



Interview with Catherine Chiniara Charrett

Christopher Newfield¹ · Catherine Chiniara Charrett²

Accepted: 9 March 2023 / Published online: 7 May 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Keywords Palestine · Hamas · Diplomacy · Queer · Race · European Union

Christopher Newfield (CN): It seems as though this project did not emerge from a strictly academic environment?

Catherine Charrett (CC): I often find my approach requires me to remove myself from the academic space to understand what questions actually really need answering. Before beginning work on the book I was working at an institute that hosted a series of events with senior bureaucrats and officials working in diplomacy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This was in 2007 and 2008. The common thread that came from those discussions was questioning how it was possible that diplomatic channels were not pursued with Hamas and that these officials maintained a practice of no-contact with Hamas. Hamas was the second largest political movement in Palestine. These diplomats discussed how they knew Hamas was integral to any diplomatic initiative in Palestine, and they said they knew that any political initiative would require the involvement of Hamas. And I'm sitting there, this young researcher, listening to all these 'important' conversations by senior officials and wondering to myself: aren't you the ones that are responsible for this policy of exclusion and sanction? You are upset with your own decisions and policies? What is going on in your place of work, in your environment that you are not able to enact what you think actually needs to happen?

CN: One of the amazing things to me about your book is that you were working towards a modality of interaction that tries to get out of the repeated rituals that surround European diplomacy in Palestine. You critique the rituals that surround these official meetings and what those participating in them actually think is going to emerge from these resolutions. So there is a performative element to the West's relationship to this region, in which there is a lot of standing for Western values

✉ Christopher Newfield
chris.newfield@isrf.org

✉ Catherine Chiniara Charrett
c.charrett@westminster.ac.uk

¹ Independent Social Research Foundation, London, UK

² University of Westminster, London, Great Britain



around democracy and free elections, and so on. And then there is a pretty glaring gap between the enunciation of the principles which you are calling a ritual, on the one hand, and then the facts on the ground.

CC: During an interview with a senior member of the European External Action Service, a British diplomat, it came up where he could tell from my tone of voice, that I was really upset and disappointed with how the EU responded to Hamas's election. And he asked me what did you want us to do? I gave suggestions. And I said, well, you know, you could have done this. And had you done that. You could have given them a chance. You could have at least maintained certain channels of communication open. Like had you not cut all funding to Hamas related projects and shifted the money towards Fatah. What you pushed were really bad, racist politics. You pushed a decision of trying to actively dismantle Palestinian governance structures. And what he said to me was, "you assume that had the European Union acted differently, everything would have turned out fine. Right?" And "I was like, no, but at least you would have tried, right? And at least you would have, you know, put things in a different direction." In the book I call this a kind of queer moment. Which says, we are all too good at behaving correctly. Instead, we need to step out of line for a moment, we need to ask the queer questions.

He knew that what the EU did was wrong. And it was really bad politics. He knew Hamas had a strong social support base, and for good reason. He knew recognising their elections would be important for the strength of Palestinian governance. And the research I did for this book and the interviews I conducted showed that everyone knew that. The EU Commission had extensive reports and internal audits and reviews that shows clearly to themselves, that "if we shift all funding away from the Hamas government towards Fatah, we are likely going to create divisions on the ground, increase levels of mistrust in the European Union and actively work against the government elect. What we should do is let the elections run their course, have elections again in four years' time and see how things go." So there is extensive and overwhelming evidence that they knew what they were doing the whole time. And they were really aware of their bad politics and bad practice.

CN: That seems to me to be one of the most important themes in your book: this disjunction that comes to consciousness between what they want and what they are getting. And it's not just, oh, we want this and we're trying to get it, but we're not able to because of the situation, because of Israel, or because of Palestine because of the US or whatever it is. It is that we are actively working against this, against getting the thing that we want. We are the ones who are blocking it. You call this a need to invoke a queer moment, to open up the possibility of enacting what we want. What if queer is the moment where you think "I'm supposed to want this but I don't want this. I want the opposite of this. I want the other thing."

CC: There is a part of the book where I explore the possibility of love, of loving the Other, of the possibility of exploring intimacy between different political figures, that can recognise the Other as a brother or as...? Judith Butler writes on this through Frantz Fanon, whereby there are social and psychic kind of relations, she calls it a racial foreclosure on the possibility of love. I think that you are right, and that refusal to love, that kind of moving away from the possibility of love is also quite a violent process, which requires a lot of work. To forbid a kind of brotherly



love, community love, or even refusing an alternative future, of progressing into the future in a different way. In the book, I call this destroying the possibility of recognising the Other and recognising yourself differently in this modality.

CN: Your lack of fatalism comes through on every page in this book, and I wanted to ask you about your method and your process in the way that you are writing about this. I mean, one is that you use fragments, as Rhys Machold points out in his contribution, rather than writing a conventional historical narrative. Do you think that writing like this opens up possibilities that work for you?

CC: The methodology for me is really important. The book's form mirrors its theoretical argument and its ethical commitments. Each chapter has the opening and closing of a ritual. It is as if each chapter has this kind of opening, this kind of hope or expectation that things could be otherwise. And which then culminates in the closing down of that option. In many ways, the form mirrors the elections or mirrors the kind of perpetual possibility for a politics otherwise that resides in a theory of performativity. The reason I write like this is that form has a lot to do with content. The form perhaps exudes a particular feeling of, of how political rituals and even social rituals work.

I also try and shift what and who we think talks about international relations, or national politics. I try and include a lot of different kinds of texts in my writing from poetry, art, but also drag artists, queer artists. Artists and activists who have lived with struggle on the streets and have had to shape their political environments in different ways. And for me this explores politics looking otherwise. From looking into the margins, and to explore these sites as the interlocutors of political theory and expression.

Through the methods, I try and engage. I try and resist playfully with the readers, to explore what an alternate universe might look like. Through a collage of different fragments, of texts, emotions and experiences I try and create links between the residues, between the residues of what is left. I create a collage of experience that I hope might provoke a reaction, a response in the readers. I ask what if we do take risks? What if we try to open up and change ever so slightly the trajectory? What does this look like? Drawing on artistic or creative forms I centre the question of affect or emotion. Something that I think has largely been or attempted to be excluded from international diplomacy, relations, politics.

Part of the book is trying write in the spirit of being unruly and ungovernable and really trying to push the limits of what can be in an academic text. Or what can count as putting forward an argument. And what can count as serious. In this way, the book enacts a queer form of ungovernability, by creating non-straightforward connections, links and desires. I think you are right, the text is trying to be an inclusive text. In a sense lots of different energies can come together to try and promote change. So I think there is a kind of unruliness to it, that refuses to abide by a kind of hierarchy or authority and which tries to push and expand the boundaries.

CN: I think the book's form succeeds at that. Do you see a next phase from resistance or self-rule, for lack of a better word?

CC: What I can see happening are two kinds of forces on the ground in the colonised Palestinian territories at the moment, which might be changing some of what we have discussed in this interview, and we might entering into a different



dangerous phase, from around 2015 to 2020. There is an important and growing youth movement, a democratising movement also led by women, young women, as well as queer women. There was what some have called, the Unity Intifada that built off the energy of lots of different youth groups in different parts historic Palestine, including 48, coming together through a democratising energy that was putting pressure on the state of Israel. A lot of this, I think, is probably supported by advocates for a one state solution, and a lot of it in support of the Boycott Disinvestment and Sanctions movement. So there is a lot of youth energy that was really trying to shift the old guard. That raises new questions about Hamas, which are somewhat different than they would have been in 2006, or even 2010. This encourages us to interrogate what might be the relationship between different segments of Palestinian resistance and solidarity, and how do they work together. There are also a lot of Palestinians in Europe and in the US really trying to push the transnational democratising effort. So that is one force.

The other is that the counterinsurgency against this democratising force by the Israeli state and its many supporters in Europe, Canada, the US and elsewhere know exactly how local and transnational solidarity works. And they know it has been successful. So the worrying thing is what has now come as a response to the strength of that movement. For example, in 48, after the Unity Intifada, there was a really dangerous and important moment. I think there has been quite a concerted effort to fragment that democratising movement. There were mass arrests that took place of Palestinian Israelis and a call to arms against them, which sort of laid bare that they are never going to be full citizens in the current settler colonial apparatus. That was internally.

Externally, we saw the deployment of the IHRA definition all across the UK and Europe, basically to punish Palestinian scholars, allies, allies of colour, and UK universities more broadly for, first of all, acknowledging that there are human rights abuses going on, acknowledging that Israel is a settler colonial occupation, acknowledging that its apartheid, and that we must do something about it. The UK Government and the Zionist lobby intend to shut down those conversations. And struggle is ongoing. There is a concerted effort to try and destroy that kind of social movement at its base.

CN: This is very much part of European colonial history and I always think of the US in relation to this as a settler colony that is based on appropriation of land. This shapes those of us in the US who are unable or unwilling to imagine settlements that do not involve the use of force. In other words, many of us refuse recognition of a peaceful settlement or a fully negotiated settlement that does not have coercion. I believe it is hard for many Americans to set coercion aside: much of the Republican Party represents this assumption that people with different needs or views finally need to be coerced. They pretty whole heartedly see the use of force as the way that you have a nation. So they would not bat an eye at the continuous use of force and power as a way of regulating the situation.

CC: I think that is a good observation, Chris. I thought you were going to say that there is sort of general assumption that there is nothing really wrong with settler colonialism. And I think that might be a kind of subconscious, but even a political position, considering Europe's history and its relationship to the US, or Turtle Island, and Australia, that perhaps there is nothing wrong with settler



colonialism, and then on a subconscious or political level awareness and acceptance of the violence that is needed to uphold that structure, and which then continues to be used to uphold that structure.

What my research shows, and perhaps my more recent research is that violence is the modality of European politics in the Middle East, and within Palestine. Violence is the only language through which settler colonialism can manifest. There are different orders and presentations or expressions of this violence, but it is violence, nevertheless. There is talk of another Palestinian legislative elections. There has been continuous delay of these elections by Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, because Hamas, again, is polling quite well. Hamas also did quite well in recent Student Union elections at Birzeit University. There was also an incident right before those elections involving mass arrests of Hamas affiliated student activists. The Student Union of the university was attacked by Israeli forces right before the elections. And someone made the comment to me that they thought this attack by Israeli forces improved Hamas's chances of being successful in the Union elections. Israeli forces are also very aware of this phenomenon, or outcome. So how do you manoeuvre around this pressure as an activist? Violence produces a particular order of political arrangements.

I find a point of tension with my interpretation of Hamas that is not necessarily in the book. Hamas performed well as a government after it won the elections. Despite pressures externally Hamas did really well, not just according to itself, but to residents of Gaza, in holding firm, and actually creating a functioning civil service. What concerns me is how effective it was that Hamas became the new bogeyman around this time. The way that leftists and communists were before 9/11. This was replaced with the 'Islamic Threat'. Palestinian leftists and Communist parties and leaders continue to be targeted in historic Palestine. I think it is important to unpack and understand the relationship between the targeting of different movements and groups. And how effective for fascism and capitalism to have that bogeyman Other. It is evidenced that Israeli officials, supported by Israeli academia knew very well that a Hamas success in the elections would help Israel argue that Palestinians are terrorists and therefore they need to receive a militarised response. While EU officials conceded repeatedly in interviews with me that they knew Hamas and Palestinians were not terrorists, that they knew they were not dogmatic, European support for settler colonialism meant an acceptance of the racialized ordering that comes with the current claim of terrorism.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

