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Introduction

Two graffiti pieces on the Israeli separation wall slicing through Abu Dis, a Palestinian village on the edge of Jerusalem, catch the eye: “From Warsaw ghetto to Abu Dis ghetto” and “Welcome to Soweto” and resonate with multiple audiences – international, Palestinian, and Israeli. This graffito pointedly encapsulates Palestinians’ understanding of the wall and their socio-spatial location in relation to it. They graphically render an historical awareness that draws on the power of comparison across time and space. Palestinian graffiti, street art, and murals, what can be referred to as the “writing on the walls” (Peteet, 1996), have been constantly in motion, appearing and disappearing; painted or written over, they document and index changing events and sentiments on the ground in Palestine. Significantly, they encompass the voices and imaginations of both local and international writers/artists and thus speak to a multiplicity of audiences. Indeed, this was dramatically captured in the May 25, 2014 photo of Pope Francis gently touching his forehead and right hand to the wall in Bethlehem framed by red graffiti: “Free Palestine” and “Bethlehem looks like Warsaw ghetto.”

This chapter examines two periods in the life of graffiti and street art in Palestine: the first intifada, the popular uprising (1987–1993) against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip beginning in 1967, and the graffiti and street art that have accompanied the second, or 2000 al-Aqsa, intifada and the construction of the separation wall beginning in 2002. Although graffiti, street art, and murals occur in Palestinian locales at a distance from the wall that speaks to an internal audience, this chapter focuses more on the numerous and highly visible graffiti and street art of locals and foreigners dotting the separation wall.

These two periods also implicate fairly distinct spaces as tableaus for murals, street art, and graffiti: the ordinary stone walls of homes and businesses during the first intifada and the separation wall emblematic of the past decade in Palestine. Before delving into the writing on the walls, I briefly describe the Israeli policy of closure and the wall which are the context and the medium for post-2000 graffiti and street art. Along with over 500 checkpoints, a draconian permit system that regulates Palestinian mobility, and a segregated road system, the wall enacts the policy of closure. Launched in March 1993, closure refers to Israeli restrictions on the movement of Palestinian goods, labor, and people into Jerusalem, between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank,
between them and Israel, and most devastatingly and tellingly, between Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank. For Palestinians, the results have been geographic fragmentation, economic devastation, immobilization, social fracturing, and a deep sense of isolation (Peteet, 2016). Closure spatializes the distinction between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis and clears Palestinian land for new Jewish settlements. In short, closure fragments and miniaturizes Palestine and facilitates stringent control over access to the space of Palestine by Palestinians, while forging spatial contiguity and mobility for Israelis.

Combining architectural simplicity and modern technology, the wall is a spectacle, performance, and symbol. Israelis refer to it as “the security fence” or “the separation barrier.” Palestinians call it “the wall” (al-jidar) or the “apartheid wall” and, more bitterly, apropos its incarceratory nature, forming “a prison without a roof.” The bare prefabricated slabs of upright concrete blocks snake through cultivated and populated areas, punctuated by prison-like watchtowers and firing posts. At nearly 25 feet high and at an estimated 700 kilometers in length, it is significantly longer and higher than the 12-kilometer-long, 8-foot high Berlin Wall. Thousands of acres of Palestinian agricultural land were confiscated and tens of thousands of trees were uprooted to construct the wall. In places, it extends up to 14 miles into Palestinian territory. It draws a unilateral border that includes large blocks of settlements on the Israeli side, prevents a territorially contiguous Palestinian state, and separates villages from their agricultural lands and from each other. Indeed, the wall dissolves the West Bank into a multiplicity of discontiguous enclaves.

Graffiti can be a potent medium of communication especially in an arena of conflict such as Palestine/Israel where the authority to represent and access to media are vastly disparate. As a form of cultural production and communication, it may be a universal medium and communicative act with origins millennium old, as evidenced in pre-historic rock art. In the two historical periods to be reviewed, graffiti has been both a mode of communication and political commentary on Israeli settler-colonialism and occupation, whether by Palestinians, or more recently, by a transnational cadre of supporters. Each period has engendered qualitatively different forms of graffiti and murals. Painted on a distinct and highly charged surface, targeted to multiple audiences, the act of writing on the wall (al-jidar) has been taken up by foreign supporters; this is not to overlook the continued taking to the walls by Palestinians in villages and camps well away from the separation wall.

As a public “literacy act” (Hanauer, 2011: p. 305), the writing on the walls compels questions as to its aims and efficacy. What are they and can they be assessed? Often depicted as a transgressive medium, it provides a counter-discourse, by turns comparative, satirical, mocking, warning, and plaintive, a challenge to dominant narratives and an appeal made by the often marginalized and voiceless. Yet, graffiti and street art on the Israeli separation wall occur on a space built by the occupier. Is this reclamation of space a turning of the wall back on itself? Is it a refusal to normalize the wall? Or is it a beautification and commodification of what should remain stark and ugly?

Graffiti and street art are often deemed “illegal” or of an “illicit” nature; this may be an instance where the structure, the actual physical mechanism of power, the wall, limits and shapes the contours of the resistance it generates. In the U.S., they are widely considered acts of vandalism because they are drawn without permission on private or public property (Ross & Wright, 2014: p. 177); Palestinian graffiti, street art, and murals were forbidden by Israeli military orders that govern daily live in the West Bank. With the Oslo Agreements1 and the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) assumption of quasi-authority in limited areas of the West Bank, Israeli censorship eased; with the redeployment of Israeli troops from major Palestinian towns, graffiti’s legal status is now rather ambiguous. In the context of an illegal occupation, and more recently a separation...
Graffiti deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice, positioning graffiti as vandalism or an illegal act seems nothing short of irrelevant. Indeed, how illegal can it be to daub graffiti on a wall that is itself illegal?2

In Palestine, graffiti joins a historically broad constellation of actions to respond to and challenge occupation ranging from protests, petitions, general strikes, uprisings, civil disobedience, hunger strikes, stone throwing, legal action, popular music and art, armed struggle, and the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, among others. With the consolidation of the Israeli occupation and the doubling of settlers in the occupied West Bank in spite of the Oslo Agreement, and the impossibility of a state in the fragmented territory of what remains of Palestine, one can detect a Palestinian shift to combating normalization of the status quo, pursuing membership in UN organizations, and encouraging the BDS. In this atmosphere, it could be argued, the communicative dimension of graffiti lessened. Yet graffiti remains in the roster of resistant tactics Palestinians have had recourse to over several decades. It continues to serve as a form of documentation and voice of Palestinian opinion and sentiment but increasingly writing it and visits to view its more elaborate forms have become an act of solidarity by international visitors with those under occupation. In writing on the wall, an unmediated narrative landscape of dissent, anger, solidarity, and mourning has crystallized. Thus in registering a written and visual rejection of the normalization of incarceration behind a concrete wall, graffiti can be understood as constituting a form of political action or intervention.

So, who is the audience for Palestinian graffiti? Several publics come to mind: international, Israeli, and local. A Palestinian public has waned as the graffiti no longer delivers messages or directives as it did in the first intifada; Israelis seldom encounter wall graffiti except in certain stretches of the wall in Jerusalem. Much of it is directed to an international network of supporters and the journalists who photograph it (see Bishara, 2013). The contemporary context of graffiti and its meaning is best conceptualized by situating it in the shifting topography and structural mechanisms of a colonial occupation and resistance.

Graffiti of the first intifada: the writing on the walls

During the first intifada, or uprising against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, often dubbed a “war of stones,” the main Palestinian weapon, graffiti was a “print weapon” (Peteet, 1996: p. 139). Thus, stone was both “weapon and medium,” recording domination and simultaneously intervening in it (ibid.: pp. 141–142). Written on the stone walls of Palestinian homes and businesses, it was ubiquitous and written mainly in Arabic. In an era of simpler communications technology (no cell phones, email, Internet, or social media), and heavy censorship, graffiti announced strike days and issued directives for action. I conceptualized them as “interventions in a relation of power” because they were a communicative component of a mass uprising (ibid.). They conveyed messages and “directed, informed, commemorated, provided critical commentary, and could be a diagnostic of occupation tactics” (ibid.: p. 152). “No taxes without representation,” written during the tax revolt in the Palestinian town of Beit Sahour aptly captures all of these functions. It directed and supported the refusal of an occupation practice and in doing so, forged a relationship with the Palestinian community in the project of resistance. For Palestinians, graffiti affirmed resistance: “The intifada continues” as well as indexed a historical event. In the contested terrain of Palestine, graffiti also cleverly claimed place and inscribed memory of it, embodied in the expression: “1948 + 1967 = all Palestine.”

Graffiti tags were primarily done by political organizations such as Hamas, Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), or the United National Leadership (UNL), an
underground coalition of political groups that directed the uprising. Graffiti used in this zone of protracted conflict, like gang graffiti elsewhere, also serves as territorial markers of these various political entities. As a component of the Israeli pacification campaign against the uprising, graffiti and graffiti writers elicited a swift response from the occupying Israeli military authorities. Declared illegal, graffiti was often blackened out in a war of words and those caught writing could be beaten and/or detained and charged with a criminal offense.

**The street art of closure: writing on the wall**

“Free Palestine,” “No Wall,” “No to the racist separation wall,” and “Stop the wall,” are scribbled repetitively on the separation wall in English. “CAPTIVATING,” painted in large black capital letters, each letter filling one of the concrete slabs that together compose the wall, is a witty play on words. The imposing wall itself is visually captivating and those behind it are captive. Like the ordinary stone walls of homes and businesses in the first intifada, the materiality of the wall is simultaneously the context and the medium. Much of the substance of graffiti is commentary on the wall itself. Akin to prisoners laboriously scratching names, dates, and messages on the concrete walls that confine them, the structure of imprisonment is also the medium of protest.

Similar to the first intifada, contemporary graffiti, street art, and murals signal a refusal to acquiesce and to normalize the abnormal. As a riposte to enclosure’s mammoth and imprisoning wall, they can be considered an intervention in a relation of power. However, this work departs in significant ways from the writing on the walls during the first intifada. Distinctions between these two periods involve questions of location (walls and now the wall), visibility, risk, temporality, message or content, language, audience, and response. This section explores these continuities and changes.

To Palestinians, the wall is ugly and menacing, a monstrosity exemplified in the graffito, “wall=horror.” Yet this iconic device of separation, isolation, and subjugation at once inspires artistic expression and serves as a communicative tableau. On its stark slabs, foreigners and Palestinians daub graffiti and paint elaborate murals. Eye-riveting, often highly colorful and woeful as well as satirical, an array of graffiti and murals protest, state opinions, offer analysis and commentary, and express solidarity. Scrawled across the wall in a multitude of languages, this public blackboard is a medium for polysemic political commentary, its stone slabs the canvas on which is registered anger, hope, dreams, defiance, political stances, and grief of both Palestinians and foreign supporters.

In this atmosphere of separation and immobilization, graffiti no longer performs as it once did. During the first intifada, writing graffiti was hedged with the danger of being caught by the occupying military forces. In that context, it was an act of civil disobedience. With separation of Israelis and Palestinians by closure, which entails severe restrictions on Palestinian mobility, few Israelis come into contact with graffiti. There are a few areas where graffiti appears on the wall as it runs along roads traveled by Israelis such as the road south east to the Allenby Bridge and the Dead Sea. Stark commentary was evident in the single word “Ghetto” neatly stenciled in large angular black script every couple of hundred feet on the wall along this otherwise blank canvas. Furtiveness and risk were involved in painting on a road traveled by Israelis. With greater visibility to Israelis comes more risk. However, in large part, Israelis seldom see most graffiti as it is out of their direct line-of-sight.

With closure and enclavization, graffiti has been increasingly written by non-Palestinians in solidarity with them and directed to the world outside. In more urban areas such as Jerusalem, and at sections of the wall easily accessible to visitors, Arabic is now accompanied by a
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cacophonous polyglot of English, Spanish, French, etc. At heavily trafficked sites with fairly easy access, the wall serves as an international bulletin board where visitors leave commentary and messages.

Once a highly local medium, and part of an internal Palestinian conversation, graffiti and street art now have acquired a transnational quality. The vivid Palestinian street art of the first intifada, located in neighborhoods not generally on the path of tourists or journalists, have now been re-fashioned by a cohort of international street artists for the separation wall. It should be noted that wall graffiti and street art have received considerable attention from journalists and solidarity groups (Bishara, 2013: p. 237). Some of the most widely photographed and circulated are by those by the internationally acclaimed street artists such as Banksy and Blu; their works are readily available on numerous websites. Graffiti and the murals have become an objectified, conscious, commoditized form of cultural production, often drawn by well-known artists and those who come to read and photograph them. For 30 Euros, a Netherlands based website called www.sendamessage.nl will arrange for a message to be written on the wall; a photo of the message is then sent to the purchaser who can then circulate it. Sometimes they are messages of support; other times they are personal gimmicky messages such as a marriage proposal written on the wall. Graffiti by-proxy is form of commodification but with the gloss of a non-profit. Proceeds go towards overhead and then to aid communities negatively affected by the wall. Many Palestinians find the conflation of art, suffering, and revenue problematic, to say the least.

Graffiti pieces were once temporally short-lived, often fleeting images, hastily scrawled under cover of darkness and then painted over or erased within days or even hours. They now exist in a new temporal space of longevity, openly painted, where repetitive viewing renders them a colorful although eventually faded foreground to the wall.

Post-2000 writing on the wall constitutes an intervention in political action but more as commentary and a critical response than as a means to propel direct action. It does not announce actions to be taken nor issue directives about strikes or demonstrations. New communication technologies such as social media, the cell phone, and the Internet ensure instant communication. Suggestive of moral stances and political positions, contemporary writing on the wall critiques Israel and the U.S., expresses outrage and solidarity, draws attention to human rights violations, compares the wall with apartheid South Africa and events in Jewish history, satirizes closure and mocks Israeli colonialism. Above all, it is a voice of rejection and a refusal to be silenced.

It is fairly easy to discern graffiti written by Palestinians. It includes expressions such as: “We have the same blood,” which speaks directly to Israelis as do these bitter appeals to the humanity of Israelis: “You must be ashamed,” and “Witness the Jewish Shame.” “No for another Wailing Wall” speaks to Jewish religious tradition. All were daubed on the Israeli side of the wall in Jerusalem. Additional graffiti at a spot in the Abu Dis wall, where children had to climb over cement slabs to reach their now cut off schools in Jerusalem, include: “Children want to go to the schools,” or “Who wants to be children in a jail.” Highlighting the hardships imposed by the wall on children, these lamentations are diagnostic of a colonial cartography of cruelty and deprivation.

Graffiti no longer gives as much expression to national unity or reaffirms a relationship between a leadership and a populace as it did during the first intifada when many were signed by political organizations or the UNL. Orders or directives have been replaced by protest and political commentary with a good dose of satire. In villages and refugee camps, one can still see Palestinian-written graffiti and painstakingly painted murals depicting events in Palestinian history, poetry, and commemorations of nationalist days. It often references local, intra-Palestinian tensions and features posters of martyrs (those killed by the Israeli Defense Force). Yet there are instances when local graffiti spikes in appearance. With the 2012 hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners,
protests spread throughout the occupied territories and among Palestinian communities in Israel. Prisoners come from all political factions and their plight can be a unifying factor among Palestinians; nearly all families have at least one member who has been through the prison system.3

Graffiti in support of the hunger-strikers spoke to a Palestinian audience and echoed the graffiti of the first intifada when directives were issued and calls to action were prominent. Simple stenciled images of Khader Adnan, a well-known prisoner, with his bushy beard and round glasses, relied less on aesthetics, irony or even commentary but in their simplicity were a call for national solidarity and mobilization. The graffiti “#dying2live” in English under his stenciled face or “Freedom for Khader Adnan,” were common in English and Arabic.

Handala, the ragged and forlorn iconic Palestinian refugee child appears frequently on the wall, in villages, and in camps. Created by Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, Handala symbolizes the Palestinian condition; he faces away from us, hands clasped behind his back as he patiently observes and waits for justice and return. Like the flag and the key either alone or in a clenched fist, Handala represents all Palestinians regardless of political affiliation. Handala can be spotted randomly on the wall and on the walls of homes and businesses. His now commoditized image can be found in jewelry, in posters, on stickers, on coasters, and coffee cups.

The wall is a main spot for solidarity visits or what is sometimes called “political or conflict tourism.” At heavily trafficked sites with fairly easy access, the wall resembles an international bulletin board where visitors leave commentary and messages in protest and solidarity (see Bishara, 2013; Hanauer, 2011). For example, visitors pen messages of support: “Scotland Supports Palestine,” “Seattle Supports Palestine,” “Ireland Supports Palestine,” “Norway Supports Palestine,” “England Supports Palestine,” and “Together in Stopping the Wall.” Christian visitors have also left their messages: “Love God Love People” and “God leads us to Peace.” A sense of plaintiveness is apparent in this French graffito: “Ou est le monde?” (Where is the world?)

Comparison is a prominent rhetorical device in graffiti in Palestine. For example, “This is an apartheid wall” is a common graffito. Thus, it is worth probing what sort of work comparison does. Evans-Pritchard dubbed the impulse to compare “one of the elementary processes of human thought” (1965: p. 13). Indeed, comparisons help make sense of the world. Comparison locates particular histories and forms of subjugation in more expansive fields of analysis. Comparison’s power lies in its capacity to make things seem familiar (or different) by highlighting broad resemblances or approximations. Comparison draws on the logic of analogy as an empirical, cognitive and, it may be argued, an emotive, rhetorical device. Most importantly, comparison opens a space for shifting narratives in new directions. It can be disruptive of grand, in this case, national narratives. It can work to dislodge facile assumptions of Israeli exceptionalism. Invoking a named or highly resonant analogy or “cross-cultural juxtaposition” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986: p. 157), can open space for criticism. Likening Israel with apartheid familiarizes it. For example, “Faisontombole mure’ Apartheid” (“Let the Apartheid wall fall”) draws upon the rhetoric around the fall of the Berlin Wall and declares the wall that separates Israel from Palestine a form of apartheid. Or, consider this comparison in black capital letters neatly painted on a splash of whitewash on the wall in Spanish: “Guernica 1937 . . . Palestina 1948 . . .?” invoking a comparison between the mass displacement of Palestinians in 1948 and the 1937 bombing of the Basque town of Guernica. Declaring things equivalents works to de-exceptionalize what can appear to be a unique and intractable situation.

This little comparative chestnut, on the Jerusalem wall in Abu Dis, draws upon local historical memory of particular instances of Israeli violence and Palestinian displacement. It lays out over fifty years of critical moments in Palestinian history, their encounter with colonialism and violence, and the beginning of the wall:
While replete with declarative comparisons such as: “Sharon = Nazi” and “From Warsaw ghetto to Abu Dis ghetto,” comparison can also convey warnings: “Jerusalem is stronger than Apartheid,” reminding that apartheid did fall eventually.

“We will return,” hastily scribbled or stenciled in black block letters, is a frequently encountered graffito. Sometimes, it is accompanied by a drawing of a key, the symbol of homes in Palestine now destroyed or occupied by Israelis in 1948. It reiterates the Palestinian right of return and is reminiscent of the formulaic logic of that mathematical graffito from the first intifada: “1948 + 1967 = all Palestine” (Peteet, 1996: p. 149) in its evocation of place, time, and rights. Such a spatio-temporal formula carries tremendous meaning to Palestinians inside and outside Palestine. “Jerusalem is ours” captures presence and reaffirms a claim. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s famous line: “Write down, I am an Arab! . . .” boldly affirms rootedness and is a warning to those who usurped the land of Palestinian.

“A-Quds ilna” (“Jerusalem is ours”) dots the wall near Jerusalem. A diagnostic of the intent of the wall to sever the West Bank from Jerusalem, it epitomizes Palestinian understanding of the intent behind the wall: separation, immobilization and fragmentation rather than the standard security arguments put forth by Israeli spokespersons. West Bank Palestinians are prevented from legally entering Jerusalem without a difficult to obtain Israel-issued permit. This graffito also affirms a Palestinian negotiating principal that East Jerusalem is to be the capital of a Palestinian state.

Palestinian voices on the wall can be detected in the register of “we” and “our”: “Jerusalem – our land our capital” or “We will return” signaling presence, indigeneity, and a refusal to cede neither memory and historical consciousness, nor the internationally-sanctioned right of return. A graffito on the wall of a mosque in a town well away from the wall: “We will not forgive. We will not forget,” ties together present and future.

There is little Israeli response to graffiti or street art, no rushing of jeeps full of soldiers to blacken it out and if possible arrest the authors as was common during the first intifada. Graffiti is no longer conceptualized as much of a security threat as in first intifada. With security in the West Bank out-sourced to the PA as part of the Oslo agreements, Israeli forces are not as engaged in preventing or erasing it or punishing those who take to the walls. Usually daubed on the Palestinian side of the wall, it is out of the visual range of Israelis. However, the threat of violence is ever present. For example, while drawing on the wall, an Israeli soldier stopped Banksy in an encounter in which guns were drawn and cocked.

It is worth briefly acknowledging Hebrew or Israeli graffiti, particularly with the discernible increase in anti-Arab graffiti and the “price tag” incidents and vandalism of Palestinian property by settler youth groups known as “Hilltop Youth.” “Price tag” references the retribution settlers say they will inflict on Palestinians for any curbing of settlement activity in the West Bank and Jerusalem by the Israeli government. The not infrequent Hebrew graffiti “Death to Arabs” was now accompanied by anti-Christian graffiti such as “Jesus is garbage” scrawled on a church in Jerusalem, especially in the run-up to Pope Francis’ May 2014 visit. “Death to Arabs and Christians, and to anyone who hates Israel” “Transfer Now,” “Arabs Out,” and “Death to Arabs” have dotted the landscape for well over a decade.
Street art

While street art on the wall, often by well-known international street artists, attracts a global viewing, get off the well-trodden path and into villages and camps and street art also abounds. With a highly localized audience and themes, Arabic graffiti tagged by political organizations is commonplace as well. Street art depicting historical events are part of community efforts at crafting a landscape of memory and commemoration of a lost homeland and martyrs. In the camps, scenes of idyllic villages in Palestine are common; compositional elements also include the key, symbol of homes lost to Israel, the Dome of the Rock, the tree of life, maps of pre-1948 Palestine, the emblematic olive tree, and the Palestinian flag.

For renowned street artists such as Banksy, the location of their work is integral to what they want to convey. Thus the wall, that ugly scar on the landscape, is transformed into an artist’s canvas. Banksy is quoted:

The segregation wall is a disgrace. On the Israeli side it’s all manicured lawns and SUVs, on the other side it’s just dust and men looking for work. The possibility I find exciting is you could turn the world’s most invasive and degrading structure into the world’s longest gallery of free speech and bad art.

Thus, his work combines humor and art to effect a visual denunciation of the wall and its dehumanizing effects. Banksy calls attention to the dehumanizing wall by making the viewer alert to the wall itself. The wall exceeds itself as a canvas and comes alive to speak its own horror.

Banksy’s now well-circulated meta-linguistic image of a pig-tailed girl gracefully lifted to the sky by her handful of balloons on a string provides a striking backdrop to the massive Qalandia checkpoint that controls Palestinian movement between the north and the south. The stenciled image suggests the freedom to soar above the ugliness and repressiveness of the wall and a will to persevere. Another awe-inspiring mural depicts a child painting a white ladder rising up to the top of wall. Some of his black stencils speak to absurdity such as that in Bethlehem of a soldier checking the identity card of a donkey. Although a mocking of the Israeli insistence on surveillance of Palestinians and their incessant demands for identity documents and permits to the point of absurdity – even donkeys need identity papers – Palestinians painted over this mural thinking it was equating them with donkeys.

Others point to mobility as in a stencil of black and white figures either walking or riding an escalator up the wall. Below it is an over-sized bug toppling a series of dominoes that resemble the concrete slabs of the wall. Escape, mobility, and the inevitability of release from imprisonment behind the wall are common mural themes as is the desire for and denial of a normal life; in a tromp’oel that peels away the wall to reveal a thicket of trees swaying over the blue lapping water of the beach while children play with toy pails and shovels among the rubble at the base of the wall. Images of escape draw our attention to the incarceratory nature of the wall. The wall has become thematic in other cultural and artistic venues as well. A watercolor by American artist Ellen O’Grady displayed at the exhibit, “Breaching the Wall,” mounted by the Jerusalem Fund in Washington, D.C. in May 2011, somberly depicts a Bethlehem home and its car-repair business surrounded on three sides by the wall; the looming dark clouds allude to the devastation to come. A lone male figure, hands jammed in his pants pockets, stands forlornly on the street. The barbed-wire topped wall forms the backdrop against which the house, the lone-figure, and two stray cats are positioned. Palestinian artist Najat el Khairy’s painting, “Wall, Return of the Soul,” re-creates the floral, cross-stitch patterns of traditional Palestinian red,
white and black embroidery on the wall’s cement panels. The exhibit catalogue aptly frames the panels as engraving identity on the wall built on Palestinian land.

**Wall aesthetics**

The wall’s two sides are markedly different in appearance. Each side displays a strikingly different set of visuals. The Palestinian side is filled with a disorderly array of street art and graffiti. In an attempt to minimize the behemoth wall’s stark, grey appearance looming on the landscape, sections of the side visible to Israelis are adorned with colorful pastoral scenes of meadows, trees, and blue sky. Near the Gilo settlement, close to Bethlehem, for example, beautification is evident in the neatly landscaped horizontal dirt mound abutting the wall, planted with flowers, which diminishes the perception of its height and adds a splash of natural color. In other locales, a pastoral tableau of green fields, colorful flowers, and tidy white houses is part of a sanitizing aesthetic that masks the desolation on the other side. By late 2010, the wall in Bil’in, a Palestinian village whose lands have been confiscated by the Modi’in settlement, displayed this aesthetic. The Palestinian side was stark cement, while the Israeli side was painted with a brick terraced look in several shades of alternating brown, beige, and white, ironically mimicking the terraced landscape of Palestine. Parts of the wall in Jerusalem are painted in soft pastels, depicting a viaduct bordered by lush green fields and a vibrant blue sky. These aesthetic devices are conscious attempts to disguise walled separation and the harsh reality of a scarred terrain. According to Bishara,

In a nod to Palestinians’ mixed feelings about street art, the now oft-quoted exchange between Banksy and an elderly Palestinian man is worth reiterating:

**Old Man:** You paint the wall, you make it look beautiful  
**Me:** Thanks  
**Old Man:** We don’t want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall, go home.

(quoted in Bishara, 2013: p. 244)

Such an exchange is not unusual. I have heard Palestinians, particularly older people insist that artists stop trying to beautify the wall. Some Palestinians think graffiti minimizes the seriousness of the wall. The Palestinian artist Ayed Arafah says, “I won’t touch the wall with colors, it’s an act of normalization or beautification. People come here now as though they are visiting the pyramids in Egypt, like they are visiting a tourist attraction” (quoted in Wiles, 2013).

The wall provides fodder for local humor. Jokes circulate about people being lifted over the wall with a crane. In this vein, humorous postcards entitled “The Palestinian Daily Olympics” depicted a young man pole vaulting over the wall; the flip side depicts the same young man running furiously from Israeli soldiers in a jeep. The graffito “Open Sesame,” in large black stenciled letters, referencing Arabic/Persian literature and the international language of a children’s TV show, coveys imprisonment and the endless and unpredictable waiting that Palestinians endure as they wait for Israelis to let them pass through checkpoints or open the gates that will let them access their schools and agricultural lands. The graffito “CTRL-ALT-DELETE” indicates that irony is not in short supply either.

**Conclusion**

Once a form of resistance signaling “civil disobedience and a self-reflective moment” (Peteet, 1996: p. 145), contemporary Palestinian graffiti is less often a call to action and more an expression
of solidarity and political commentary. The street art and graffiti unfold against the backdrop of a voice and perspective marginalized in the international arena.

As dystopic spaces, walled communities can be contradictory, fostering intimacy and creativity, as evidenced by street art, murals, and graffiti, as well as the isolation and despair the wall itself imposes. I use dystopia less to refer to a degenerative process and more to an exclusivist utopian project that spelled disaster for the indigenous population and transformed their terrain into dysfunctional, unsustainable places. Street art and graffiti have changed little about the wall except to bring it more forcefully into the consciousness of the world by those who use it as a find and those then observe, photograph, and circulate it as images. The commodification and entry of Palestinian wall art into global circuits links Palestine with other distant struggles against marginalization and subjugation. Ultimately, this crafting and circulation of words and images does open a space for conversation about the wall and its meaning. Yet the space on which these images are inscribed is a space not under the control of those who inscribe their words and images on it but of those who built it. In both moments discussed here (first intifada and post 2000), street art and graffiti have been constant reminders of the abnormality of everyday life under occupation and now closure. They shed some light on the policies of occupation and an expanding settler-colonial project. They draw attention to its de-humanizing aspect and the resilience and creativity of a subjugated people while refusing normalization. I wonder about the graffito: “Silence is complicity.” Would an empty wall, a barren cement slab, devoid of human response, imply acceptance?

Notes

1 Oslo is a set of interim agreements hammered out between Israel and the PLO in 1993 and 1995, which set up the Palestinian National Authority (PNA or PA). They include protocols for security and economic relations and fragment the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C with differentiated levels of Israeli and Palestinian presence, control and responsibility. On the ground, realization set in that Oslo had simply garnered Palestinian acquiescence to relentless colonization and was ultimately an agreement to buy time for Jewish Israelis to further populate the West Bank. Relations between Israel and the PA would revolve around managing conflict.

2 The wall is widely recognized as a response to the impending demographic imbalance between Palestinians and Israelis and unilateral land grab. Israel touts the wall as a security device; however, a state’s protection of its citizens must be within the bounds of International Humanitarian Law (IHL): that means the response to perceived security risks must be proportionate. In 2004, the International Court of Justice (IJC) ruled 14–1 that the wall constitutes collective punishment, causes disproportionate harm, is an acquisition of land by force, and violates the prohibition on changing status in occupied territory and thus violated IHL and human rights law. It ruled the wall must be dismantled and a resident whose land was confiscated be compensated. No sanctions were forthcoming from the US or the international community.

3 In the first decade of the new century the number of young males incarcerated was around 69,000. In over four decades of occupation, around 650,000 Palestinians have been arrested (Rosenfeld, 2011: pp. 3–4). Given the small size of the Palestinian population in the OPTs (1 million in 1967 and around 4.5 million in 2012), this is a phenomenally high rate of arrest, detention, and incarceration.

4 “Price tag” and “Hilltop Youth” are euphemisms for what Israeli writer Amos Oz referred to as “sweet names for a monster that need to be called what it is: Hebrew neo-Nazi groups” that “enjoy support of numerous nationalist or even racist legislators as well as rabbis …” “Amos Oz calls perpetrators of hate crimes ‘Hebrew neo-Nazis’” Haaretz May 10, 2014 www.haaretz.com/news/national (accessed May 14, 2014).


6 The TV show Sesame Street in Arabic was entitled iftah ya simsim “Open Sesame” in English.
References


