

Enclosures of Possibility

The University & the Encampment

Communique from
the People's
University for Gaza
at UBC

In the early hours of April 29, 2024, students, faculty and community members began their encampment of UBC's MacInnes field. Inspired by student groups from across North America, we too are calling our institution to divest and cut ties from companies and institutions supporting the genocide in Palestine. In the contagion of resistance, students began building a barricade out of salvaged pallets, flipped picnic tables, cafe tables, and construction fencing. We set up our tents proudly, and began putting countless hours of organizing to work by setting up programming space, as well as medical, supply, and food tents.

For many hours everything was possible, and it felt like our escalation would lead us to new, unexplored terrains of freedom. This was until the encampment spoke to the police...

UBC is a land-grant university, generating its wealth first from stolen Musqueam land, then profiting off this stolen wealth with genocidal, ecocidal, and technocratic investments. The university, much like Israel, is the expansion of the settler colony, and as such, an enclosure of possibility. It's inevitable that the structures of the university would replicate themselves in the "People's University for Gaza," but in the interest of advancing both learning and liberation, we've detailed a short list of what we're referring to as "enclosures of possibility." We offer these as invitations for how we as a group can advance Palestinian liberation by means of advancing our liberation zone further into the university.k

Aesthetic Betrayal

“British oppression, which had escalated to an unexpected level, and the escalation of police raids, mass arrests, and executions throughout 1937 and 1938, weakened the revolt but did not end it. The British had come to realize that both in essence and substance, and in regards to its local leadership, it was a peasant revolt. As a result of this, the revolutionary spirit that prevailed throughout the whole of Palestine led to everyone in the towns wearing the peasant headdress (keffiyah and agal) so that the countryman coming into the town should not be subjected to oppression by the authorities”

- Ghassan Kanafani- *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine*¹

The lesson of the keffiyeh is clear: it is not just an aesthetic, or an indication of politics, but also an extension of solidarity with peasant escalations, and an acceptance of risk.

While a constructed barricade in a field is an aesthetically beautiful thing to behold, it too must extend beyond the aesthetic. It is the denouncement of property and of safety through policing, and it must provide shelter for those taking risks while advancing the liberation zone. Without this, it's just a bunch of students building a fort within a fort within a fort.

1 <https://pflp-documents.org/documents/PFLP-Kanafani3639.pdf>

Student Leadership

As noted by Indigenous women of the Native Study Group in 1968 'Vancouver', considering solidarity between Indigenous and Palestinian people,

“The question of leadership has been forced upon us by the bourgeoisie”.²

At the People’s University for Gaza, we are not defining a student by the superficial categorization of merit, or by their capacity to handle the financial burden of attending post-secondary, but by their capacity for co-creation, their ability to bring analysis to their struggle, and by their commitment to liberation.

As police and administration force the use of ‘student leadership,’ are we able to resist their rhetoric and tactics for division?

Righteous Victims

“Authentic victimhood, passivity, moral purity and the adoption of a white washed position are necessary for recognition in the eyes of the state... The desire for recognition compels us to be allies with, rather than enemies of the State, to sacrifice ourselves in order to meet the standards of victimhood...”

- Jackie Wang- *Against Innocence: Race, Gender and the politics of Safety*³

² <https://cpavancouver.org/1976/01/native-study-group-on-indigenous-and-palestinian-struggles/>

³ <https://www.liesjournal.net/volume1-10-againstinocence.html>

Camp, much like the media we consume, is quick to speak about the deaths and tragedies of Gaza, leaving little space to celebrate resistance. Innocence is also used to sanitize the solidarity movement for Palestine by alienating those who express support for the resistance^{4,5}.

As soon as a camper spoke to the police, innocence and safety were wielded to advocate for acquiescing to the police's demands, and ensure legality of the encampment. Thankfully, after many distractions and a long day, none of the police demands were met, highlighting how unimportant the demands truly were.

“The invocation of personal security and safety presses on our affective and emotional registers and can thus be manipulated to justify everything from racial profiling to war. When people use safe space language to call out people in activist spaces, the one wielding the language is framed as innocent, and may even amplify or politicize their presumed innocence”

- Jackie Wang

Day 2 in camp included an arrest formations workshop to better protect vulnerable or marginalized students. Arrest handbooks were handed out to campers so they could know their rights once they're arrested. Arrests were communicated as a foregone conclusion without any discussion of running, fighting, or escalating our defense. This, like many actions that

4 <https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2023/10/31/langara-natalie-knight-hamas-comments/>

5 <https://www.mapleridgenews.com/news/police-arrest-bc-protester-who-called-hamas-attack-heroic-and-brave-7352305>

have come before it, felt like “symbolic arrest” was on the horizon so that we too could become righteous victims.

“Militancy is undermined by the politics of safety. It becomes impossible to do anything that involves risk when people habitually block such action on the grounds that it makes them feel unsafe.”

- *Jackie Wang*

Waiting around for police escalation in hopes of performing the righteous victim not only doesn't escalate for Gaza, but it reinforces liberal reformism and reproduces the existing social order.

Sweet Songs of Organizers

It was not long before we understood that students had assumed a hierarchal structure with “organizers” advising and back-channeling with students on decisions of how to proceed. No matter how sweet their words might be, how many interviews they've given, books they've sold, or social media followers they have, organizers can only be trusted to act according to their own goals, which may or may not align with our collective values and aims. Their politics may be good, but resorting on tired tactics (leadership structures, symbolic arrests, peace policing) limits our imagination and any possibility of advancing the liberation zone.

Pedestal Pedagogy

The encampment followed the rut of protests that came before it: a loud speaker with a microphone and speeches and lessons from faculty and “organizers”. While these teach-ins provide a much needed space for faculty and students to speak openly, it also reproduces the structure of the classroom. Much of the learning we witnessed came from the co-creation and construction of mutual aid and defense strategies within the camp: the book and zine library, the food distribution zone, the supply station, the medic tent, and of course, the barricades. Learning at the People’s University for Gaza exists in the creation and continual expansion of liberation zones; it must be in the democratic co-conspiring of faculty and students; in the practice of freedom and joy; and in the creation of a movement where everyone is needed and everyone has what they need.

The Big Outsider

On May 1, 2024, Rashid Khalidi spoke to students at Columbia University where he described how their protests in 1968, against the war in Vietnam and American imperialism, were characterized by politicians as being led by ‘a bunch of outside agitators’. Students were inevitably beaten by aggressive and indiscriminate repression from the NYPD. Rather than remembering what MLK poignantly noted in 1966, that “the riot is the language of the unheard”, it seems that the state’s framing has leaked into the consciousness of ‘student leadership’ pushing for change in the contemporary moment.

If community members and upwardly mobile university students cannot be responsible for their tax money and tuition fees, then who can? When our university is an imperialist war machine with a vested interest in the genocide of a people and the indiscriminate slaughter of children, are you glad you are on the inside? In the case of the university, students are the strongest weapon against the expansion of the settler colony, whether they are understood as 'inside' it or not.

The Manager in your Head

As awareness of the encampment grows, so does the number of students. Each time a newcomer saw something that required tending to, they were quick to look for the "organizers" and leaders to make sure to ask for permission. Do the people in your direct vicinity agree with your vision? Will they help you achieve it? Don't let this invisible manager hold you back. Get a group of friends and do what is necessary: strengthen the barricade; organize the food station; facilitate a conversation; construct a space that you love; or redesign your least favourite classroom. Find your people, and take what you need to escalate for Gaza. The more you create something you love, the harder you'll fight for it.

We have yet to find liberation within these enclosures, we believe we'll find it once they're gone

Free Palestine