

# Landscape as Archive: Reflections on the Gadap Sessions

Heba Islam

From February to July 2016, the Gadap Sessions, a 'course' of sorts organised by Karachi LaJamia (KLJ, also known as Karachi Art Anti-University), brought together thirteen artists and academics to research an ongoing mega-development project.<sup>1</sup> The project in question was Bahria Town Karachi, and the course aimed to explore the displacement/destruction it has caused in the peri-urban area of Gadap.<sup>2</sup>

The following interview is a conversation between a participant of the sessions, Heba Islam, and KLJ, comprising artist-researchers Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani. They discuss the value of the Gadap Sessions as an archive, and the complexities that emerge in the process of documentation as a pedagogical exercise. The interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

**Heba Islam:** When you initially convened the Gadap Sessions, you emphasised that this was a process of documentation rather than a more spectacular, 'activist' intervention into a space. In essence, it appeared to be an archival project. Who were the intended readers/seekers of this archive? And what exactly were you archiving?

**Zahra Malkani:** I think since we started KLJ, there has been a disavowal of identifying ourselves and the larger project as an activist project. This has a lot to do with an unease with the word 'activism', which seems to emerge from the idea that political change is something that happens in professionalised ways as opposed to forms of political work being practiced in very daily and often invisible ways across the board in communities that don't identify as activists. The aggrandisement of the 'activist' doesn't make sense to me because a lot of the most effective social change and threats to the state have always come from self-organised communities like nationalists, students, lady health workers, or the lawyers' movement, not people who come from outside these communities to 'organise' them. There are forms of political action and resistance outside of the framework of 'activism' which, it seems to me, have largely failed. In KLJ, we seek to explore and understand the ways in which our daily practices of art/knowledge production can be politically engaged and weaponised in a city where these practices are being increasingly surveilled and attacked. As for the idea that the Gadap Sessions was an archiving project: I never thought about it that way. The sessions were like everything else KLJ does; an experiment in pedagogy, attempting to create a pedagogical environment that was politically engaged and outside of the institutional structures that we normally work in.

**Shahana Rajani:** That is so true, even though we ended up producing a vast archive of documentation during the Gadap Sessions, when we started, the archive was not something that we were thinking about. We had been very inspired by 'ecopedagogy' as a political praxis, where collective and engaged study is not just a process of building solidarity and connecting with ongoing struggles in the city, but also a process of being with and in an environment, of sensing your surroundings.<sup>3</sup> Taking this planetary viewpoint, we wanted to lay bare the human-nature entanglements in Gadap. Our initial aim was not just to go to people and record their stories, histories, and documents but also to observe and seek out the markings of landscape over time, the ways in which land has been layered with histories of place making, to document the emergent and degraded ecologies, the ongoing violence of infrastructure on land but also the slower violences of resource extraction and climate change—to see *landscape* as bearing witness, as an archive of sorts.<sup>4</sup>

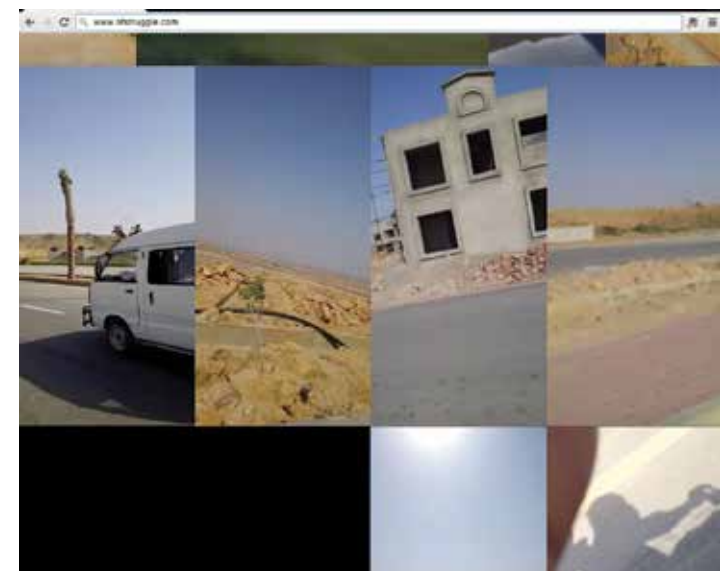
**Malkani:** When we were planning the sessions, there was no 'end product' [in mind]. The 'product' was simply the creation of a pedagogical environment, collaboratively, with Karachi Indigenous Right Alliance (KIRA),<sup>5</sup> and a hope that that environment could somehow be a transformative experience for those people who were participating—transformative in the sense of creating a radical political attunement and personal radical political practice. The fact that an archiving or documenting impulse then *emerged* in the community that was formed out of the Gadap Sessions is simply a result of the fact that we were a group of artists and academics. Our impulses, skills, and training were geared towards documentation and archiving practices.

**Islam:** Elizabeth Povinelli notes, "[...] archives are not sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production; or, in the act of retrieving information from archives the users of archives reproduce and conserve state power."<sup>6</sup> In what ways do you think the Gadap Sessions were cognisant of this, and in what ways did the sessions attempt to circumvent reproducing state power?

**Rajani:** Our awareness of Gadap emerged in response to the concerted state efforts to deny visibility to indigenous dispossession and struggle. When we started the Gadap Sessions in February 2016, there was a complete media blackout regarding the illegal occupation of Bahria Town and knowledge production was being closely monitored and policed in the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> So we began our collective project with the intent to document and make visible the ongoing violence of Bahria Town's development but it was not until we went to Gadap and started speaking to people that we realised that the ongoing erasures of the indigenous landscape, is part of a much longer history of structural violence, where the post-colonial state continues to enact policies of discrimination and displacement against the indigenous population of the city. Gadap is not only located at the outskirts of Karachi, but also occupies a peripheral location in our public imaginary, which is the result of the formulation of a historical narrative of the

nation that neglects indigenous pasts, presents, and futures. Institutionalised histories and state archiving are key sites and practices of this state forgetting. Our own desire to document and archive emerged in response to this wider state-sanctioned erasure.

Your question reminds us, though, that the archive in and of itself is a problematic endeavour, a manifestation of power that is full of gaps and silences. As outsiders/researchers, the imbalances of power and privilege formed the very substance of our own collected archive. We had a lot of anxieties about this during the sessions and were constantly and collectively thinking through and questioning how to work with and across these tensions and frictions of ethnographic research. We especially discussed this at great length when we started collaborating with Abeera Kamran<sup>8</sup> on building a website to make our archive public and accessible. Something that we ended up doing very consciously as a result of these anxieties, was to also centre ourselves within this archive; to not present it as a complete, objective and transparent venture, but instead to engage and acknowledge our own positionalities, complicities, and obscuring visions. We are outsiders going in, and our stakes are so different from the people who are living there.



Homepage of [www.ofstruggle.com](http://www.ofstruggle.com), 2016–2017—a net art project engaging with the Gadap Sessions archive. The homepage is a collage of videos shot by Deen Muhammad and Nawaz Ali Baloch, each video acting as a portal into different stories, documents, and data from the Gadap Sessions. Website design: Abeera Kamran, Shahana Rajani, and Zahra Malkani. Image courtesy: Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani.

**Malkani:** Another important thing to remember is that this is not an attempt at archiving *Gadap*, ecological crisis, or displacement in Karachi; this is an archive of the *Gadap Sessions*. It is the attempts of a specific group of people in Karachi to learn and grapple with its present and its history through these encounters and collaborative learning/research practices in *Gadap*. The archive that we produced is something we are still looking at and figuring out what to do with. We struggle with the desire and people's expectations of us to share the experience of the *Gadap Sessions* and to make visible what is happening in *Gadap* because there is also cognisance of the fact that this kind of visibility is not always productive or helpful.

**Rajani:** Opacity is needed because in our constant desire as researchers to lay things bare, there is a violence involved, it turns indigenous communities into objects. This need to archive, on micro-levels, everything about their lives and histories from the 'ancient past' to the present is a bizarre and objectifying exercise. This compulsion to amass data reminds me of the essay, "Archivist Manifesto":<sup>9</sup> Yuk Hui talks about how in today's modern age, we are *all* archivists since the ubiquity of information on the internet forces us into endless processes of data production and data navigation. We need to counter this inundation and blindness of data by politicising the question of the archive. Hui calls for the formation of a personal archive, based on "technologies of care"; that in making an archive and manoeuvring through information we need to put in that labour of care. The archive that emerged from the *Gadap Sessions* also concerned a politics of time and care, of sensing and listening, of location and situating. The challenge now is how to visualise and preserve this technics of care in the archival website of the *Gadap Sessions*.

**Islam:** Since we are thinking of the archive in a digital terrain, in this same volume, Adnan Madani says of your work, "They attempt to [...] reveal the founding mode of *visuality* that enables this erasure of communities and their landscape. Google maps and satellite imagery provide a drone-eye view of the land as map, terrain rather than lived and living experiential space." The *Gadap Sessions* however, also used satellite imagery to think about displacement, indigenous modes of life and land, and layers of history. How do you think this exercise subverted the impersonal visuality of the "drone-eye view" that Madani speaks of?

**Malkani:** Our conflicted relationship with maps and mapping has marked the *Gadap Sessions* and after. When we started the sessions, KIRA was interested in having the area mapped through the tools that were being developed at Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) through Parween Rahman's<sup>10</sup> practice, that is, to map the land to make visible the claims and presence of informal communities and settlements, and then work towards having these claims legalised. We had planned to collaborate with OPP on the course for this but the collaboration fell through for logistical/scheduling reasons. Though we had been interested in taking this on, we were also cognisant of the problems with this kind of mapping and the privatised relationship with land

that it reproduces. Yet we ended up returning to mapping much later in the *Gadap Sessions* when there had been an exposé on Bahria Town in *Dawn* newspaper and we were told by locals in *Gadap* that it would not be safe to visit any time soon. We wanted to keep working so we thought of Google Maps specifically as a useful surface to work on collaboratively in order to get a sense of what we had learnt so far and to plan out the remainder of the course. In that sense, beyond the problems that mapping might have in terms of the 'god's eye view', of rendering a space transparent, of representing a violent relationship with land, we found it had value for us as an *analytical tool* rather than as a final product. The value was not in the product, but rather the process, which is why I never wanted to share that map with anyone besides the participants of the sessions and KIRA. I recently opened it again and found that the way in which we mapped and used the map was so irreverent. We were subverting the codes and methods of map-making in a way, with our systems of marking and classification. For example, we had a layer that was titled "Global Aspirations of Bahria Town", or how the Grand Jamia Mosque was marked repeatedly across multiple layers: erasure, history, and global aspirations etc. each time with long reflections for captions.<sup>11</sup> There's an irreverence to the language, a poetics to the way spaces were captioned, and images were placed.

**Rajani:** Although we began archiving on Google Maps later on, the act of mapping was central to our research from the beginning. During our visits, we always carried a satellite map with us and were always recording GPS coordinates. This impulse to use the map emerged from our own familiar ways of knowing and being in the world, where it is through the map that we learn to anchor and orient ourselves. When we first looked at *Gadap* on Google Earth, besides Bahria Town and a couple of *goths* (villages) marked on the map, there was nothing there. So when we were marking GPS coordinates, it was with the intention of wanting to re-inscribe and refuse the imperial visuality and cartographic portrayals of *Gadap* as a blank sheet, as *banjar* (barren) and *ghairabad* (deserted). However, the act of mapping is also so tainted, colonial, and full of epistemic violence—this haunted the whole project. Our counter-mapping was a difficult relation of being implicated in the very imperial protocols, which we were trying to oppose, of visualising through, and re-appropriating resources inevitably impure.

**Islam:** It has been over a year since the *Gadap Sessions* were convened. I have been thinking about how we can understand the work produced retrospectively. The research to emerge from the sessions has been visual, theoretical, engaged with in both public and private spaces. Should we see the sessions as a closed chapter or should we see the documentation that took place as an ongoing process/dialogue? And how can we think of the archive as the same?

**Malkani:** The *Gadap Sessions* were supposed to be an eight-week-long series. That the sessions ended up being six months long highlights the fact that all the participants were committed and willing to give it that kind of time, but also that the work demanded that kind of time,

that slowness. I feel we were incredibly slow about it; it was necessary and it radically removed us from our normalised ways of being at the university or galleries in which we work, which demand exploitative and violent levels of productivity from us. I think of the Gadap Sessions as a closed chapter in terms of a pedagogical project, but the hope was that it would continue in participating individuals' practices.



Reading the Bahria Town master plan map against a satellite map in Jumma *goth*, Gadap Town, Karachi, June 2016. Photograph by KLJ. Image courtesy: Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani.

**Rajani:** I agree with what you are saying about the kind of slowness, but I also feel that because our visits were scheduled only once a week or once in two weeks, they were really packed, intense, and exhaustive. We knew that during our visits, the landscape was transforming at an alarming speed so there was an urgency to the research. Once, when we went to Jumma *goth*, after two weeks, 60 homes had been demolished in that time. So every time we went there, we knew we had to make the most of our trip—meet as many people and visit as many places as possible. That is why I feel that even though the sessions have ended, critical reflection and engagement with the collected research has only come much later. In that way I feel our archive is not a finished and static product, but an open-ended and continuing process, shifting, eluding, becoming. The ways in which we are now re-thinking the Gadap Sessions archive, not simply as teleological but also presenting non-linear temporalities and alternate modes of indigenous knowledge production, these are understandings that we have been able to gauge and process over a sustained period of time.

**Islam:** Keeping in mind the idea of archiving as an ongoing process, some of the research that has emerged from the Gadap Sessions thinks of how what's being erased—the materiality of indigenous life—continues to remain 'entangled' with what seeks to replace it: a 'world class city' that replicates both the economy and aesthetics of Dubai. How can documenting displacement account for this entanglement, rather than relegating the indigenous to the past?

**Rajani:** The border-making and boundary-drawing project of Bahria Town is not simply denying indigenous communities' access to their land, but actively destroying it. This obliteration of the indigenous landscapes is an attempt to literally inscribe Gadap with emptiness. This erasure legitimises and sanitises the violence of development by removing any claims that indigenous communities have to the present. However, the emplacement of Bahria Town's new securitised geography is far from totalising. During the course of Gadap Sessions, we became aware of an extensive terrain of everyday resistance performed on a daily basis, silent partners to the louder forms of public resistance and rallying gestures, struggles that remain undetected by policing forces. It is these situated struggles that enact an entangled landscape; they create a textured interweave that scrapes at the smooth glosses and amnesiac forces of Bahria Town. The very name of the mountain *Pahwaro* is a Sindhi word that actually means to struggle in the face of difficulties and hardships. Its name is a testament to the communities' continuing relationship to this land, the spatial and temporal practices of struggle and place-making that continue to mark this landscape with meaning and memory.



A road under construction in Gadap Town, Karachi, February 2016. Photograph by Zahra Malkani. Image courtesy: Zahra Malkani.

An important medium of this ongoing struggle is visual documentation, a production of counter-visualities, images, and videos. Circulating quietly through WhatsApp and Facebook, they form a covert and undetected realm of exchanges, solidarity, and knowledge production. One powerful example is a series of short videos made by Deen Muhammad and Nawaz Ali Baloch from their mobile phones to trace the violently transforming landscape.<sup>12</sup> From the newly laid tar and concrete, they excavate a haunting geography, material residues and textures, of both disappearing and persisting local landmarks, spaces of leisure, water and pasture, of journeys and histories. In bearing witness, the image becomes a document of and against erasure.

**Malkani:** I think it is also important to understand that there are many, very diverse forms of 'contemporary indigenous life' in Pakistan. Part of the difficulty with grappling with that also comes from the newness/awkwardness of applying the term 'indigenous' to the Pakistani context—which despite its problems is a very useful political gesture in conversations about land and resource struggles in the Global South, where the term has not been widely used. We can see this for example in Bangladesh where the government cracked down against the use of the term 'indigenous' to describe communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts because they recognised the strength and potency of the term in connecting the struggles in Chittagong with a larger global community and tradition of resistance.

These struggles over land and resources are very much *contemporary* struggles and they have implications for everyone—not just indigenous communities. At the same time, there is more to contemporary indigenous life than these struggles. I think this question of the relegation of indigenous communities to the past in mainstream Pakistani discourse is connected with a larger relegation of Sindhi, Baloch, and Pashtun communities more broadly to the past, as they have always been understood in feudal or tribal terms, never depicted in urban environments. Contemporary indigenous life is not only happening in Gadap, it is also happening in Gizri, DHA, Clifton, in the rest of urban Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, in Sukkur, Quetta, Hyderabad, Peshawar—and it should be recognised as such.

**Islam:** There are different kinds of visualities that KLJ has employed besides mapping: For your show at Gandhara Gallery, you utilised photographs and a website. For the show at Koel Gallery, you created postcards.<sup>13</sup> Some of your work has considered elements of nature and indigenous knowledge, while other work has focused on occupation. How can we interpret these different modes of representation?

**Malkani:** The more recent work that sprung out of the Gadap Sessions was the postcard series and the book/lecture performance. With both of these, and the forthcoming website, the idea was not to narrativise Gadap, but to self-reflect on the course as an art, research, and pedagogical project. After the sessions, there was an impulse to be productive, to be accountable

in some way, but also an anxiety and desire to not speak for Gadap, and instead the need to make our own shortcomings and problems as artists/researchers visible. That was what the book and lecture performance reflected upon. That is also the kind of tension that the larger KLJ project emerges from: The witnessing of the failures and temptations of knowledge production and research practices that we are conditioned into, although we feel the need to seek out possibilities and practices. There were ideas that we came across in ecopedagogy: That you build a road by walking and involving yourself in these practices, in careful and critical ways. To be willing to take the risk of carrying out an imperfect project over the paralysis of understanding that all constructive practices will have their problems (though I am not opposed to paralysis or refusal as a political position). To be willing to expose, discuss, and share these problems widely as an integral and essential part of the project. We initiated work on the website thinking that we would have data that we *need* to share to expose Bahria Town's violence. But while we did have this information and these conversations, they didn't look like the objective forms of data we had imagined—they were fraught, complex, and subjective. We found that we had to grapple with this and to make that grappling visible as well.

#### Notes

1. KLJ is "an Anti-Institution based in Karachi seeking to politicise art education and collectively explore new radical pedagogies and art practices." They describe themselves as a "nomadic space moving outside the institution to occupy public spaces in the city as sites of study, disrupting imperial modes of knowledge production and circulation." See, "About", *Karachi LaJamia*, accessed 12 May 2017, <http://karachilajamia.com/about/>.
2. Bahria Town Karachi is a mega real estate project of Bahria Town, marketed as Asia's largest real estate company. Spread over 35,000 acres, the project is based in Gadap Town, a vast region that encircles most of Karachi and is home to indigenous Sindhi and Balochi-speaking communities.
3. Francisco Gutiérrez Pérez and Cruz Prado Rojas, *Ecopedagogy and Planetary Citizenship (Ecopedagogía y ciudadanía planetaria)*, trans. Natalia Bernal and Levana Saxon (El Masnou: Diálogos, 2004).
4. "Human-nature entanglements" refers to the ways in which the environment and ecology of Gadap are inter connected with local socialities, histories, and livelihoods.
5. The Karachi Indigenous Rights Alliance was founded in March 2015 by Gul Hasan Kalmatti, Saleem Baloch and other indigenous community leaders in direct response to Bahria Town's incursion into Gadap.
6. Elizabeth Povinelli and Peter Cho, "Digital Futures," *Vectors* 3, no. 2 (September 2012), <http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/index.php?project=90&thread=AuthorsStatement>. Elizabeth Povinelli is an anthropologist whose work on materialities and socialities has focused on indigenous communities in Australia.
7. Large tracts of land in Bahria Town Karachi were illegally allotted to the real estate company by the Malir Development Authority.
8. Abeera Kamran is an IVS alumnus who works as a freelance graphic designer and front-end web developer.
9. Yuk Hui, "Archivist Manifesto," *Mute*, 22 May 2013, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/archivist-manifesto>. Yuk Hui is a research associate of the project "techno-ecologies of participation" at the Leuphana University Lüneburg in Germany.

10. Parween Rahman was an architect who was the director of the Orangi Pilot Project, a community-run organisation dedicated to low-cost housing and sanitation in informal housing settlements. Parween Rahman was murdered in 2013.
11. Bahria Town claims that it is building the largest mosque in the world, after the ones in Makkah and Madinah, in their Karachi project. The mosque is said to have an 800,000-strong capacity.
12. These are residents of *goths* in Gadap, who spoke to members of the Gadap Sessions, often at risk to themselves.
13. Koel and Gandhara are two art galleries located in Karachi, Pakistan.

Hui, Yuk. "Archivist Manifesto." *Mute*, 22 May 2013. <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/archivist-manifesto>.

Pérez, Francisco Gutiérrez and Cruz Prado Rojas. *Ecopedagogy and Planetary Citizenship* (*Ecopedagogíayciudadaníaplanetaria*). Translated by Natalia Bernal and Levana Saxon. El Masnou: Diálogos, 2004.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. "Digital Futures." *Vectors* 3, no. 2 (September 2012).  
<http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/index.php?project=90&thread=AuthorsStatement>.