

“I Hear Its Chirping Coming From My Throat”: Activism, Archives, and the Long Road Ahead

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Several weeks ago, I opened an email from my colleague Bassam al-Ahmad, with the message, “Can you please proof this interview for inclusion in our archival database.” The database was the result of a year-long partnership which had produced *Syrians for Truth and Justice* (stj-sy.com), an organization founded by human rights activists which had created a network of citizen journalists across Syria to record the many abuses associated with the current conflict. Indeed, many of the founders of *STJ*, themselves, had been the victims of harassment, detention, and torture by the Assad government.

Looking quickly at the attached document, I learned that the subject of the interview was Dr. Jafal Nofa, a Syrian doctor who was arrested by Syria’s Assad government for using civil disobedience to advocate for human rights. Near the end of the interview, when reflecting upon his experience of extreme torture and deprivation, he tells the following story about a young boy:

The most painful incident I can never forget is the story of a young boy.

The boy was arrested during a police campaign along with 15 other children. They were detained for 10 years. A few months before release, he was brought to Adra civil prison. He was a young man in his twenties at the time. He was hyperactive, moving a lot, and playing all the time. I asked him whether he gets bored from doing this or not. He answered that he cannot rest and he could never know the meaning of being quiet. I asked him why and he narrated his sad story to me:

“After I was arrested as a young boy, I was taken to Palmyra Prison. One cold day, they put us out in the yard to stand there as punishment. A small bird fell on the ground, unable to move its wings or fly. I stared at it with the tenderness of a child, but one of the guards saw me and asked whether I liked it. I remained silent because I was afraid to answer. So he asked me again, but this time in an aggressive and loud voice. I hesitantly answered that it was a nice bird. He ordered me to go and get it. When I held it in my hands, it was chirping. For a short while, I thought that this guard hadn’t lost all of his humanity or maybe he is here against his will. I hadn’t completed the thought when I heard him asking me to swallow this bird. I didn’t understand and I asked how could I swallow it alive! He shouted at me and ordered me to swallow it. So I did. This incident happened years ago, but up till this moment, I hear its chirping coming from my throat, especially in moments of silence. I hate to remember that incident, and this is why I don’t like to stay calm.

Part of the goal of this symposium is to address the question, "What is to be done?" One way to situate a response would be to talk about the need for activism—connecting our classes to community campaigns for justice, organizing street marches, and lobbying against discriminatory and racist policies (see Trump's recent "travel ban" executive order). Such actions are vitally necessary. And I hope to be able to continue to do such work in the near and distant future.

I want to use this space, however, to focus on a different type of work, one perhaps seemingly a bit distant from such actions—the creation of archives as sites of documented experience as an aligned strategy from which the above-mentioned activism can benefit and draw upon. And I want to do so by discussing a set of projects in which I have been fortunate enough to participate—projects that begin in the UK, extend to the Middle East, and ultimately end in documenting a young girl's journey from Guatemala to Philadelphia.

Archiving History/Documenting Atrocities

For the past twenty years, I have been working with the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP). The organization originated in the late 1970s in the United Kingdom, during the period which would lead to Thatcherism, the deliberate destruction of working class institutions, and the implementation of a neo-liberal agenda marked by de-industrialization and, as recently debated in the UK, increased global immigration. During this period, as you might expect, there was an intense reconsideration of working class identity—a reconsideration that manifested in some instances to an uptick in the National Front, to some working-class allegiance to Thatcher, and to the consistent defeat of Labor. Clearly I am painting with a broad brush here.

Within this historical moment, the FWWCP was an interesting counterweight. For the organization was a network of close to 100 individual working-class writing groups, spread across the United Kingdom, who self-published their individual and communal histories. The writers were miners, dockworkers, and sign painters; some of them could write with ease, some of them struggled with basic literacy tasks. As the organization expanded, the writers began to include Caribbean, African, and Middle Eastern immigrants. Writers began to emerge from disabled, LBGT and survivor communities. And through yearly meetings that brought these groups together, they collectively did the difficult work of creating a vision of the working class which was inclusive, premised upon the value of laboring experience, and which attempted to organize for an increased recognition of working-class values and legitimate needs. To me, they were organic intellectuals, organizing as a community for increased cultural literacy and political rights. And their literacy activism soon became the model for my own efforts to establish similar work first in Philadelphia and then in Syracuse.

But the FWWCP and its writers were also mostly poor or working poor. And in 2007 and 2008, the organization went bankrupt.

Suddenly a network that had lasted 30 years, circulating over one million self-published working-class writings, was reduced to a disparate set of locations, where publications were resting in attics and basements. That is, the FWWCP had been too poor to have established its own archive, and, within the UK, their work was not seen as "literature" (at least by the British Arts Council) so they

also had no university presence. Consequently, it seemed to me and my UK partners, the FWWCP's legacy would be unavailable for future worker writers and working class literacy activists.

And so with my colleague, Nick Pollard, from Sheffield Hallam University, Jessica Pauszek, from Syracuse University, and the members of the newly formed "FED" (a reconstituted FWWCP), we decided to create an archive of this work. In this sense, my involvement in archival work emerged in response to a specific crisis within a community that was in danger of having its self-defined history slowly vanish. While there are many methodological and theoretical issues which could be explored, for the purposes of this article, I just want to point out that, after many setbacks, an archive of over 2,500 FWWCP publications now exists at London Metropolitan University.

And I want to highlight one aspect of our collaborative work. In creating the archival categories, we invoked the practices of community literacy partnerships. We worked with FWWCP founding members and members of its former writing groups to create the organizing categories of the collection. We also attended annual festivals of the new FED to get feedback and insight. That is, our goal in creating the archive was not merely to save the texts, but to articulate the theoretical and cultural framework within which those texts were produced—the FED's understanding of what it meant to be worker writers writing about being working class. Moreover, our strategic goal was to use the prestige of the university to claim important work had been done by the FWWCP—work that scholars and students could learn from.

This sense of needing to preserve the voices and texts of oppressed individuals and communities, of the need to build a model which demonstrated the framework which produced those stories, and using university prestige to validate the results of this work, ultimately led me to my colleague, Bassam al-Ahmad and, as a consequence, to read the "bird" story which appeared in my email.

Prior to our meeting, Bassam had worked at the Syrian Center for Media and Free Expression. At the outset of the Arab Spring protests, the organization's offices were stormed by Assad's troops. Bassam was captured, tortured, and held in a detention center for almost a year. At one point, he was granted a trial and released on the promise of returning to face charges. Instead, he escaped to Turkey. I met him when he was a Democracy Fellow at Syracuse University. Together with other Syrian activists, we created Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), a project partially housed at Syracuse University. As noted above, STJ uses a network of in-country Syrian citizen journalists to record the systemic violation of human rights now occurring, such as the intentional bombing of civilian sites. Through connections in refugee camps and refugee communities, we are also recording testimonies of survivors of torture not only from Assad's government, but from ISIS and the proliferating militias.

We are currently developing a project to sponsor a series of reconciliation workshops designed to help repair some of the damage done by state-sponsored sectarian violence, militia sponsored relocations, and ISIS atrocities. And we are beginning to attempt to map the network of detention centers used by each of these organizations and, by doing so, demonstrate how these personal experiences were the result of systemic efforts. Here the goal is to record the horrors produced by that system and, hopefully, help to create spaces where individuals and communities can rebuild a sense of a future, a future marked by inclusion and tolerance.

Creating Networks at Home

Viewing the recent presidential election from the perspective of my English and Syrian colleagues, it was clear how the past year has been marked by the articulation of working-class concerns into an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim bigotry, a bigotry always existent under a false decorum of manners, but now being expressed with full-throated enthusiasm. When additionally interwoven with blatant sexism, it too often felt like much of the progressive inclusive rhetoric that has attempted to mark work in literacy in composition had been for naught. Or at least, what we imagined to be the political efficacy of our work, the strategies taught to students and infused in our partnerships here and abroad, seemed to be called into question. Certainly, "community" as an organizing term hadn't carried the collective power imagined in the face of a nationalist "Make America Great Again" mantra.

It was for me, at least, a very depressing period—a period made worse when placed in the context of colleagues who can no longer enter the country; of students who face (along with their families) deportation, often back to violent and conflict-ridden contexts; of classrooms where an undercurrent of distrust and animosity always seems ready to break forth. And to be honest, I am less than sure about any answer I might offer to "What can be done?"

And yet, like so many others, I need to move forward.

And so, I have recently taken on a new project brought to me by an old friend, Mark Lyons, whose work on Mexican migrant farm workers was published by my press, New City Community Press (NCCP), over ten years ago. He approached me about an oral history concerning a fourteen-year old girl who travelled from Guatemala to the United States, primarily by herself, only to be caught at the border and placed in detention. Her detention led to a hearing, which led to an abusive foster home, and ultimately to her being brought into the life of a Philadelphia family where education and a future were made possible. Of course, I am clearly shrinking the complexity of this story quite significantly. I mention elements of her story to state that my press also agreed to publish the testimony. And in deciding to publish the story, I was also deciding to use elements of our field (community publishing, narrative, cultural rhetoric, etc.) to invest her experience within a network that could produce a curricular, cultural, and legal response to the current political moment. Similar to the work with STJ and the FED, then, it was an attempt to create a counter-narrative in which actual (not alternate) facts could be established and used by multiple parties in support of important political work.

Now I had certainly attempted such work before, often in the service of producing a systemic change in a local neighborhood. With this book, I am thinking about how to begin a process of weaving together a new constellation of alliances, one that perhaps begins in the local moment of a classroom but that is fully articulated across the parallel streams of local, regional, national, and international networks of economic and political power. Too often, I think, by not drawing these additional contexts into the work at hand, I have come to believe that the small change produced by such publications only ameliorated the worse elements of systemic trends, masking the true source of the problem actually being faced. And I have come to realize, hopefully not too late, that there is a connection between the history of this (now) young woman from Guatemala, the experiences of the working class in England, and my colleagues in Syria. It is not a straight line, a clear path, but

it is a network that needs to be brought to light in community publications so that readers can find commonality, not enemies, as they look outward from their home to the broader world that dictates much of their existence.

Moreover, the goal should be more than to simply trace rhetorical or material networks of possible alliances. It should also include a search to think through moments where potential alliances had been disarticulated, fractured, under the force of the past election cycle. These nodal points needed to be re-established, needed to be brought back into contact to maintain and expand the possibilities of equity, inclusion, and justice. In *History and Class Consciousness*, György Lukács speaks of capitalism as a state of constant crisis management, one endlessly stitching together micro-moments to sustain its global dominance. I understand the current moment as one in which the “global order” is attempting to patch over the Trump/Brexit phenomena of economic nationalism (though not perhaps the bigotry implied in such attitudes). And I see our role as countering this attempt, drawing together different alliances, moving in a different direction.

That is, I am less interested in learning how to stitch my values into the current triumph, discover a nostalgic (and racialized) vision of “middle America,” then I see the work as being part of a concerted effort to create alternative networks which establish the hegemony of progressive inclusive economic and cultural values. And for this to occur, the term “community” and community publications have to be re-cast less as a description of bounded geographic spaces, but instead as moments of global narratives being imbricated in local histories. An imbrication that if interrupted by local moments of resistance could ripple outward, and, if such resistant moments could be aligned with other such moments, perhaps an alternative future could be created.

For here is the essential point, undergirding all of the above: each of these archival projects are premised upon the ability of bodies—defined by others and literally fixed in space by policies and treated as other, as “illegal” or “terrorist,”—that found a way to move anyway. That is, these documentation projects reveal an agency, a mobility, which both disrupts the centrality of Western narratives which demonize their bodies and demands we align with them, work to support and expand their ability to move beyond such narrow categorizations, and support those local moments of resistance until in their sheer number they tip the web of connections that stands for “global” into a new direction, perhaps one based upon a sense of a different set of values, goals, and dreams.

And here, I should add that, in practice, the work looks much less “revolutionary” than might be imagined from the above rhetoric. In fact, a lot of the work of publishing the book and drawing it into a larger effort has meant creating a small team of dedicated students (Rafael Evans, Molly Velaquez, and Zach Barlow), long-time immigrant activists (Mark Lyons) and myself. It has involved considering what resources could be linked to this story, how those linkages could materially interrupt work at schools, agencies, detention centers, and policies in Philadelphia. It has meant considering how such interruptions could be linked/aligned with regional and national moments. It has been the slow work of calling individuals, establishing moments of intersecting interests, creating common conversational and policy-informed spaces. That is, it has meant using all the rhetorical skills, conceptions of literacy, and understandings of power that mark our field in the service of deliberate actions, momentary tactics, and strategies for change.

Finally, on a personal level, for me, it has meant the beginning of re-situating the landscape of my location in the discipline, primarily marked by a focus on local communities, outwards towards a focus on a system of momentary alliances and friction that produce “the global” in all its oppressions and opportunities. And I am in the process of re-educating myself to be an effective ally in this new landscape, to understand what engaging in work that frames community within multiple global contexts simultaneously can and can not produce. I consistently ask myself how the voices of those in Syria, the UK, and the US, from Daraa to Birmingham to Philadelphia, could be linked in a disruptive fashion towards an articulation of an alternative set of nodal points that better support an inclusive world. So where I realize others came to this realization earlier—have written more theoretically and eloquently than I am now—when pressed for an answer to “What do we do now?” And I have found myself replying, “We learn, we act, we build, and we continue.”

The Long Road Ahead

I began by posing archival and documentation work as aligned and supportive of political work being done by street activist, policy advocates, and non-profit organizations, all of whom are attempting to navigate the new “information landscape” that has emerged post-election. And through the work of the FWWCP, STJ, and NCCP documentation projects, I’ve tried to show how such work can demonstrate the power of past collective actions, the importance of recording the present, and the possibility of building a better future.

That is, the FWWCP archive is about documenting an inclusive and, we might say, human rights-based conceptual framework for working-class identity; STJ is about archiving its opposite—an armed network dedicated to torture and violence, to the elimination of any such a human rights framework; and, finally, the work of NCCP has become about documenting the experiences of those on the margins of the current political/economic system and beginning to consider how such experiences might produce the possibility of new alliances, new futures.

I want to end, however, with a more immediate purpose for such work. In all of these documentation projects, there is an attempt to use our disciplinary skills to accurately record, document, and archive fundamental facts about what occurred at specific historical moments to communities in crisis.

Facts which can document systemic human rights abuses.

Facts which can be used, we hope, to bring the perpetrators of such abuses to justice and reconciliation.

Facts that demonstrate the possibility of building, through dialogue and collaboration, inclusive visions of just communities.

I end with this stress on the value of facts because, today, it could be argued that we are increasingly living in a fact-free media culture or, at least, in a culture where basic facts are placed into “equal time” conversations with propaganda and false news. Within such a toxic media mix, my fear is that the voices and experiences of those on the wrong side of privilege and progress are being lost. Or rather, I fear the concerns of the oppressed have few platforms which can validate the legitimacy of their claims, can present evidence for the need to redress their concerns, and can be

used to collaboratively develop new economic policies premised on equality and tolerance, policies not smeared with racial animus but meant to create the context for true social justice.

And so out of these beliefs, several years ago and still today, I turned to archival and documentation work—to the slow methodological collection of testimony, texts, recordings, and visual artifacts that evidences an alternative moral universe, an alternative framework from which to shape a public and political agenda. And I do so intentionally from and within a university setting because, despite the slowly eroding effect of right wing attacks on such institutions, there is still a legitimating function we can serve. As scholars and researchers, we can use our degrees, our publications, and, yes, our archives to validate the struggles of those whose bodies are on the front lines of human rights struggles.

That is, I like to believe that perhaps, even from our most privileged of positions, and perhaps, even in the smallest of ways, we can claim to have stood in alliance with those whose humanity is under assault, but who continue to try move forward.

Perhaps, that is, we help create a world where birds can fly and young children are allowed to look at them in wonder.