem's crossroads. Traffic lights at the interchange with Israeli settlements stay green for an average of one minute and thirty seconds. On the contrary, those at the entry to Palestinian areas stay green for twenty seconds only. At the intersections between Israeli and Palestinian areas – respectively, Pisgat Zeev / Neve Yakov and Beit Hanina, but also in other Palestinian areas near Al-Mosrara, Shoafat, Sheikh Jarrah and Wadi Al Joz, Palestinian cars get easily stuck and traffic jams freeze mobility. If, on the one hand, the question of organisation of time at traffic lights is a municipality's duty to regulate traffic, on the other hand, it serves a segregationist logic of separation as it reflects the classic colonial use of time, as a way to confine native's life into spatial and temporal "immobility".

⁶ Johannes Fabian. 2002. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press: 27.

ID cards. Behind ID cards lays the human drama of family reunification in Jerusalem, between the Blue IDs of the Palestinian 'residents' and the Green IDs of those from the West Bank who would need a permit to enter the city. The wall channels the movement of the 'Blues' and the 'Greens' controlling direction, flux and frequency. While innocent love is perceived as an unrestrained impulse, "you *fall* in love, you lose control", the codification of love under Israeli law affects Palestinian life dramatically: couples can apply to the Israeli authorities for family reunification, but the process is not easy: ever since 2003, a 'Green' will hardly ever turn 'Blue' and therefore obtain a legal resident status in Jerusalem. Also, the process is full of obstacles. For instance, the Israeli ministry of interior keeps extending the application of the Citizenship and Entry to Israel Law of 2003, that states how "The minister of the interior may, at his discretion, grant permits to stay in Israel to spouses from the Occupied Territories, if the husband is over the age of 35 or the wife over the age of 25. These permits can be renewed but they do not entail social benefits, a work permit or status in Israel".⁷ Alternatively, the decision of a Blue ID to reunite with a Green ID, which means leaving Jerusalem for the West Bank, can be fatal: as residents but not citizens, East Jerusalemites are subject to Israeli entry laws, hence an extended residence out of the city can be used by the state to revoke their Jerusalem residency status and expulsion, with the Israeli Supreme Court's approval. More than 14,000 residency revocations have occurred between 1967 and 2011. This means that more than 14,000 were denied life in their own city. Narrating love through ID cards at the time of occupation, highlights the role of the law in the process of a reckless fragmentation of the social fabric of the city, and its families, as a way to demonstrate the ongoing demographic war waged by the State of Israel against Palestinians.

Home. The question of Palestine since the Nakba revolves around the erasure of Palestinian national space: land, villages, properties and, of course, private homes. Those renting property in East Jerusalem can only have 'three' generations of tenancy,

⁷ 'Family Separation in East Jerusalem', *B'Tzema*, 20 August 2013, http://www.btselem.org/family_separation/east_jerusalem

set as a limit by Israeli law for state protection. Israeli law determines that by the death of the third generation (grandfather, son and grandchild), the protection of tenants will be lifted and the property can be confiscated. Facing the possibility of a dramatic increase of forced evictions from the Old City, the Judaisation of the Old City is a multifaceted process, whose final goal is the change of demographic balance, and consequently, the preservation of a Jewish majority in the whole city. The ongoing property confiscation and displacement of Palestinians in favour of Jewish settlers brings to the fore the centrality of the refugee as the political category around which the conflict revolved and still does, making the Nakba an ongoing process. In this sense, such contemporary practices of displacement reconnect with the Old City's refugee narratives dated from 1948 when the Mu'askar camp in the a-Sharaf neighbourhood (then the Mughrabi quarter of the Old City) sheltered 3,500 refugees fleeing from the 55 villages which have been cleansed around the Jerusalem district. Refugees stayed in Mu'askar until 1965, when the Shoafat Refugee Camp was established by UNRWA-United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine. The Mughrabi neighbourhood was demolished immediately after the 1967 war to allow a smooth and comfortable pray area for the Jews coming from all over the world to the Wailing Wall, and to visit the "liberated" city. While today there are no longer traces of these refugees in the Old City, the risk of a new massive displacement put again the unresolved figure of the refugee at the centre of Palestine's question.

Jerusalem's blues is the closing term that ends this foreword to the lexicon. The headword rather than refer to melancholic and sad lyrics, as if it was a 'blues' melody or rhythmic talk from American plantations giving sound to the souls of slaves, simply represents the variations of 'blue' that depict Jerusalem's everyday life. For Jewish Israeli culture the light blue or biblical blue *Tekhelet* is a dye used for the clothing of the High Priest, a fringed garment mostly known as the *Tallit*. The *Tallit* is the gamer worn for prayer, and the white and blue can be found in the flag of the State of Israel. However, the blue the lexicon writes about is a nuance between the 'Blue' colour of the IDs of East Jerusalem residents and the Blue that colours the Flag of UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian

refugees, which until today waves on the Shoafat Refugee Camp. The chromatic scale between these two variations of blue eventually gives a coloured representation to stateless-ness in its various forms. The lexicon reaffirms the inclusion of the category of the refugee at the core of the debate of contemporary Jerusalem, as it is for the question of Palestine as a whole. The refugee here stands as a political rather than humanitarian subject and serves as the key to its decolonised future⁸.

⁸ See Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency: Alessandro Pettit, Sandi Hilal, Eyal Weizmann. 2013. *Architecture After Revolution*. Sternberg Press.