Counting versus Narration: On the database as political form

The database has always maintained an uneasy relationship with colonial conquest and desires. The census, the map, the land registry, or the museum all rely in one form or another on mechanisms of counting and classification that index and register bodies, objects, artefacts and landscapes based on singular templates that assign them a distinct location in time and space. Together, they provided those who considered themselves at the centre of the world with the primary tools to impose their taxonomies of meaning onto the rest of the planet. One could even argue that without the database as a distinct mechanism of mapping, cataloguing, ordering and validating knowledge, the conceptual illusion of a centre–periphery axiom would not have been possible to maintain. Yet to conceive of the database as a discrete object in many ways falls prey to the very logic of totalizing classifications that any critical engagement with the postcolonial condition would want to escape.

Technology, as French philosopher Gilbert Simondon reminds us, does not have a proper meaning, place or existence. It obtains its discrete function and form through the diverse sets of order that it links into its operational field. What does this mean for the way we think about the database as political technology and object? In my research, I suggest that the database is not bound to produce replicable plurals. It may equally well provide a powerful counter-imaginary to challenge and subvert the totalizing logic of colonial registers that gave us the stereotypical figure of the Arab, the Palestinian, the Refugee or the Jew. In this view, the power of the database is not built into its capacity to calculate, measure and put things into relation, but lies rather in its capacity to represent the world through data objects that remain open to infinite variability and change. As Lev Manovich once put it, the database is above all an unordered list of items that can be organized in all sorts of directions. This encourages us to reconsider the relationship between the database and information, and the ways in which these are used to generate set descriptions of the world.

Information, according to cyber-theory, refers to the degree of indeterminacy or contingency in a set of signals. The basic assumption here is that the less predictable a sequence, the more information it communicates. The refugee relief system, in many ways, operates on the directly opposite
assumption. Its primary domain is states of utmost uncertainty and unpredictability. Yet the way in which it registers and processes events shows a serious lack of complexity and depth. One could argue that the less predictable the events that refugee relief and humanitarian agencies encounter, the more restricted and impoverished is the information they communicate. Part of this has to do with the architecture of the humanitarian system itself.

Emergency response mechanisms are designed to render chaos into manageable situations, which almost inadvertently require reducing complex social systems to basic parameters, facts and needs. Complexity remains bound to a moment prior to the event of rupture and crisis, located in the distant past. In this context, justice can only be achieved by returning to a state before the breakdown of order. What goes missing on the way, however, are mechanisms to address and account for the complexity of social situations as they unfold while this moment of return is awaited, and that may significantly alter or undo horizons of shared futures or pasts.

The humanitarian system, Michel Agier suggests, inaugurates its own time and space of governance, which defines the entire spectrum of human experience. Within its totalizing frame of moral reasoning, the victim, the perpetrator or the refugee are all summarized into a singular figure – the beneficiary. The eligible party to its flexible machine of on-demand service provision shrinks down to the mute body of the wordless victim, the one excluded from the logos, armed only with the moan of naked suffering to make its presence felt or heard. This reduction has radical consequences for the ways in which the beneficiary of humanitarian intervention becomes visible and recognizable as historical entity and subject, because it leaves no room to reclaim a positive presence, but holds the victim hostage to the traumas of an unmastered past. It is here, against the totalizing frame of humanitarian interventionism, that the database can provide a powerful tool to break monopolies of representation and offer an effective counter-imaginary to the totalizing template of the beneficiary.

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I will illustrate this with a few examples from my research on Nahr el Bared, a Palestinian refugee camp in the north of Lebanon. In this research I explored the critical tension between modalities of reference and accounting in environments marked by successive waves of violence, displacement and war. Nahr el Bared is one of 12 Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, located 15 km outside the city of Tripoli in north Lebanon. The camp attracted international attention when a small group of militant Islamists inside it entered into a fierce battle with the Lebanese army in 2007, in the course of which the camp was completely destroyed. The entire population, about 30,000 people, was displaced and more than 400 people died during this three-month confrontation, which some commentators described as the most serious armed confrontation between Palestinians and Lebanese forces since the end of the civil war (1975–1990). People lost their homes, businesses and everything they had acquired during the previous 60 years in exile. Decades of hard work and investment were bombed to the ground overnight.
One of the biggest challenges in reconstructing Nahr el Bared was the question of how to address the temporal paradox built into the function and nature of refugee homes. Palestinian camps across the Middle East have always been a key symbol for the right to return in the Palestinian national imagination. This required above all insisting on their temporary status, even if only in rhetoric or for the sake of securing a stake in negotiations about a future Palestinian state. The establishment of the camps was one of the most powerful manifestations of the impossibility to reconcile competing narratives of return between Palestinians and Israelis. The camps are a living embodiment of conflicting narratives about an imagined past. Yet, if the camp in and of itself is a manifestation of the impossibility of ever arriving at a shared understanding about the when, where and how of returning, what could possibly provide a viable starting point for thinking and planning the return to the camp itself? What is the temporal structure within which this return should be thought of and imagined, given that the camp is already a marker of violent displacement and loss? Whose histories and losses are indeed to be acknowledged? And what does it take to engage with a legacy of suffering and endurance, without turning people into eternal prisoners of their pasts?

What was at stake with the reconstruction of Nahr el Bared was not only the challenge of recovering lost property and assets. The process confronted the refugees with the delicate task of reclaiming recognition in ways that acknowledged both their struggle for return to the lost homeland, and their historical achievements at the place of exile in Lebanon. There was then a dual history to be accounted for and reassembled in the reconstruction of Nahr el Bared, which raised major challenges for the refugee relief agencies and planners involved.
The spatial history of Nahr el Bared

Nahr el Bared has long outgrown its original size and location. The land rented by UNRWA in 1949 to establish the camp, about 200,000 square meters, soon became insufficient to house the second and third generation of refugees. People started to expand, first vertically by adding floors to their houses, then horizontally by buying up land in the immediate vicinity of the Nahr el Bared's historical core. Most of these investments in land, however, were never officially documented. Palestinians are banned from owning property in Lebanon, which led them to acquire land by power of attorney. Buying land by power of attorney has become a common legal instrument to obtain effective rights of use without being formally registered as the official owner of a piece of land. This, together with the reluctance of UN agencies and governmental bodies, had left the spatial history of Nahr el Bared undocumented. The camp existed by and large in the blind spot of the national cadastre and institutional maps.

Official records of Nahr el Bared's spatial syntax were restricted to a set of partial records, spread across multiple databases at the headquarters of international NGOs. This made it almost impossible to establish a reliable baseline map of the camp's historically grown spatial structure, raising the spectre that its unique social fabric could be lost for good. Alerted by similar experiences in other camps, a young team of architects and planners joined forces with the refugee population to map the camp at a level of detail that ensured it could be rebuilt in its pre-destruction shape. The work of this grassroots initiative is unprecedented. It brought an undocumented chapter of Palestinian history to the surface and set new standards for the manner in which the history of the camps was documented and accounted for. The most significant achievement of this grassroots initiative, however, was the fact that it put the refugee population itself at the centre of the data collection process, and in doing so was able to successfully invert the totalizing logic of counting and classification to the benefit of the refugees.

The lack of archival records has clearly demonstrated the critical significance of the database and of social and geographic information for political claim-making among disenfranchised groups. In Nahr el Bared, the database became the primary means to reclaim the material and political foundations of a historical presence marked by structural invisibility and neglect. Most importantly, it put the camp population in a position to articulate their demands and lay out a clear vision for how the camp should be rebuilt and imagined. Yet, at the same time and in fact for that very reason, the database soon became a site of intense power struggles that initiated fierce battles between key power brokers.
inside the camp. This severely undermined the promise of the database to reinstitute the refugees as primary authors and owners of their histories and futures, and once again diffracted the archival record of their historical presence across multiple institutional registers and domains.

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This is a highly tragic outcome that could speak against my initial claim for the database as a technology of resistance and a liberating force – yet in many ways it does not. The failure to live up to its promise of hacking into the source code of colonial imaginations is, after all, not built into the operative logic of the database itself. It rather relates to the wider framework of legal architectures and power differentials within which the process of data collection unfolded, and that severely constrained the degree of control over its emancipatory potential on behalf of the refugees. By way of conclusion, I would like to highlight some of the key achievements that the experience of Nahr el Bared nonetheless established, and that opened up new ways to think about how mechanisms of counting and calculation might be utilized in the future in similar scenarios or circumstances.

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Despite its failure to restore the full authorship and ownership of the refugees in managing and administering the track record of their historical presence, the database nevertheless broke the monopoly of representation upheld by international relief agencies. What is more, it enabled the refugees to reclaim visibility and presence as an historical entity and collective in ways that acknowledge the complexity of the Palestinian situation, without reducing it to the ahistorical template of the beneficiary. Accounting for people’s property and possession not only registered the exile population as agents of change and masters of their own fortune and futures, it also provided a detailed record of their gradual evolution from a community of destiny marked by the shared experience of suffering into a sovereign body acting on its own behalf. This provides a powerful starting point to rethink mechanisms of counting and calculation as a critical site for political claim-making, in particular for those whose political aspirations have not yet found proper recognition in the form of territorial sovereignty. What was clearly shown by the critical significance of data in the reconstruction of Nahr el Bared is that effective information management has become a critical site for new forms of sovereign claim-making, where the ability to control modalities of reference constitutes a key means to reclaim political self-determination and autonomy.

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Collectively held knowledge is one of the most precious resources available to populations who have little more than their memory to affirm their existence as political subjects and group. Being able to exercise sovereign control over the ways in which individuals and collectives become visible, recognizable and addressable as political actors or groups in such a scene constitutes a critical
source of sovereign power in the realm of self-expression. It enables those who have so far been deprived of the supreme authority to set the agenda, with new means to escape the totalizing frame of bio-political regimes. As such, *expressive sovereignty* opens up new room for manoeuvre when confronting humanitarian agencies, the military and state bodies. It facilitates forms of self-mastery and self-determination in the realm of data and information, through which lack of access to conventional mechanisms of political claim-making may be compensated for and redirected into a new source of agency and strength.

**Author:**

Dr. Monika Halkort completed her PhD as part of the ESRC-funded *Conflict in Cities and the Contested State* (RES-060-25-0015) programme at the Universities of Exeter, Cambridge and Queens in the UK, focusing on political technologies discussed in the context of the reconstruction of Nahr El Bared refugee camp. The present article is based on her research. Dr Halkort's work traverses the fields of urbanism, political geography, cybernetics and media archaeology, and in particular the relationship between technology, the production of knowledge and political subjectivities. Based in Beirut she is an author, writer, and researcher on old/new media and political technologies. Email: monika@halkort.com