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# In Search of a Liberatory Appraisal for Palestinian Archives

ANDREW SANDOCK

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**ABSTRACT** In November 2023, the Central Archives of Gaza was bombed during Israel's ongoing incursion in the strip, reducing 150 years of the cultural record to ash. This attack is but one moment in the long history of archival theft and destruction in Palestine, the culmination of a sphere of colonial epistemicide. Palestinian ways of knowing face a constant threat of annihilation, and Palestinian archives are built under the looming peril of physical destruction. Palestinian archives struggle to appraise for the future and engage instead in massified forms of appraisal and digitization in efforts to preserve everything they can in the face of these threats. Taking stock of some current prominent instances of archival projects in Palestine, this article thinks through some current approaches to appraisal, wondering if they apply here and whether they can be expanded to account for the particularities of this environment. It then attempts to reimagine what a liberatory appraisal might look like, thinking about the Palestinian archive as a counter to epistemic violence and exploring the processes through which appraisal methods and categories might be gleaned by anticipating liberated futures.

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**RÉSUMÉ** En novembre 2023, les Archives centrales de Gaza ont été bombardées pendant l'incursion en cours d'Israël dans la bande de Gaza, réduisant en cendres 150 ans de documentation culturelle. Cette attaque n'est qu'un moment dans la longue histoire de vol d'archives et de destruction de la Palestine, le point culminant d'une sphère d'épistémicide colonial. Les systèmes de connaissances palestiniens font face à une menace constante d'anéantissement et les archives palestiniennes sont érigées sous la menace constante d'une destruction physique. Le milieu archivistique palestinien a de la difficulté à envisager l'avenir et recourt plutôt à des formes d'évaluation et de numérisation massives dans ses efforts pour préserver tout ce qui est possible face à cette menace. En faisant le point sur quelques exemples marquants de projets archivistiques actuels en Palestine, cet article réfléchit à des approches actuelles de l'évaluation s'interrogeant si celles-ci peuvent y être appliquées et si elles peuvent être élargies pour tenir compte des particularités de son environnement. Il tente par la suite de réimaginer ce à quoi une évaluation libératrice pourrait ressembler, utilisant les archives palestiniennes comme contre-attaque à la violence épistémique et explorant les procédés par lesquels des méthodes et des catégories d'évaluation pourraient être glanées sur la base d'une anticipation de futurs libérés.

## Introduction

On October 27, 2023, three weeks into Israel's ongoing acceleration of violence in the Gaza Strip after Operation al-Aqsa Flood, the Gaza City mayor's office received a phone call from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) threatening the destruction of the municipal complex at Palestine Square, including a direct targeting of the Central Archives of Gaza. The mayor's team appealed to the soldier on the other end of the line, warning of what would be lost if such an attack were carried out: critical water services to the city's inhabitants, ancient sites and buildings in Gaza's city centre, and the archives – the “memory of Gaza City” itself.<sup>1</sup> One month later, the neighbourhood lay in ruins and the archives was a bombed-out shell, 150 years of the cultural record reduced to ash.<sup>2</sup>

This attack is but one moment in the long history of archival theft and destruction in Palestine, beginning with the 1948 *nakba* (catastrophe), when 750,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from their land by the Haganah and other Zionist settler militias. Many of these people left their homes unaware that they would not be returning after a few days of tumult: tables lay set, laundry lay in bins, half-written letters lay on desks. Settlers plundered the vacated houses and villages, having already emptied them of their inhabitants, then emptied them of their contents, stealing artifacts, heirlooms – anything they might have found of value. Maps were removed from villages and villages removed from the map. Along with tens of thousands of souls and hundreds of villages, many Palestinian cultural institutions were lost during the *nakba*; not a single one survived. Over 60,000 books from private Palestinian collections were taken during this time, forming the basis of what became the Israel State Archives.<sup>3</sup> Colonial archival institutions continued to accumulate stolen materials under the occupation of the following decades; as they grew, Palestinian archives shrank. This pattern notably culminated in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut with the sacking of the Palestine Research Center, which contained the archives created by the cultural

1 Middle East Eye, “Gaza's Central Archives Building Lies in Ruins after Israeli Air Strike,” November 30, 2023, YouTube video, 1:19, <https://youtu.be/dCNftkL7cx4?feature=shared>.

2 Palestinian Ministry of Culture, *The Second Preliminary Report on the Cultural Sector Damage* (Gaza: Ministry of Culture, 2023), 35.

3 Daud Abdullah, “A Century of Cultural Genocide in Palestine,” in *Cultural Genocide: Law, Politics, and Global Manifestation*, ed. Jeffrey S. Bachman (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 227–45, 236.

wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Thousands of documents, records, film reels, and photographs were smuggled across the border into the IDF archives, later used as bargaining chips in prisoner swaps (not before being scanned), then kidnapped again years later.<sup>4</sup> The Palestinian archive can here be considered a lifeblood of the nation, traded alongside resistance fighters, held in locked rooms, and withheld from public view. As Rona Sela notes, the epistemic violence of archival theft “does not end with the physical act of plunder, but continues with colonial administration”<sup>5</sup> – with the imprisonment of archival material and the denial of access to its heirs.

The 2023 bombing of the Central Archive of Gaza has cemented what is already widely known: that nowhere is safe for Palestinian archives, that our memory and lifeblood is as indiscriminate a target as the more than 50,000 people killed (so far) in this genocidal campaign. This instance of cultural genocide is typical within the broader landscape of colonial violence, as the dismantling of national patterns of the oppressed have been coterminous with “the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor.”<sup>6</sup> As the father of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, once proclaimed, “If I wish to substitute a new building for an old one, I must demolish before I construct.”<sup>7</sup> It is part of a broader phenomenon of epistemic violence whereby colonizing powers actively replace Indigenous ways of knowing with hegemonic ones through colonial technologies like the archive and, in their attempt to build a totalizing body of knowledge, literally populate the shelves with the dismantled archives of the colonized. In this ideological framework, the colonizer asserts that there is but one version of history (and only one archive that can hold that history) – theirs – and that any attempt to produce alternative forms of knowledge will be met with concerted violence. In this space of hegemonic ideology, how can the colonized assert, “I too know history”? Where the archive remains under constant threat of annihilation, how can the archivist begin to think about appraising archival materials? Which methods, which categories, could stop the flames from burning or the roof from caving in? This article is an attempt to imagine what such an appraisal might look

4 Rona Sela, “The Genealogy of Colonial Plunder and Erasure: Israel’s Control over Palestinian Archives,” *Social Semiotics* 28, no. 2 (2018): 201–29, 205.

5 Sela, 206.

6 Abdullah, “A Century of Cultural Genocide in Palestine,” 227.

7 Abdullah, 240.

like; to think about Palestine as a site of epistemicide and the Palestinian archive as a counter to that violence; and to ask if the relationalities between lost, stolen, and destroyed archival materials can be reconciled with newly appraised Palestinian archives. Taking stock of some current prominent instances of massified and fragmented archival projects in Palestine, I think through some approaches to appraisal, wondering if they apply here and whether they can be expanded to account for the inevitability or anticipation of the violence that may be inflicted upon these archives. And, by no measure finding replete answers, I explore the possibility of a liberatory appraisal practice – one that does not cling to the idea of reproducing archives long gone but that orients itself toward liberated futures.

## The Colonial Archive and Its Enunciations

To indict the archive as a technology of colonialism is not a novel act. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida notes that the modernist archive purported to be a site of “consigned memory,” one that surmised a supposed “faithfulness to tradition.”<sup>8</sup> The taking up of this archive was necessarily oriented toward the past; if the document represented a truth, an event, a transaction, then it could be logged as proof of a teleology between past and present. It is not a leap to then understand the archive as a technology of rule: if one controls the archive, one controls history itself. Ann Stoler deems the colonial archive to be “the supreme technology of the late nineteenth-century imperial state” and a precursor to today’s rendition, the “circuit through which facticities move.”<sup>9</sup> As such, the archive (like any colonial technology, according to Aníbal Quijano)<sup>10</sup> is deeply ensconced in the workings of colonial modernity, upholding hegemonic powers’ vision of today’s world and, further, reifying the “universal cultural model”<sup>11</sup> of colonial culture and thought. Not only does such a force obliterate other forms of knowledge and

8 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 33.

9 Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Cape Town, SA: David Philip, 2002), 83–102, 89.

10 Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–78, 169.

11 Quijano, 169.

of cultural or historical transmission, but it works to confuse one's conception of the colonizer itself, obscuring the role of the archive not just in the production of colonial epistemology but also reciprocally, in the production of the colonial state.<sup>12</sup> The archive thus becomes co-constitutive of the hegemonic epistemes in which it arises. It is constructed in the vision of these hegemonic epistemologies, in turn creating or reifying the narrative and being of such structures through its affirmation of history and evidence – justifying its violence under the banner of a necessary teleology and the “higher goals” of progress.<sup>13</sup>

As Stoler contends, this is not an excuse to dismiss the colonial archive as an irrelevant “source of the past” but, rather, an opportunity to engage it from another angle, to seek the answers to different questions, which interrogate the very configuration of colonial authority.<sup>14</sup> Following Trouillot, she questions “what accounts get authorised, what procedures were required, and what about the past is possible to know.”<sup>15</sup> It is impossible not to hear in these questions echoes of Foucault, who in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* conceives of the archive as the evidential stake that has been used to determine what indeed can be known at all within the pervasive realm of colonial modernity – the production of a colonial *episteme*. He asks, “Who is speaking? Who . . . is accorded the right to use this sort of language?”<sup>16</sup> The colonial archive here may not comprise *facts* but instead prescribes the “laws of possibility” under colonial modernity – “the rules of existence for the objects that are named.”<sup>17</sup> That the colonial archive constitutes such a “system of enunciability”<sup>18</sup> leads one reasonably to identify it as a site of epistemicide. In the settler-colonial context of Palestine, in order for the Israel State Archives to construct both the nation and its history, it must simultaneously demolish and appropriate the Palestinian nation and its history.

12 Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” 90.

13 Edward W. Said, “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,” *Social Text* 1, no. 1 (1979): 7–58, 9.

14 Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” 85.

15 Stoler, 87.

16 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 55.

17 Foucault, 103.

18 Foucault, 146.

## The Decolonial Archive and Its Enunciations

This epistemicide plays out through the routine mechanisms of Israeli occupation beyond the frequent plundering of Palestinian archives, such as attempts to eradicate the Arabic language from public life (including by removing it as an official language of Israel in 2018) and the criminalization of commemorative holidays such as Nakba Day.<sup>19</sup> As the atmospheres of epistemic violence permeate the recesses of everyday life, and as the continual threat of physical violence looms overhead, people are feeling that the existence and posterity of their culture and nationhood are endangered.<sup>20</sup> What has ensued is a frenzied “archive fever,” both within Palestine and in exile, in reaction to the ever-escalating conditions of the occupation.<sup>21</sup> Much of this work has been centred around the West Bank village of Birzeit. At Birzeit University, the Awraq Digital Archive project has amassed tens of thousands of documents and archival materials and digitized them for publication on its website,<sup>22</sup> largely in an attempt to bring close the archival research opportunities that otherwise lie beyond checkpoints or borders.<sup>23</sup> Since 2011, the university has digitized and compiled into an enormous digital repository materials received through donations and loans, almost indiscriminately taking in whatever might be of research or other historical and cultural value, and indeed, the accessioning of “unofficial” records is well within its mandate.<sup>24</sup> So, in this fevered space, the personal papers of 20th-century Palestinian families mingle with the official bureaucratic records of 19th-century Ottoman administrators. Just a few kilometres away, the Palestinian Museum has embarked on a separate project to archive Palestine, not just as a geography but as a concept. While separate, these projects are not entirely unconnected as some scholars from Birzeit University are also involved

19 Abdullah, “A Century of Cultural Genocide in Palestine,” 239.

20 Lourdes Habash and Raed Bader, “The Palestinian Digital Archive between Anarchy and Anti-Method: A Critical View,” in *Tomorrows* (West Bank, PS: Birzeit University, 2014), 2.

21 Habash and Bader, 2.

22 Habash and Bader, 3.

23 Ann Laura Stoler, “Archiving Praxis: For Palestine and Beyond,” *Critical Inquiry* 48, no. 3 (2022): 570–93, 580.

24 Stoler, 592.

in programming at the Museum.<sup>25</sup> What started out as a somewhat more curated vision – broadly, one facet within the nascent museum itself – the archive has shifted, stalled, and collapsed inward throughout the past decade as the institution has found its footing.<sup>26</sup> Now, in the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, photos of major uprisings consort with photos of weddings and picnics by the sea. The Archive is utterly defiant in its rejection of any pronounced appraisal protocols, a move that participating scholars Lourdes Habash and Raed Bader call “most certainly political . . . one entailing the anti-authoritarian decision *not* to decide.”<sup>27</sup> In a rejection of the colonial logics that govern hegemonic historical and archival thought, what Stoler calls a praxis of “dissensus,” it deviates from or even rebels against the professional norms that engrain colonial ideology in their forms, “allowing other defiant political visions, aesthetic possibilities, and affective reflections.”<sup>28</sup> A large niche has been carved for a new way of archiving.

This wave of archivization has also made way for what former Birzeit University president Beshara Doumani calls an “emergence of archival democracy,”<sup>29</sup> a guerilla archiving where documentation happens in living rooms, on the streets, in mosques, and in churches through the recording of oral histories, the collecting of photos and diaries, and the mapping of genealogies. This diffusion of archival practice embodies an implicit distrust in the archive as an institution, problematizing archives’ representation as “official” bodies where there is no state that can be deemed “official”<sup>30</sup> – when, as Doumani notes, leaders of the Palestinian Authority are “incapable of protecting their own people, much less salvaging the Palestinian past and preparing for the future.”<sup>31</sup> It enacts a dissensus that “puts and presupposes an equalizing of persons and things (that

25 Stoler, 583.

26 Stoler, 590.

27 Habash and Bader, 4.

28 Ann Laura Stoler, “On Archiving as Dissensus,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38, no. 1 (2018): 43–56, 44.

29 Beshara Doumani, “Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians: The Patrimony of Ihsan Nimr,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 36 (Winter 2009): 3–12, 4.

30 Roger Heacock, “Locating and Opening Palestinian Archives: A National Priority,” Birzeit University working paper no. 2011/2, 2, *SSRN*, March 1, 2011, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1801124>.

31 Doumani, “Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians,” 5.

are not otherwise equal in a hierarchical order) at the crux of its making.”<sup>32</sup> It points to a reclamation of what Trouillot would call “unthinkable histories,”<sup>33</sup> which lie outside the colonial purview and cannot be slotted into the colonial archive’s (failed) categories, whose own presupposed classifications can only digest a decolonial enunciation of history in fragments.<sup>34</sup>

So, is a decolonial archival enunciation what we are witnessing here? It is certainly possible. To use Quijano’s definition, any such undertaking would truly need to “make invisible the colonial order as totality.”<sup>35</sup> If the institution of the archive serves to totalize epistemology by reinforcing and perpetuating hegemonic ideology, how can colonized peoples enact decolonial ways of knowing from within and without the archive? Crucially, in the context of Palestine, where there has been a zealous effort to violently destroy, disappear, and appropriate Indigenous archives, how should archivists conceive of their role in forming or reviving decolonial epistemologies? Are such revivals even possible or worthwhile? An intervention is needed in order to blur the “structure of archivable content”<sup>36</sup> and to challenge the certainty with which the colonial archive is affirmed as an authoritative record of the past and rendered deleterious to possible decolonial futures. The performance of archiving through dissensus points toward just that – an “epistemic de-linking”<sup>37</sup> through disobedience. It is, after all, the open call of the Birzeit archives to speak in alternative archival languages, to redefine its structures. There is no doubt that this is vital work, a lifeblood to cling to.

A question that must be addressed is, Is such a post-structural fragmentation of our archives safe, particularly for a body of knowledge that has already been so shattered and broken, scattered across borders and the Green Line, and deposited into far-flung repositories – some the people’s, some the colonizer’s? Are we straying too far from the desire to find truth and subjecthood within the

32 Stoler, “On Archiving as Dissensus,” 44.

33 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 73.

34 Trouillot, 83.

35 Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 173.

36 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17.

37 Walter Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 159–81, 173.

archive? Is there a way (or a need) to move beyond this resolution to dismiss the archive as a relic and to instead move through its silences, speak through its gaps? A “counter-archive” could mean any of a thousand things.

In conceiving of a decolonial enunciation, Walter D. Mignolo evokes Fanon’s idea that one cannot learn a language without accepting its engrained realities.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, one cannot learn an archive without accepting its engrained realities. However, sometimes two languages differ only in syntax and not in vocabulary. When Aimé Césaire says, “We do not speak the same language,” he is still using the same words as his French audience: “racistes,” “révolutionnaires.”<sup>39</sup> The difference in meaning is derived only through his enunciation. The language of the colonizer and the vernacular of the colonized might deploy the same words but mean very different things. This dual speaking through the archive allows what Edward Said would call a “contrapuntal,”<sup>40</sup> harmonic reading of the archive – an examination of the hegemonic ideology through the Indigenous vernacular that ultimately reveals something about both renditions that neither could produce alone. It is the same *logos* with which Stoler urges us to rethink reading archives, not “against the grain” but rather “along their fault lines.”<sup>41</sup> Habash and Bader affirm that the collection of the Birzeit archive “does not claim to be the only imaginable one, nor does it strive to occupy such a position.”<sup>42</sup> This should ideally leave room for the archive to be read as “orthogonal to colonial forms,” as Stoler offers – as “one that runs oblique to them.”<sup>43</sup> It allows a reading of history not from one end or the other but “from the center,”<sup>44</sup> or as Mignolo would say, as an “our” archive, which is not independent from “theirs” but at the same time is “unrepentantly, unashamedly, impenitently ‘ours.’”<sup>45</sup> In this sense, an archival decolonial enunciation makes way for engagement with a lived reality that is confined to the residual space left out of the colonizer’s account of our lives – to

38 Mignolo, 165.

39 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 14.

40 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 52.

41 Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” 100.

42 Habash and Bader, “The Palestinian Digital Archive between Anarchy and Anti-Method,” 9.

43 Stoler, “On Archiving as Dissensus,” 46.

44 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 52.

45 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” 169.

claim an inheritance from a different cosmology than that of recorded lineage or historical timeline, but still traceable within the gaps of the archive. With this tangent, I am not attempting to redeem the colonial archive but instead to draw attention to the interrelationalities that must be considered if any method of appraisal is to be explored. It is important to understand the preconditions of epistemicide before continuing, and here we might explore the possibilities of an appraisal that takes on the shape of decolonial enunciation.

## In Search of an Appraisal

Habash and Bader state that the Birzeit archive “does not tell the whole story, but seen in conjunction with other archives . . . empowers the Palestinian narrative and shows how an archive may be constructed that is dissimilar to colonial ones of the British or Israeli variety.”<sup>46</sup> Again, there is dissimilarity in form, but an archival decolonial enunciation here invites a speaking through the colonial archive: Are they not our stolen artifacts that sit on their shelves? Are the Palestinian materials held behind Israeli archival gates diminished in their relation and interdependence with Palestinian archives simply because they were stolen away? I am reminded of Helen Samuels: “Records mirror the society that creates them.”<sup>47</sup> When Samuels devised the idea of a “documentation strategy,” she gestured toward the rhizomatous networks of meaning between the colonial and decolonial archive, suggesting that “a common soil and water source enriches and binds collections together” and that “archivists should offer the future not individual trees, but a forest.”<sup>48</sup> She envisioned a web of co-operation, where a fragmented body of knowledge reaches across the crevasses, across institutions, and whereby archivists plan from the beginning for both the creation and retention of important records.<sup>49</sup> But still, it would not be simple to wilfully tailor collecting decisions in the Palestinian environment, where the crevasses are perhaps insurmountable. The terms of settler-colonial occupation hardly

<sup>46</sup> Habash and Bader, “The Palestinian Digital Archive between Anarchy and Anti-Method,” 19.

<sup>47</sup> Helen Samuels, “Who Controls the Past?” *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 109–24, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Samuels, 124.

<sup>49</sup> Samuels, 115.

facilitate coordination between relevant institutions. And, of course, there is the persistent matter of ongoing violence. These co-operating, planning, and coordinating roles cannot necessarily be delegated among archivists who are each attempting to preserve anything and everything they can get their hands on. Perhaps, though, there is space to think about cohesion among archiving bodies, between those in Palestine and those in exile, and among diasporic archives themselves. Indeed, those links are currently being tightened.

We might move closer by incorporating Terry Cook's "macroappraisal," moving further from an "essentially empirical" practice to one more "concerned with the recognition of forms and patterns of knowledge."<sup>50</sup> For Cook, a documentation strategy is a somewhat artificial attempt at repairing archival fragmentation, and it should only come after a provenance-based appraisal is complete.<sup>51</sup> Beginning from the top, considering the values most defining of society, the archivist can begin to parse out categories upon which to base the process of appraisal. It is not up to me to decide whether these categories can differ enough from the functions- or values-based categories of the colonial archive, but this idea is worth considering seriously. If such categories can be produced, how, and by whom? The Birzeit archive shies away from relying on categories of appraisal, and the "categories" through which it arguably does appraise and arrange in reality operate along more indexical lines. Indeed, assessments are often randomly based upon such characterizing categories as "refugees and migrants," or "Palestinian personalities," and any number of individuals might (and often do) fall into both or more.<sup>52</sup>

Closer yet, Michelle Caswell offers us her concept of feminist standpoint appraisal, a way to start identifying categories by seeing from below, embodying a situatedness in appraisal processes that "inverts dominant appraisal hierarchies" that prioritize records speaking to the dominant standpoint of the (colonial) archival institution.<sup>53</sup> With such an approach (and, as Said suggests, from the standpoint of Zionism's victims),<sup>54</sup> how would Palestinian archivists

50 Terry Cook, "Documentation Strategy," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992): 181–91, 185.

51 Cook, 188.

52 Habash and Bader, "The Palestinian Digital Archive between Anarchy and Anti-Method," 10.

53 Michelle Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021): 1–36, 6.

54 Said, "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims."

identify which community is the starting point? If the greatest material struggle for Palestinians is the condition of colonialism, then is it possible to assert the value of one experience over the other – the experience portrayed in the photo of the uprising or that portrayed in the photo of the wedding? To be sure, both are inextricable from their colonial context.

The wall that this search seems to be hitting is that any of these appraisal strategies might require a reworking of the massified collection practices of Palestinian archives, which in the end would likely do more harm than good. It may not be possible to adapt them to a context of settler-colonialism and violent epistemicide without altering the inherent nature of such a theory. This archive fever unfolding in Palestine is a core expression of an archival decolonial enunciation that is both outwardly stated and implicit, for two reasons. First, it is decidedly not an irrational impulse driven by fear but a reaction to material conditions. In critiquing today's phenomenon of the "cacophony" of archives engaged in mass collecting rather than appraisal, Richard Cox, speaking of course of an entirely different context, contends that archivists should engage in a pointed "self-evaluation" of their purpose.<sup>55</sup> While the first question that might be asked is whether such a self-evaluation is possible under such acute and urgent conditions, or whether it can be afforded, it becomes clear that this collecting is a result of such an evaluation. It is not incidental. A collective "informed subjectivity"<sup>56</sup> reveals the necessity of engaging in such an act. Of course, collecting *everything* cannot be achieved – this is never denied. Gaps will exist, and contrapuntal and imaginative archival readings help.

This brings us to the second point: these materials are subject to mass collecting not only because they are all under threat but also because they are all highly relevant. If our starting point, the axis upon which we base our collections, is the condition of occupation, these materials all have value because of the unmitigated pervasiveness of coloniality. The photograph entitled "Friday after the great prayer, Israeli army invade the streets Nablus Old city"<sup>57</sup> seems an

55 Richard J. Cox, "The End of Collecting: Towards a New Purpose for Archival Appraisal," *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 287–309, 290.

56 Cox, 307.

57 The Palestinian Museum, The Palestinian Museum Digital Archives, The Joss Dray Collection, "Friday after the great prayer, Israeli army invade the streets Nablus Old city," 0006.02.0131 [photograph], 1988, [https://palarchive.org/index.php/Detail/objects/14782/lang/en\\_US](https://palarchive.org/index.php/Detail/objects/14782/lang/en_US).

obvious choice for selection with its depiction of the old Arab men rushing across the street; the three armed IDF soldiers rounding a corner, a smirk on one's face; and a revolutionary slogan spray-painted on the wall behind them. What about "A Wedding Party, al-Wehdat Camp,"<sup>58</sup> showing children surrounding a couple, with heads bowed, under streamers of tinsel? This photograph offers another angle on colonized life, the everyday life of the camp, and the march of exile that brought the bride's parents there as well as the groom's. It offers what Stoler calls the "debris"<sup>59</sup> of everyday life, relegated to the margins when attention is paid solely to the political narratives, to the accelerations of violence, and not to the "slow violence"<sup>60</sup> that seeps down into every level.

How can we attempt to archive across these temporalities, across these experiences? How can we appraise – which is to say, assign value to – materials under such a totalizing atmosphere of coloniality, where kernels of the occupation are found in even the most mundane moments of life? How do we appraise the air people breathe, the water they drink, the burns on their skin, the chronic diseases that come and go? Can we archive a breath? Can we archive a cell? Do we appraise the drone or the flinching at its overhead thrum? Do we appraise the reports of famine or the blurriness after a hot day, the dragging of the feet? Do we appraise the death certificate or the absence of a small hand, once held within a mother's? How do we appraise 50,000 souls, family trees, or ideas thought before drifting to sleep at night? Who decides?

## In Search of a Liberatory Appraisal

The Palestinian way of appraising manifests in this massive aggregation; our methods of appraisal need to be expanded to accommodate. But can this itself be furthered? Is the collection of materials in and of itself a rebellious act? Habash and Bader state, "By building and building upon a Palestinian archive such as

58 The Palestinian Museum, The Palestinian Museum Digital Archives, The Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) Collection, "A Wedding Party, al-Wehdat Camp," 0002.06.2198 [photograph], 1987, [https://palarchive.org/index.php/Detail/objects/29731/lang/en\\_US](https://palarchive.org/index.php/Detail/objects/29731/lang/en_US).

59 Stoler, "On Archiving as Dissensus," 47.

60 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

this one, the distortions of Israeli archives are combated, even as Palestinian memory and identity are resurrected.”<sup>61</sup> This resurrection can be thought of in several ways; I consider two. It was traditionally thought that the duty of those responsible for archives was, as Duranti puts it, to “preserve them uncorrupted,” to “set them aside for continuing preservation.”<sup>62</sup> Can the archive be activated not just to preserve Palestinian history but also to enact resistance, to embody the necessarily revolutionary spirit of Palestinian epistemologies? Can we activate, in Stoler’s words, “a Palestinian order of things”?<sup>63</sup> Can we find “new ways of configuring and chartering both the ‘imaginative geography’ (as Edward Said would call it) of and beyond a colonial occupation?”<sup>64</sup> Maybe the excesses of reality that lead to the archive’s inability to represent the colonial experience is what is rejected through this attempted representation. Some actions have probed this idea, such as the nomination of the Dheisheh refugee camp to the UNESCO World Heritage List<sup>65</sup> – a symbolic move to seal a site built to be temporary into the body of Palestinian life and to emboss the experiences of occupation and exile into the concept of Palestinian culture itself.

Perhaps another kind of resurrection thus takes place that is akin to Walter Benjamin’s *erlösung* (resurrection, transfiguration, redemption), which delivers the past into the present by a force that is undoubtedly *anticipatory*, a past that “carries a secret index with it, by which it is referred to its resurrection.”<sup>66</sup> This resurrection of the past is not preservative but transformative, finding traces of the present in every inch of the past.<sup>67</sup> He goes on: “To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’ It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.”<sup>68</sup> We see here the past mediated

61 Habash and Bader, “The Palestinian Digital Archive between Anarchy and Anti-Method,” 19.

62 Luciana Duranti, “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory,” *American Archivist* 57, no. 2 (1994): 328–44, 336.

63 Stoler, “On Archiving as Dissensus,” 49.

64 Stoler, “On Archiving as Dissensus,” 43.

65 Gil Z. Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 5.

66 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” transl. Dennis Redmond, 2005, originally published in *Gesammelten Schriften I:2* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), II, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

67 Benjamin, III.

68 Benjamin, VI.

through the conditions of the present. But in *The Spirit of Utopia*, Ernst Bloch contends that there is no true experience of the present: “I no longer possess as experience even what just passed.”<sup>69</sup> What is “present” is just out of reach through the translation of sentient experience. Nevertheless, the past persists, and past experience “does not cease to exist or to influence.”<sup>70</sup> In that sense, the present moment cannot be of a novel volition, does not cradle anything that “was not once present to consciousness.”<sup>71</sup> In this temporality, where the world is in a constant state of becoming and emergence, the job may be to somehow detect the change that is happening or that is constantly arriving. In other words, we must look not in the present but somewhere else for a new liberatory consciousness. Yes, the past continues to exist, but the future *will not stop existing*.

Therefore, just as it seems untenable to rely on the values of the past to archive the present conditions, I wonder whether we can possibly rely on the values of the present to archive for the future. The categories we choose now to base appraisals upon must neither imitate the values of an historical past nor embed and define themselves within the current structures of settler-colonialism (always quickly historicized as past experience). Moving beyond this dialectic, in which past becomes present and present becomes past, is there a temporal switch to be made? Can an appraisal instead call upon the values of the future – a *liberated* future? Can we anticipate this liberated future in our appraisal practice rather than thinking solely of the categories of the past? As Mignolo says, such a new archival language, such a decolonial enunciation, “is not a return to anything.”<sup>72</sup> Gil Hochberg echoes this, positing that the impulse to archive is not one of “becoming Palestine *again*. It is not a move backward toward a fantastic vision of past revival, nor is it an anachronistic call to do away with the tremendous . . . impact of the past seventy years.”<sup>73</sup> Any archival imaginaries created henceforth will not revive a Palestine that once was but will cater toward a Palestine that *will be*, a Palestine that will necessarily exist in the condition of liberation.

69 Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 188.

70 Bloch, 188.

71 Bloch, 188.

72 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” 168.

73 Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine*, 9.

As such, I wish to amend my search for a *decolonial* appraisal to seek instead a *liberatory* appraisal – a practice that anticipates liberation as much as it plans for it, takes seriously the “not-yet-conscious knowledge” of the future, and activates “*the values of amazement* that are carried by the state of presentiment.”<sup>74</sup> Benjamin encourages us to think along these lines: “Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? Is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today? . . . For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us.”<sup>75</sup> In *Becoming Palestine*, Hochberg thinks through this retemporalization, looking to “find traces of the future in the present”<sup>76</sup> and noting, “Liberated from the grips of history, the archive can join, in turn, a future-oriented social force connected to a moment of political becoming.”<sup>77</sup>

Caswell gives us the term “liberatory appraisal” to denote a practice that “[centres] oppressed positionalities by assigning archival value based on the needs of oppressed communities,”<sup>78</sup> and acts as “the process of determining the value of records in regards to their potential activation for liberation struggles.”<sup>79</sup> But if we were to transpose this idea into the Palestinian context, how would such a liberatory appraisal look? Perhaps it would be saturated with affect, as Stoler proposes – a channelling of emotional and imaginative life into a political praxis.<sup>80</sup> Or it might centre the relationalities among fragmented archives, conjuring a unified body, “reshaping how colonial conditions are imagined, altered, and lived.”<sup>81</sup> Roger Heacock, among those heading the Birzeit archive initiative, affirms this in his work that the archive is built in preparation for “the promised consolidation of the Palestinian state.”<sup>82</sup> A liberated future, the promise of utopia, must be at the heart of every appraisal decision made. Fredric

74 Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 193.

75 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” II.

76 Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine*, ix.

77 Hochberg, xi.

78 Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021), 84.

79 Caswell, 85.

80 Stoler, “On Archiving as Dissensus,” 51.

81 Stoler, 54.

82 Roger Heacock, “Locating and Opening Palestinian Archives,” 2.

Jameson sees utopia not as something conjured through inductive imaginings but as the point beyond our current abilities to imagine, beyond the place we allow ourselves to dream.<sup>83</sup> This anticipation is thus neither “predictive” nor “symptomological.”<sup>84</sup> Rather, it involves a hermeneutic that seeks out glimpses of the utopian in our reality – not *regarding* the atmosphere of coloniality but nonetheless *through* it – the same words in different languages and enunciations. It is a hermeneutic that detects the genealogical points that will be the preconditions of liberation, not its causes or antecedents.<sup>85</sup> This serves as a reminder and a warning: a liberatory appraisal is not to be confused with liberation itself. Appraisal is not revolution. It will not free the Palestinian people from their condition. It will not tear down the checkpoint nor shoot down the drone. It will not pave the road to return nor hand back the key to the exiled.

Ideally, it will unveil the utopia within this dystopia – the potential waiting to be released.<sup>86</sup> It will appraise the photograph not only for its value in revealing the permeations of coloniality but also for the flicker of a different reality, a conditional future. Here, the wedding photo, the past-tense wedding in a refugee camp, is deeply enmeshed with a past conditional, with “what could have been,” which gestures toward “what could be.” To invoke these examples once again is to clarify that we still lack any positive theorization of a liberatory appraisal. There is no way to know exactly what liberation will look like, and there is no way of knowing what utopias might be held within the archive. But just as Jameson gestures at the limits of imagination and thought, at the horizon of possibility, they are there. In the masses of records created and collected across Palestine and its diaspora, we can be sure they are there. A liberatory appraisal is thus an unthinkable appraisal. It is the dedication to an archival practice that seeks to dissolve the boundaries of land and mind, to breathe life into possible futures, which may be inconceivable but exist, prefigured, nonetheless. Liberatory appraisal is driven by paradoxes. It is an operation designed to sense the repressed, to work toward the unknowable. And so, while I necessarily fail to

<sup>83</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future,” in *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, ed. Michael D. Gordin, Hellen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 21–44, 23.

<sup>84</sup> Jameson, 41.

<sup>85</sup> Jameson, 42.

<sup>86</sup> Jameson, 42.

draw up any guidelines for such an appraisal method, I hope we are on the precipice of provoking such a *mode* of appraisal. For, as Jameson tells us, “Such a revival of futurity and of the positing of alternate futures is not a political program or even a political practice, but it is hard to see how any durable or effective political action could come into being without it.”<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

Where does this leave us? It feels ludicrous to centre such a conversation while we wake up every morning to genocide. Yes, every day we lose more records, pictures, stories, sites, but more importantly, we lose each other. Positioned in the diaspora, this futility is not lost on me. This also gives me all the more reason not to look to the past for answers. The past will not save Gaza; the past will not save us. I think that not only the archivists working at Palestinian institutions such as Birzeit and the Palestinian Museum but also the guerilla archivists working at the grassroots level understand this deeply. While I see this particular mode of work as a reaction to the crushing cultural genocide and epistemicide taking place, I further understand it to be the murmurings of a decolonial enunciation, an attempt not to preserve Palestine as it once was, or to resurrect any martyr, but as a way to shift these things outside the domineering framework of coloniality. It is an enunciation that speaks *through* the archive, not against it.

The appraisal frameworks available to us seem to fall short of the sheer magnitude of this reality. What documentation strategy can unite the fragments of our archives? What categories can be imagined to assess the value of an archive under fire, on the brink of being extinguished? What standpoint encompasses the ubiquity of the occupation? How can we make sense of this grief in the archive? I think the answer comes from somewhere in the future, from anticipating liberation. I think it is the same anticipation that characterizes *sumud*, the Palestinian steadfastness, which has nourished the Palestinian people’s refusal to disappear through these decades. I think of Benjamin’s description of Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, from which he conceives of an angel of history – one who faces the past in perpetuity but is driven backward into the future by a

<sup>87</sup> Jameson, 43.

storm, the past piling in front of him like a pile of rubble.<sup>88</sup> Benjamin envisions the angel as follows: “Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet.”<sup>89</sup> The past – one single catastrophe, one single nakba. Jameson sees this not as the end of history, but its beginning: “The angel’s wings . . . must be adjusted to catch the wind, to profit from the wind of history that is to propel them.”<sup>90</sup> For now, *Angelus Novus* hangs in the Israel Museum.

In this moment, a liberatory appraisal practice exceeds a thorough understanding, but I hope that archivists in Palestine and its diaspora can engage it, play with it, and adapt it to the utopias we might sense here and elsewhere in time. I hope we can begin to think beyond a combating of the colonial archive and toward a reframing of it and an engagement with the interrelationships present within it. I hope we can engage with the affective experiences held in our archives, to sense the expectations of the past and entreat them into the future. In the meantime, let us save what we can, let us recall shards of futurity that speak to anticolonial epistemologies, that inhabit liberation, that speak in liberation, that dream in liberation.

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<sup>88</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” IX.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin, IX.

<sup>90</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Benjamin Files* (London: Verso, 2020), 220.