

# Hope in Hebron: the political affects of activism in a strangled city

## 1. Introduction

... naming the intolerable is itself the hope (Berger 2014:18)

Soldiers and settlers slowly strangle Hebron. Since 1948, intensified after 1967, and again from 1997, the city has become strictly divided within intimate materialities: unlike anywhere else on the West Bank, Zionists have taken root inside urban Palestinian communities.<sup>i</sup> Where Zionists go, the military follows and 4,000 soldiers are now stationed in Hebron to protect its 600 settlers. Physical and psychological violence consequently shapes the contours of movement: curfews, checks, dispossessions, displacements, humiliations cumulatively sterilise Palestinian life here.<sup>ii</sup> ‘Fear and repulsion’ are strategic technologies (De Cesari 2010) in the processes of ‘urbicide’ (Abujidi 2014) or ‘spatiocide’ (Hanafi 2009) that seemingly edge Hebron towards an absolute ‘death-world’ (Mbembe 2003). The streets are not yet, however, at the endgame of death, in fact being in *and of* the city is a profoundly affective experience; life persists in some form. Strangulation, though, regulates life, bringing a certain assemblage of affects characterised by dampening atmospheres of circulated fears, threat and humiliation (Anderson 2009; Massumi 2005). On these embodiments Ghazi-Walid Falah writes of ‘the desperate need for oxygen which the Palestinians are experiencing ... [it’s] a geopolitics in a sense inflicted on the body, the mind. A mechanics of mutilation of flesh and spirit, close up’ (2004:599). Life in Hebron does continue, but under these conditions, and strategic technologies enact, as Falah puts it, ‘political and human asphyxiation’, delimiting the body’s capacities. Such understandings not only draw on the body as metaphor but also emphasise the corporeal subject of the Occupation in Hebron: the body is materially contingent and co-constitutive with the violent sensorium maintained by the Israeli military and Zionist settler communities (see also Curti 2008; Jamoul 2004).

This article documents the corporeality of the Occupation in Hebron, evoking the body as materially contingent to explore agential capacities within the delimiting affects of the violent sensorium. As far as affects lay important ‘orientating’ foundations for political agency (Coole 2005; Damasio 2004; McManus 2011), the overwhelmingly negative affective experience of occupation might well result in what Lauren Berlant has referred to as ‘political depression’, marked by ‘hopelessness, helplessness, dread, anxiety, stress, wary, lack of interest’ (2005:8). Agency and resistance from such a position lack the future-orientating ‘dynamic imperative *to action*’ of hope (Anderson 2006:744, original emphasis). The objective here is to map the affects of Occupied Hebron and track resistance to such limits. Drawing on

fieldwork with Palestinian activists engaged in providing political tours for international visitors to the West Bank, I recount an affective experience of Hebron, seeking to recreate textually the corporeal violence of the occupation. The activists I met used the intense experience of fear, threat and humiliation as a resource for their activism. I argue that by reappropriating the violent affects of occupation, this form of activism demonstrates agency that resists 'political depression'. Theoretically, I argue further, at hand is an empirical account of the 'autonomy of affect' whereby affects, however zealously engineered by the military and settlers, never assuredly enter causal relationships with the body (Massumi 1995; 2002), in this case giving rise to a form of critical hope amid a sensorium of fear. The research presented here, therefore, contributes to addressing a key question for resistance in Palestine (and beyond): how fear – a predominant affective register of contemporary politics - can be 'mined and harnessed' (McManus 2011:1) as 'a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis' (Cvetkovich 2007:460).

The discussion both focuses on and performs materialist ontologies. The main body of the article presents an account of a political tour of Hebron in narrative form that takes in four particularly affective encounters: the approach; the market; the checkpoints and the settlement. I incorporate photographs taken on the tour to complement the intentionally image-rich presentation of the narrative. The account focuses on one particular tour of six similar tours I took during fieldwork in the summer of 2015, a period of unremarkable but nonetheless always-violent state and settler presence in the city of Hebron. The use of narrative is aimed at a commensurable mode of presenting affective data - or 'prediscursive experience' (Dewsbury 2003) - through language, that is, I aim to reflect the intensity of the data in writing. A short section preceding the narrative explicates the methods used, alongside reflection on the conceptualisation and attendant politics of affect. Following this and the narrativisation of the data, I discuss the body's ambivalent relationship with the negative affects of violence, explicating the ways in which activism can and does draw on critical forms of hope and a mode of political agency that remains resistant to Israeli oppression.

## **2. The politics and methodology of affect**

The data used here come out of fieldwork with six activists working in Hebron. Three of these worked for different NGOs, the others were not affiliated with organised groups, though they would regularly collaborate with others while giving the tours. For instance, of the ten tours I followed, each stopped to talk with representatives of either or both ISM (International Solidarity Movement) and EAPPI (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel).<sup>iii</sup> For the account here I use the example of Nidal, an activist based in Ramallah but working all over the West Bank, not because the other tours differed significantly, but because Nidal's covered all of the city's sites where the occupation is most visible and felt. During and after the tours I took notes and recordings, and where I could,

interviewed other participants on the tours immediately afterwards. In all, the data is made up of hand-written field notes, ten interviews with Palestinian activists and 19 with tour participants. Each of the quotes in the narrative are drawn directly from these data. The nature of the data derives from the simple and immediate fact that the tours of Hebron were, to me, and to each participant I spoke to, a viscerally intense experience. Recognising and utilising my presence in the field as an affecting and affected body (Askins 2009), the notes I made attempted to document the embodied experience of Hebron, following John-David Dewsbury's assertion that 'the researcher can have the confidence of using her or his body directly in the field as a recording machine itself, knowing that writing these nervous energies, amplitudes and thresholds down, is feasible as such jottings become legitimate data for dissemination and analysis' (2010:327).

The attempt to document affective experience, however, presents significant methodological challenges, and also requires engagement with the politics of affect. Methodologically, once affect is understood as beyond the deliberative order of representational thinking (McCormack 2003; Pile 2010), writing 'prediscursive experience' (Dewsbury 2003) may require 'quite different intellectual models' (Grosz 1994:xi). As Simon O'Sullivan has put it 'you cannot read affects, you can only experience them' (2001:126). To negotiate this bind, at least in part, the data here is presented using 'performative writing', characterised by a 'literariness' that 'calls on the sensuous, the figurative, and the expressive' (Pelias 2005:183). Taking leave of certain conventions, I cite 'sparingly' in an effort to 'pare things down to the immediate and the embodied' (Dewsbury 2010:322). The 'sensuous' in the data comes from using the body as an 'instrument of research' (Longhurst et al. 2008); the research presented here is therefore not only '*of* the body' but also '*from* the body' (Wacquant 2004:viii, original emphasis).

Politically, the ontology of affect can evoke an undifferentiated and thus potentially apolitical body. Critiques from feminist and postcolonial perspectives have problematised the conceptualisation of affect as a pre-cognitive dimension of experience, arguing that such 'non-representational' understandings look away from history and attendant critiques of Euro/phallo-centrism, thus ignoring what Divya Tolia-Kelly terms 'the political fact of different bodies having different affective capacities' (2006, 213). When a focus on pre-discursive experience is broadened across both constructed and embodied lines of gender, race and class, accounts of affective life risk negating the 'political facts' of power and oppression as factors in an individual's capacity to affect and be affected. Thus from feminist and postcolonial perspectives affect is critiqued for 'reinstating the unmarked, disembodied, but implicitly masculine, subject' (Jacobs & Nash 2003:274), and 'lack[ing] historicity, and thus a memory of theoretical critiques of universalism' (Tolia-Kelly 2006:213). The political potential of affect as pre-discursive – exposing the arbitrariness of the categories that legitimate exploitation and inequality – is also, therefore,

the potential sweeping away of differentiations that matter, such as race, gender and class (see Nayak 2011; Saldanha 2007).

For this research, these critical perspectives on affect serve as an important corrective. The contingency between bodies and across cultures is crucial to the argument I build, but it is also important to remain cognisant of limits: a (my) white, British, masculine body's affective contingency with the materiality of the occupation is likely different to that of a Palestinian. Thus taking the materiality of specific bodies seriously, I make no claims to know with surety the embodied experience of life under the occupation, but I also refuse naturalised categories of bodily difference. The nuances of researcher positionality (e.g. Griffiths 2016; Jazeel 2007), therefore, nuance the claims to knowledge made in this research. What this means, then, is that the affective life of Hebron documented here tells us a lot about the work of activists in the city within registers of affect, and it tells us something – but not everything – about the embodied experience of Palestinian life under the occupation. I return to these reflections in the conclusions to the article.

First, the focus moves to a cramped minibus on a hot August morning in Ramallah and a writing of research that - to reiterate – intends to 'sustain rather than obliterate' the dynamics of affects in data (Bondi 2014). It is a story that asks transportation to the winding, closing-in streets of ancient Hebron, and readiness to imagine the corporealities of life under evermore violent occupation.

### **3. A political tour of Hebron: the approach**

We meet in Ramallah and Nidal, our guide, like everyone here, has stories. The bus rolls off to a preamble about wanting to show us “what the Israeli military does here” and he begins to talk about his 15-year-old cousin. Nidal tells of how five IDF soldiers came to his family home in B-----<sup>iv</sup> late in the evening. “They banged on the door, didn’t wait for an answer and grabbed hold of him”. Nidal’s animated but doesn’t sensationalise; no sensation needed when the bare facts already push at the senses. I’m with seven other Europeans on this tour, none of us know each other but together we’re gripped: “they said he was stone throwing, they said they had to arrest him” – I try to imagine soldiers coming to my house to arrest a teenage relative, I can’t – “and then they shot him in the penis, and the bullet exited from his anus”. The words strike - *penis, bullet, anus* - and approach the limits of imagination. *Imagine?* I can only wince. Nidal doesn’t pause for shock, instead his uncle enters the scene, coming to the aid of his son, pleading with the commander for an ambulance. The commander orders him to leave his son alone. He doesn’t; they shoot him in the shoulder, the force of the rubber bullet drops him to the ground. It’s never *only* a rubber bullet. The uncle hauls himself up, his instinct has taken over and he moves once again towards his son. His other shoulder takes the second bullet, Nidal’s fist gesturing on his own body. The uncle bleeds to death in front of his family.<sup>v</sup> We all burst with questions in silence, our questions monosyllabic,

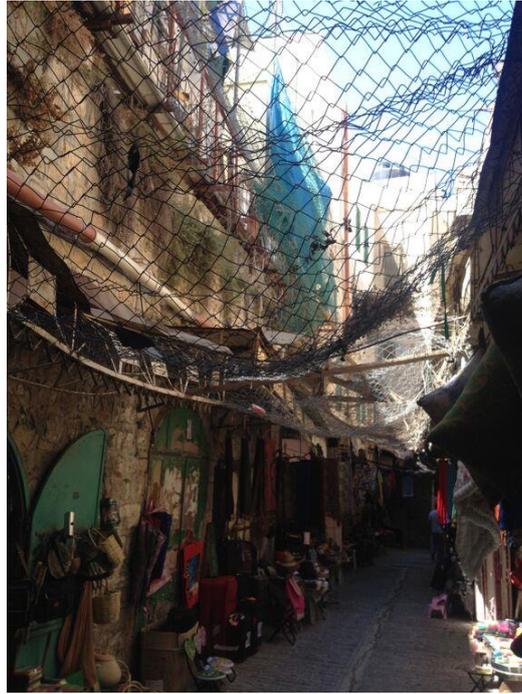
inarticulate: what? why? how? And the answers at this point, long after Resolutions, Accords and The Process have exhausted answers: this is a violent occupation, and death - Palestinian death - is its ultimate violence. Nidal turns around and looks forward as we pass through the hills between Jerusalem and the Jordan river. In the back there's a loaded silence as the story resonates; we cannot cognise the ineffable violence, the fucking horror of shooting a boy and his father while restraining a mother and wife.

We make our way along the route of the old Hebron road (Highway 60), making detours to avoid checkpoints and those sections only for Israelis (we're *beyond* or *within* the Green Line). We pause at the only place that affords for most Palestinians a view of the Haram al-Sharif (or Temple Mount) and the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat Al-Sakrah*). That's inside the Green Line, too, but people like Nidal - whose ID card is the wrong colour<sup>vi</sup> - cannot visit their country's most significant (significant in every sense) site. We've all visited them in the last few days, our passports are European.<sup>vii</sup> The landscapes are spectacular, spoilt only by the contrasting aesthetics of lush settlements with water tanks on every roof. Nidal explains something of the water politics in the West Bank.<sup>viii</sup> It's another explanation that ends in death, that of a Bedouin man shot by settlers who objected to him redirecting water from his well back to his property. "Google it when you get home", he says.

Further narratives of trauma mark the early morning bus ride - we would hear of Nidal's father imprisoned without charge, of his interrogation in *that* Mossad bunker (he points as we pass) and death he witnessed at the Wall, an IDF sniper just following orders. The bus skirts Jerusalem towards Hebron. Hunched up in the back with the others, we barely speak. It's the only response, Nidal's trauma narratives take us 'outside the frameworks of normal social reality and thus outside the linguistic and other symbolic tools we have at our disposal for making sense of the world' (Edkins 2002:246). The 'unspeakable, inexpressible' presses hard on the senses, it 'cannot be organised on a linguistic level' and we're working on a 'somatosensory level' (Van Der Kolk & Van Der Hart 1995:172). Language seems a solidly human endeavour, and radical evil an alterity, its brutality we cannot speak. The very idea of a bullet in your genitals evades cognition, the only real reaction is through the body's recoil, grimace, shudder. "How does it happen?" the Spanish guy next to me eventually musters. It's an articulation of nothing and everything: a senseless question from everyone's senses. (Out of the window a settler in civilian clothes waits at an Area C bus stop, semi-automatic strapped over his shoulder). Nidal shrugs his shoulders, a common response here, and turns to face the road.

"Do you get to see your father, Nidal?"

"No".



*fig.1 The market in Hebron*

### **3.1 The market**

Our first site is the old souq – or *qasaba* – that was once the vibrant commercial centre of the city. Nidal leads but doesn't speak, he leaves the closed shops and bored shopkeepers to present themselves. The narrow passageways have been sterilised by arbitrary eviction and wind-up orders - and there's little bustle. Even where the sun reaches the open streets, there's a feeling of being constricted; the uncovered parts of the souq are covered by a rope net and wire mesh. Nidal gathers us just before we're under the mesh to explain that settlers have occupied the upper floors (the Avraham Avinu settlement) and the net-cage protects the street from objects thrown from above (fig.1). Sometimes it's bleach or urine, but mostly it's household waste; once it was a couple of dead rats (Ward 2011). The effect is a quite unpleasant aesthetic of rotting organic material suspended just above eye level. "If you look up over there to the right and then directly behind you, you can see the watchpoints". I crane my neck, in one there is no more than the top of a beret, from the other protrudes the barrel of a semi-automatic. The politics of verticality (Weizman 2012) in full effect: no-one looks down on the IDF, no-one looks down on fear. The movement of the neck, the opening of the torso, the exposure of the jugular, the gravitational disadvantage: there's something primordial to height and intimidation. The topography of the wider West Bank - where the Valley's hilltops are Zionist prizes - spills into the city of Hebron: colonisation has turned this 2,000 year-old trading place into a modern panopticon where asymmetrical visibilities - whoever or whatever looks or points cannot be known - set bodies on edge. Nidal talks about the cage and we half-listen, the shadow of rotting peel, AK-47s and the oversized flags (the size owned by people who don't want peace) make it hard to think. I catch the end as Nidal points to an opening in one of the

houses above: “sometimes settler kids piss [on the street] from that spot there”. We look up. “... the soldiers never see that”.

My body perceives the threat in ways I struggle to relate. As if walking on a wire, as if on trial, as if its knowledge is of a different order, commanding involuntary movements. It’s an unsettling experience and I wonder what it would take to be arrested. Or to be shot. It’s impossible to know, nor is it possible to know who’s watching in what mood. Nidal is matter-of-fact: “it’s calm most days but this is a war zone don’t think it’s not, sometimes it just happens”. Nidal’s words capture something of what unsettles here, to do with the unknowability of it all: are they watching? Under what orders? When will the next act of violence come? Violence looms, but indeterminately. Indeterminable futures are the threat, and fear is indeterminacy written on the body (Massumi 2005). The uncertainty is key, it pretends stasis – *status quo* – but it’s more accurately a ‘modulation’ of fear, ‘intermittently raised a pitch, and dampened again’ (ibid., 32). We’re about to feel it raised a pitch as we come towards the south end of the market with its permanently closed and neglected shop fronts. Nidal signals for us to move to the side while the call to prayer sounds from the Ibrahim Mosque ahead. It’s Friday and a small knot of people walk briskly past. More people come and the increasingly large mass of people bottleneck as the passage narrows. “There’s a checkpoint at the end and the soldiers check everyone before they can pass through”. There’s a palpable hush to the crowd, a nervous, or tired shuffle towards the soldiers, perhaps an anxiety of being late for the week’s most important prayers mixed with an apathy for the tedium of these routinised checks. As we walk with the crowd I can see the officers purposely taking their time to check documents, chatting behind the counter to colleagues, suddenly showing due diligence, regulating the ‘networked jumpiness’ of the population (ibid.). Nidal explains that all the time people are refused entry. “Why?”. He shrugs again: “because they can”.

We progress towards the light at the end of the tunnel (fig.2), towards a checkpoint bathed in warm sunshine.



*fig.2 checkpoint between the market and the Ibrahimi Mosque*

### **3.2 The checkpoints**

The two young Palestinian boys before me walk through and the detector sounds. The soldier motions with his gun for them to take off their belts and go again. They do, it sounds. They empty their pockets and try again; they've done this before - they move knowingly with, if it's possible, exasperated indifference. The soldier takes their green-cased cards and pretend-scrutinises them. He pauses and then performs an almost-imperceptible flick of the finger; they're through. I step forward, the alarms sounds but my white skin has me waved through, ID still in pocket. I'm not the threat, *they* are, they're *all* potential terrorists who're used to justify actual terror as the Israeli soldiers poke and prod at dignity and faith. Nidal's pale complexion and company sees him through, too. He takes us to the side and motions for us to watch as the crowd makes a left towards a second checkpoint at the entrance to the Ibrahimi. He then chats to some other observers, the 'special presences' granted to Hebron – the ISM, CPD and EAPPI<sup>ix</sup> – who today have been shooed away by the commander. He's not allowed to do that, but he has. A Swedish volunteer has removed her EAPPI vest, she must be a threat, too. We look on at the crowded checkpoint, it's almost ten minutes since the call to prayer. ID cards are retained (illegal), the soldiers dally (illegal) and (at least while we are there) three people with valid documents are turned away (illegal). In a land where Resolutions are long-ago dismissed, it seems inconsequential that a few people are made to wait; law is obliterated with impunity (Agamben 2005). An ISM volunteer takes photos and a video,

recording proof that Palestinians are made to wait for than the five minutes written into the Protocol, it won't make a difference, he's made "hundreds of videos".

"So there's an international law, but they break it?"

"All the time"

I watch, catatonically, staring - my teeth biting my lip, my head slowly nodding. I lack thoughts for feelings at this point, 'the moment of the checkpoint makes it nigh impossible to contemplate more important – political – thoughts' (Tawil-Souri 2010:18). My withdrawal is response to the in-full-viewness of what's happening and the felt injustice of a compliant international "community" constantly at pains to look away.

We walk down the slight incline towards a-Shuhada Street past a group of six men who've given up on the checkpoint and spread their prayer mats on the street. One man calls, the others follow in what I hope is a choice to defy, though it's just as probably a non-choice to cope. When we get to the lower section, Nidal is keen for us to speak to a clutch of soldiers who arbitrarily guard an arbitrary line between the Ibrahimi Mosque and the Cave of Patriarchs (actually part of the same edifice with a contested and complex history).<sup>x</sup> A small shelter stations three soldiers, they laugh and joke in the heat, for us visitors it's fascinating; the IDF we've read so much about *in the flesh*. Nidal always takes his tours to speak to the soldiers and encourages us to ask questions but we hesitate. Their presence - confidence bearing, big guns slung over the shoulder - chips away at rational thought, a primal threat calls only on a primal response: my well thought-out questions are beyond retrieval. But it's no matter, Nidal's keen with his own - he's asked before - "why are you here, what's your purpose?". It's direct and delivered with angerless authority. The soldier, a Russian who one minute ago was texting and sucking on a lollipop, straightens up and the atmosphere tightens further. She speaks with a flat face and voice in Hebrew. Nidal, unsurprised, unperturbed, asks her - politely, coolly - to speak English for the benefit of the group. For a brief moment there's a chink as she's torn between disdain for him and an awareness of non-Palestinian presences – she would have to justify arresting us. I feel tense, though I know there's something staged about this, Nidal knows eventually that we'll be shooed away and that we'll get no meaningful answers. He asks another question, but this time it's less measured and there's anger in his tone: "why do you think you have the right to be here in Palestine?". There's a pause, and a wry smile, I can sense a soldier with the upper hand: "this is Israel". I and the others on the tour look on, it's an almost-clichéd playing out of how we'd imagined. The short silence drags uncomfortably. I break it, my voice stutters as I manage to paraphrase my planned question: "how many Palestinians have you arrested, and how many Israelis have you arrested?". It's an unloaded one, concentrated on facts. She couldn't be less interested, briefly meets my eye and shrugs, "about equal". It's a nothing answer that tells us we're finished as an audience.

A settler approaches the shelter and gives confectionary to the soldiers, they exchange greetings. He has an air of importance, or self-importance – it's David Wilder, a spokesperson and activist for the settler community<sup>xi</sup> – and he's a little more direct: “go and spend your time in the Arab shops over there, don't bother these soldiers”. He's an imposing figure, at home in his booming voice and hostile tones. The soldiers and settler turn their backs, we've been dismissed. Nidal knew it would be this way, but answers were never the purpose, there's something else. It's staged, the sheer inevitability of the exchange and outcome mean it could be nothing else, it's been played out a hundred times before.

This is the point during the day when two sides come into closest contact. We've been watched and checked, but now we bear witness to the interpersonal dynamics between Israeli authorities and Palestinian civilians. As we walk away one of the Spanish guys on the tour just says “wow” and blows his cheeks. It's the day's strongest intensity so far, with a range of feelings tied in: anger, exasperation, disbelief, shame, embarrassment, fear. I can't deny it either: by anger I mean rage, a visceral repulsion to grave abuse and injustice. The confrontation puts bodies on the line, it might be staged, but there's no fast script and Nidal's free-form performance exposes us to an imagined – that is *felt* – and shared danger, with the type of emotional potency that prefigures strong solidarities (Juris 2008).

Nidal orientates us right towards a-Shuhada street, explaining “this was the busiest street in the city but they closed it before Oslo [1995], it's now nothing, nowhere”. He's not allowed to walk any further so he leaves us to walk; like so many times in this segregated land, we visitors enjoy more mobility than Palestinians (cue another unwanted (and unhelpful) pang: *guilt*). To the left there are two soldiers at a booth and two storeys up on the right there's another on a roof with his rifle (a sniper's rifle?) lazily trained in our direction – something else to keep us on edge. Regretting fluffing my lines last time round, I move to speak to the soldiers in the small booth at the street's entrance. I don't go alone, I wouldn't. I see in fact, that's where all eight of us are headed, as if the short confrontation has synchronised our movement. After polite introductions, the other Brit on the tour, asks: “why are you here?”. The young soldier doesn't hesitate: “to maintain the status quo”. That's somewhat an official line from the Israeli state. The implication is stasis, but this place feels pretty fucking far from stasis; the massive restrictions on this side might want static and retreating people, in fact I've never felt the world vibrate in such a way. The body refuses stasis, it yearns for movement, transition.

### **3.3 The settlement**

The crescendo of the tour comes with a visit to the Nura and Shadi Sidr household within the Avraham Avinu settlement, the last remaining Palestinian home and now surrounded by flags - large aggressive flags. We're welcomed by Nura, there are warm smiles and two children buzzing around. Nidal takes us onto the flat roof, there're a couple of plastic chairs and the black water tanks that mark out Palestinian properties. Nidal repeats from earlier: “so Palestinians don't control their own water supply so there's

one easy way of understanding if a house is a settler house, they don't have these big tanks to keep water". There are four on this roof, two of them have too many bullet holes in them to be repaired. "So this one here Shadi cannot use now since the holes are too many at the bottom, see?". Nidal points to the damage. "In the Intifada it was mostly soldiers shooting at [water] tanks, now it's anyone, sometimes they put things inside". Bleach and urine aren't uncommon additions, apparently. It's another way the Occupation regulates the everyday preoccupation of households, never 100% sure of water from the tap and always vulnerable to random, low-risk shots at the roof (Ryan 2015). Acts of terror.

Nidal now shifts attention to the quite impressive landscape, we can see across the Jordan Valley. He points out the soldiers looking onto us from various vantage points. Some of the soldiers pace, turning towards and away from us with equal purpose. Nidal encourages us to take photographs – "they won't do anything, you're internationals" – and we do, not without hesitation: whatever your passport, fatigues and guns are still fatigues and guns. Nidal gestures towards the windows of the overlooking apartments: "don't take pictures, settlers live there, they don't give a shit. Last week when I was here they came to take the daughter, we had to take her back... physically".<sup>xiii</sup> Somehow at this point we're not surprised and don't even question veracity, it's less desensitisation than a despondency, a grown realisation that such is the dominance here that another story of settler violence is another story of settler violence. It feeds into our existing shock state, cumulatively. They look like normal apartments in a normal city, but before long we catch the attention of some eyes in the overlooking building. Nidal asks us to put away our cameras and to go downstairs, "we should get out of the way, they don't like if we're here". I can see that from the expression in the faces. For the first time, Nidal hurriedly shepherds his tour group, making sure we all get back inside the house.



*fig.3 still from video 'Hebron - Settler attempts to take down Palestinian flag, 2014'*  
[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1s3Qt-Tm5I>]

Inside, Nidal sits us around a computer screen and starts loading a video. We're brought sweet tea and salty biscuits by Nura and Shadi, their children come to say hello while Nidal makes sure we can all see the screen. At the video's opening<sup>xiiii</sup> a settler man is climbing onto the roof we've just left, now

above our heads. The camera shakes and the only audio at this point is Shadi's heavy, and getting-heavier breathing (fig.3). Twice he shouts "למה אתה על הגג שלי" (*why are you on my roof, why are you on my roof?*), he gets closer to the intruder and, his voice calming a little, asks twice more. We can make out the man's face now, he has a dark beard and wears a white shirt and kippah. The camera then pans to the street below, and this is where we get a sense of why Shadi's breathing has shortened: it's full of settlers, perhaps 150-200 of them all watching the intruder trying to scale the roof.

"Why are you on my roof?" Nidal translates, pausing the video to ensure we don't miss anything.<sup>xiv</sup>

"I've come to talk with you ... remove that flag", of course he doesn't say *Palestinian* flag, but that's what he means.

"But this is my roof" Shadi replies, his voice cracking but dignified.

"This is all mine, this is my country and my land"

"No. This is my house"

"You just think it's yours. But this whole country is the Land of Israel"

"This is Palestine"

"What is Palestine? It is only what the Romans called it. This is the Land of Israel. This is my country. And everything that is here is mine"

Some in the crowd below show their middle fingers when Shadi turns the camera towards them. They shout. The man by now is stuck in the barbed wire that lines the roof. A soldier then arrives on the ladder and shows Shadi contempt and the settler concern. He's another soldier who's forgotten that his job is to keep both Shadi and Trespasser safe and within the law. He points and shouts at Shadi. Nidal has stopped translating in this point, there's little need. At 3m16s camera zooms in on a settler below (fig.4):



fig.4 second still from video 'Hebron - Settler attempts to take down Palestinian flag, 2014'

Nidal pauses the video and explains: “that’s Anat Cohen, or *Eady*”,<sup>xv</sup> you can see here that the soldier is taking orders from the settler, she’s in control here”. Right, the soldier cocks his head, registers something and tells Shadi “take down the flag”. Nidal clicks on a second video showing three IDF soldiers arriving shortly after and right there on the roof in the places we were standing four minutes ago are three of them, fully armed, fully imposing.<sup>xvi</sup> Nidal is just paraphrasing now: “they’re threatening to arrest him for the flag”. In the background, here in Palestine, behind the Green Line, there are oversized blue and white flags everywhere. It’s relentless, shameless, it’s enraging.

It’s a horror without end. We feel something of it, Nidal has ensured we all feel it, right to the bone. The strangulation of the Palestinian people communicated affectively.

#### **4. Affect, hopelessness, and (the limits of) political agency**

Nidal has taken us to the dark chambers of experience, to the extremes of contemporary political oppression. The approach to Hebron brings the trauma of ‘someone else’s story ... communicating it in a way that keeps it traumatic *for others*’ (Berlant 2001:44, original emphasis); the market foregrounds the ‘indeterminacy of threat’ and its corollary in the present, fear (Massumi 2005); the checkpoint lays bare the ‘humiliating acts ... [that] constitute the daily experience of Palestinians’ (Fattah & Fierke 2009:73); the soldiers allow us to partake in a ‘militant confrontation’, introducing ‘powerful emotions ... a potent mix of excitement, anger, and fear, welled up’ (Juris 2008:62) and the settlement brings home – literally – the violent creep of the colonial present (Gregory 2004). In this moment horizons are dark and hope for a better future appears strangled of life. This is the seeming political end of affective constriction: the circumscription of agential possibilities by debilitating negative affects. And this brings us - intrepidly, fearing the worst - to the troublesome issue: if our material contingency with our environments discloses possibilities in the world, if affective encounters disable and enable movements, if we are orientated agentially by our worldly encounters, then what of political agency in Hebron?

Central to a response to questions of political agency is an understanding of how the IDF’s intended “sterilisation” of Palestinian life rests on the property of affects as ‘orientating’ foundations for conscious thought processes and, connectedly, political agency (Coole 2005; Damasio 2004; McManus 2011). The ‘somatic dimension’, as Diana Coole phrases it, is ‘where bodies act and suffer; where power is etched onto the body and communication takes place through a mute yet eloquent corporeal syntax’ (2005:128). Bodies conceptualised this way, Coole continues, ‘remind agents of their own and others’ frailty; their vulnerability to suffering and pain; the high stakes of political conflict. For the body situates them firmly within material and affective worlds, where economic and emotional structures mediate the satisfaction of somatic needs and violence assaults the flesh with raw immediacy’ (ibid.:129-30). The body in this way is not merely materially contingent with its environment but it is set in a consequential relation

with the circulation of affect, emerging *politically* of and through affective encounter. Fear, threat and humiliation – the qualities of affects – and pre-cognitive-cognitive relations come to the fore here. As ‘orientations’, affective experience bears on cognitive thought as, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, ‘impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think’ (1972:161). Thus, affects are not simply transpersonal, ‘emergent’ capacities, but might also be ‘engineered’ or ‘choreographed’ - as they are by the occupation in Hebron – ‘mixtures of the word, gesture, image, sound, rhythm, smell and touch [that] help to define the sensibility in which ... perception, thinking, identity, beliefs, and judgment are set’ (Connolly 2002:20). Sensibility as consequent, then, retains a trace (or more) of the negative or affirmative (to momentarily invoke a crude binary) quality of an affect, as Deleuze writes: ‘we experience *joy* when a body encounters ours and enters into composition with it, and *sadness* when, on the contrary, a body or an idea threatens our own coherence’ (1988:19, original emphasis).

Hebron as an affective sensorium threatens coherence and, to borrow from Deleuze, can only precipitate states akin to the negativity of *sadness*. Such negative states diminish optimism and confidence, thus depriving hope of important attendant affects and potentially obfuscating visions of the ‘more to life’ that position hope as ‘a dynamic imperative *to action*’ (Anderson 2006:744, original emphasis). Political apathy might then be considered to rise from the depressive states of dread, anxiety, stress, worry and so forth (Berlant 2005). These are the ‘negative affects that precede death’ and increased strangulation, eventually, suffocates, ‘to smother all resistance’ (Falah 2004:599). Nurhan Abujidi writes of this as a ‘colonisation of the mind’ that ‘becomes so naturalised that people cannot even imagine an alternative’, citing one interview with a student activist: ‘I no longer possess a dream or big expectations ... because when I have a big dream the occupation devastates it’ (2014:210). ‘Another world’, from here, seems far from possible, as Lisa Duggan notes: ‘most calls to progressive left organising stress the importance of finding and sustaining hope’ (Duggan & Muñoz 2009:275). Hope, or a modality of hope predicated on optimism, is not an obviously ready resource amid quotidian threat, fear and humiliation. On the question of political agency, from this perspective, a lack of hope equates to an apathy of let-go dreams: when hope is smothered, it seems, so too is resistance.

## **5. Hope from fear, and critical political agency**

If this is the case, however, what of Nidal’s (and others’) work to immerse visitors in the affective sensorium of Hebron? I ask Nidal why he does this work: “for me it’s about showing people how it feels ... people have to know, see with their eyes what is happening here. You can’t get a good picture from the media, it’s not enough ... you have to see it, *feel* it”. I ask him whether he holds any hope, after a pause he responds “of course ... they can occupy everything apart from here [tapping his head], the more

they push the more I hope ... we have to hope". I ask "what do you expect?", he pauses again, looks right at me, through me: "nothing, by now I expect nothing, it's been too long but we have to have something of hope". While dreams and expectations are perhaps *devastated*, then, they clearly do not take everything of his hope. Political agency, from this perspective, retains something of hope, a hope that Nidal quite clearly draws on in his activism. In fact, the violent affects of occupation – the corporeal dynamics that strategically (aim to) smother hope – have become the very resource of his activism and his resistance to political oppression, suggesting that affects may 'orientate' ambivalently, contemporaneously suppressing and releasing political agencies. In this, the final section of the paper, I want to theorise Nidal's as a form of critical hope that opens political agency to resistance to Israeli occupation.

Ambivalent affective orientations - or what Brian Massumi termed 'the autonomy of affect' (1995; 2002) - loosen causal relationships between affect and effect, thereby opening up hope and agency to new potentials. For Massumi, bodily affects might emerge as 'qualifications' in so much as 'positioning oneself in a line of narrative continuity' involves a 'reflux of consciousness into the autonomic depths, coterminous with a rise of the autonomic into consciousness' (1995:85). Qualifications are thus a 'conscious-autonomic mix' or, in other words, affects that orientate consequentially in a broadly predictable cause-effect relation (*ibid.*). In contrast, Massumi writes of autonomous affect as 'intensity', as a 'never-to-conscious autonomic remainder ... outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function' (*ibid.*). Without an exploitable function, affect in this sense becomes 'an unstable object of governance' (Anderson 2007:162) and instead a 'realm of potential' where affective escape is antithetical to the stasis of death, and constitutive of life. In fact, for Massumi, affective escape is not only constitutive but a condition of life: 'if there were no escape, no excess or remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death. Actually existing, structured things live in and through what escapes them. Their autonomy is the autonomy of affect' (1995:96-7).

The notion of 'political asphyxia' meets its limits here. Bodies are 'not ownable or recognisable' (Massumi 2002:28), but rather escapes to the realm of potential 'where outsides are infolded, and sadness is happy (happy because the press to action and expression is life) ... a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect' (Massumi 1995:91). Rather than locking thoughts to equivalent affects (*à la* Deleuze, above), then, the coalescence of paradoxical movements allows an amount of 'agential manoeuvre' (McManus 2011) – or in Massumi's words, "wriggle room" (2002b:214) – that, crucially, lends affective autonomy its political substance. It is to this substance and manoeuvre that Diana Coole refers when she writes on embodiments and the ambivalent relations of negative affects with movements of apathy or resistance:

why should resistance not also emerge on [a] carnal level (as aesthetic revulsion, abjection, nausea) to render corporeal refusal a prelude to action? A tightening of the chest, a constricting of the throat, a stiffening of the shoulders, a knotting in the stomach, might all suggest a negative visceral response to a situation, while a quickening of the heart, a rapidity of breaths, a clenching of the fists, an adrenalin rush, a blush, a frown, might indicate a preparation for resistance that is inscribed in the exteriority of the flesh and communicates to others a silent call to common action. (2005:131)

Resistance in this way, as a political manifestation of affect, relies less on a notion of hope as an affirmative orientation – a promised ‘more to life’ - but, conversely, rests on the ‘intensities of fear [that] demand the body do something, and now!’ (McManus 2011:9). Hope is, in this sense – in every sense - ‘cruel’ (Berlant 2006), or fueled by ‘collectivity of the cynical, bitter, hostile, despairing and hopeless’ (Duggan & Munoz 2009:279).

Towards a (re)theorisation of the relations between hope and fear, Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz embark on dual project of both demythologising hope and depathologising fear, insisting on a ‘dialectical rather than oppositional relation’ (2009:280). Towards the former, Esteban Muñoz makes ‘a distinction between a mode of hope that simply keeps one in place within an emotional situation predicated on control, and, instead, a certain practice of hope that helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced’ (ibid.:278). Hope in this sense always involves a desire to escape regimes of control, and thus cannot be separated from the negative affects that gave birth to (specifically in the case Duggan and Esteban Munoz discuss), LGBT movements and also all manner of progressives - Civil Rights, Suffragettes – that rose from the most violent affects of political oppression. Importantly, hope from this perspective involves risk, and therefore must draw on forms of fear. Oxymoronically, then, fear is not a pathology to be *feared* in a project of sustaining hope, it is instead the very affect that mobilises critical or radical forms of hope and, in turn, animates resistance to oppressive impositions of power. Fear and the hope that predisposes a body to resist are in this way co-constitutive and interdependent. To paraphrase Ernst Bloch’s famous dismissal of blithe forms of hope: hope without fear is simply subjective confidence (1986:340).

There is a confidence to the soldiers and settlers’ strangulation of Hebron. The strategy of “sterilisation” counts on the material world of occupation – checkpoints, cages, dispossessions – shaping the contours of movement and the concomitant affects of fear, threat and humiliation effecting ‘political asphyxiation’. Such an outcome depends on a determinist function of violent affects, that they – cumulatively – reduce Palestinians to a state of political hopelessness. But affects are not determinist, they are at most determining - ‘their determinations are multiplicitous’ (McManus 2011:15) - and hope, not hopelessness, remains a potential even amid a supposedly debilitating sensorium. Nidal’s resistance – “the more they push, the more I hope” – is defiant proof of the co-constitutive nature of negative affects and hope.<sup>xvii</sup> His activism evidences the body’s ambivalent relationship with fear; his insistence on hope demonstrates a mode of political agency that remains resistant to Israeli oppression. Nidal therefore

provides a potentially productive contribution to a politically important project – perhaps *the* political project of our time – of how ‘fears must be mined and harnessed for critical ends such as the enhancement of potentially transformative agency’ (ibid.:1). Such activism “names the intolerable”, does not attempt to efface fear, but rather inflects it, intervenes in its circulation, retains its intensity such that the fear - the intolerable – becomes “the hope itself”. There are many other Nidals who formally and informally give tours of Hebron, their work is admirable and politically urgent. The contribution here is towards knowledge of their work, of the persistence of hope, and something – but not everything – about the embodied experience of Palestinian life under occupation. More attention is needed in the area of the body and the occupation, especially on how affects are experienced by residents of Hebron whose differentiated bodies undoubtedly matter in the movement through checkpoints, under watchtowers and so forth. For Palestinians in Hebron and across the Occupied Territories we might seek ways to explore and facilitate the ways that hope and agency retain political potential in these, the darkest, most suffocating of times.

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### **Acknowledgements**

This research was funded by the Academy of Finland RELATE Centre of Excellence. Photographs by Jemima Repo, who also participated in the tours. Thank you to Nidal and the other activists and tour guides for allowing and facilitating this writing.

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<sup>i</sup> The Hebron Protocol (1997) was agreed after Oslo (1995) in recognition of Hebron’s unique geography. H-1 (about 80% of the city) is under the administration of the Palestinian Authority. H-2, which includes a large part of the historic centre, remains under Israeli military control.

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<sup>ii</sup> A 2007 report by B'Tselem (an Israeli Human Rights organisation) reports that soldiers guarding a-Shuhada Street, formerly the busiest street in the city centre, were 'given explicit orders that the street was a "sterile route" along which Palestinian movement was completely forbidden' (Feuerstein & Shulman 2007, 29).

<sup>iii</sup> The one group consistently avoided was the Israeli NGO Breaking the Silence (BtS) which uses the experiences of IDF veterans to 'break the silence' of Israeli violence in the West Bank. While ostensibly carrying out similar work to the Palestinian activists in Hebron, a consistent criticism I heard was "it's not their story to tell". This, and observance of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (bdsmovement.net), means that many Palestinian activists refuse to collaborate with BtS.

<sup>iv</sup> Removed for anonymity

<sup>v</sup> A news report is available here: <http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=766607>

<sup>vi</sup> Though there are many subcategories, most West Bank Palestinians are issued by the Israeli state with a green-blue- or green-coloured ID card. The former denotes residence in East Jerusalem, the latter of anywhere within the Occupied West Bank but outside of Jerusalem, neither grant citizenship of Israel. Green, the colour Nidal holds, denies the right to travel to Jerusalem without a permit. For an in-depth account of the differences between ID cards on the West Bank, in Gaza and in Israel, and the discriminatory practices they facilitate, see Tawil Sourì (2011).

<sup>vii</sup> On this particular tour all eight of us were EU citizens

<sup>viii</sup> OHCHR (The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights) reports: 'Settlements benefit from enough water to run farms and orchards, and for swimming pools and spas, while Palestinians often struggle to satisfy their minimum water requirements. According to testimonies received, some settlements consume around 400 litres per capita per day (l/c/d),<sup>48</sup> whereas Palestinian consumption is 73 l/c/d, and as little as 10-20 l/c/d<sup>49</sup> for Bedouin communities, which depend on expensive and low-quality tanker water. In East Jerusalem, houses built without a permit cannot connect to the water network' (2013, 18)

<sup>ix</sup> Respectively: International Solidarity Movement, Christian Peacemaker Teams and Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. Each group puts international volunteers on the ground to witness and report from the many contentious spaces in the West Bank and Gaza.

<sup>x</sup> For more on the arbitrariness of military rule at checkpoints see Machsomwatch (2004).

<sup>xi</sup> David Wilder's blog is available here: <http://davidwilder.blogspot.in/>. A post republished in the Jerusalem Post last year recounts: A woman asked a question I hear frequently: "Isn't it dangerous to live here in Hebron?" ... "sure it is, for the Arabs around us. When they see you they're afraid". Wilder's Hebron, interestingly, is not marked by asphyxiation: 'it says in the Gemara that 'Eretz Yisrael Machkim' – meaning that breathing the air of Israel provides wisdom. Here, in Israel, and certainly in Hebron, the air we breathe is holy'. <http://www.jpost.com/Blogs/The-Wilder-Way/What-keeps-Israel-going-374775>. His piece on Baruch Goldstein is a good illustration of Wilder's politics: <http://davidwilder.blogspot.in/2014/02/baruch-goldstein-20-years-later.html>.

<sup>xii</sup> This story is corroborated by Emily, a Canadian citizen on that tour, who wrote; 'we went onto his roof. Kitty corner on the adjacent building was a soldier in an observation tower pointing his gun at us. I have seen very few guns in my life and felt very uneasy... The soldier told us to get off the roof. That we couldn't be there. Shadi is not allowed on the roof of his own house. There are bullet holes in his water tanks... after we left Shadi's house some settlers had stormed his house and kidnapped his daughter and taken her to a nearby settlement. Shadi had to round up some men to go take her back by force. Nidal had been called to help in whatever ways he could. He called the police, but the Palestinian security was not interested/didn't have the jurisdiction because of it being Area C. He phoned the media in the hopes that at least someone would take notice' (Emily, personal correspondence). This data is from an ongoing project that gathers visitors' ethnographies of political tours.

<sup>xiii</sup> The video is apparently in a cycle of being uploaded (by activists) and taken down (by Israeli Authorities) but seems to have found a stable URL on B'Tselem's Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1s3Qt-Tm5I>

<sup>xiv</sup> A full transcript of the video is available at: <http://www.jpost.com/National-News/Settler-seeking-to-remove-Palestinian-flag-in-Hebron-gets-tangled-in-barbed-wire-345304>

<sup>xv</sup> In a *New Yorker* profile of Palestine's settler community Jeffrey Goldberg writes that Cohen is 'known, even among Hebron's Jews, who are some of the least placatory of all the settlers, for her ferocity. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/31/among-the-settlers>

<sup>xvi</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c\\_yKpu61zM8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_yKpu61zM8)

<sup>xvii</sup> For further discussion of similar assertions in Palestinian resistance see Joronen (2016).

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