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The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada

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One of the most striking features of the cultural landscape of the occupied West Bank at the height of the intifada, in the late 1980s and early in 1990, was the writing on the walls.[1] The eye was immediately drawn to the hastily inscribed, but on occasion rather painstakingly painted, graffiti splashed on nearly every stone wall in the area. Usually, each graffito carried the signature of a Palestinian political faction, either its full name or its acronym. Large blotches of black or white paint, either brush or spray painted, overlaid some graffiti and were intended to prevent their being read. One could read the battle of the walls much the way an archaeologist reads stratigraphy—layer by layer—each layer of paint indicating a partial and temporary victory in an ongoing battle. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

Popularly dubbed a "war of stones," stone-throwing images dominated the intifada's public presentation.[2] Indeed it was a war of stones, but stones were more than weapons of defense: they were print weapons as well. With its preponderance of stones and stone walls, the landscape provided ready made, easily accessible weapons of communication, assault, and defense.

As an anthropologist intent on exploring cultural production during a moment of intense political contest, I had given little, if any, thought to graffiti. But upon arrival in the occupied West Bank in 1990, I could not avoid it. In streets utterly devoid of movement or noise due to a general strike, the blotchy, hurriedly splashed red or black words on an otherwise fairly monotone landscape drew the eye. Once I got a sense of the process of graffiti's production and their content—which was humorous, demanding, threatening, chastising, and resistant—I started writing them down on index cards. A young woman who worked as a research assistant with me was assigned the task of writing down as many graffiti as she could. I had the good fortune to reside in Beit Hanina, a small suburb of Jerusalem particularly rich in graffiti.

This article explores graffiti as a form of cultural production during a sustained political contest. I take one particular cultural artifact, graffiti *(shi'arat),* to suggest that forms of cultural production deployed as a means of resistance

are themselves developed within the specific space of repression, within the constraints and possibilities it entails. How and under what conditions graffiti are produced and what their production means for their writers and audiences are central questions.

What I want to suggest is that graffiti did not merely send messages or signify defiance; their mere appearance gave rise to arenas of contest in which they were a vehicle or agent of power. This article departs from other works on cultural production and resistance by focusing on the effects of graffiti on differentially empowered and positioned readers (compare Rolston 1987; Sluka 1992; Slyomovics 1991). Graffiti, and the ways in which they were read, went far beyond a binary of occupied and occupier.

As a cultural device in a communicative process, graffiti fashioned and spoke to multiple audiences. The violence that surrounded their production and reading highlighted the notion that texts themselves are sites of conflicted readings. This means as well that both reading and writing are culturally and historically situated social practices. The way graffiti were produced and read by Palestinians, and read and effaced by Israelis, indicated differences that were hierarchized. Although I briefly discuss the meaning of graffiti for Israelis, my focus here is on the Palestinians. For Palestinians, graffiti were an intervention in a relationship of power. As cultural artifacts, graffiti were a critical component of a complex and diffuse attempt to overthrow hierarchy; they were Palestinian voices, archival and interventionist. They were not monolithic voices for sure, but polysemic ones that acted to record history and to form and transform relationships. While they represented they also intervened. For Palestinians as a readership, graffiti simultaneously affirmed community and resistance, de-

Figure 1
"The intifada continues... —Hamas." On the left, a splash of paint blackens out previous graffiti.

Figure 2
**The letters fth, for Fatah, traverse a map of Palestine. The northern part of the
map turns into a human figure carrying the Palestinian flag. Painted in the colors
of the flag—white, red, green, and black—it was signed by qd (*quwwat al-darb*, the
Strike Forces, a wing of Fatah). These two walls contain multiple layers of paint,
indicating their frequent usage as a site for writing graffiti. The wall in the distant
background also carries splotches of black paint. The stones on the ground were
used to set up barricades to slow down or stop Israeli jeeps.**

bated tradition, envisioned competing futures, indexed historical events and
processes, and inscribed memory. They provided political commentary as well
as issuing directives both for confronting occupation and transforming oneself
in the process. They recorded events and commemorated martyrdom. In short,
as a form of cultural production, they were self-reflective and self-critical—
qualities that distinguished them from other forms of cultural production in the
intifada, such as embroidery or the use of colors of the Palestinian flag in deco-
rative items. The Palestinian community thought "out loud" in graffiti. Issues of
gender, religion, and politics were charted and debated.

In the context of the intifada, stones were a revolutionary device; they were
both weapon and medium in a battleground where technological disparity in

weaponry was striking and an apparatus of censorship was in place. Taking to the walls was a sort of last-ditch effort to speak and be heard. The appearance of the writing on the walls, the actions underlying them and their content, could be read in a multiplicity of ways. The graffito "No taxes without representation"[3] could be read by Palestinian audiences as a directive of struggle, as a refusal to acquiesce in the occupation project, and, in an archival sense, as a diagnostic of the kinds of tactics deployed by the occupying authorities.[4] Written under a highly elaborated apparatus of censorship, graffiti were a form of expression that recorded domination and simultaneously intervened in it.[5] Graffiti is approached here as a form of expression grounded in the complex of Palestinian-Israeli power relations in which neither group was homogeneous or monolithic.

While censorship distorted Palestinian potential for the construction of narrative, graffiti linked Palestinians under occupation, overcoming discontinuity in communication. Yet the images lasted only as long as the tolerance of the occupier. That could be a few hours or a few days. Graffiti—which Fischer and Abedi refer to as a "minor media" (1990:337)—present hastily written, fleeting, fragmentary images, much like the intifada itself. In this sense, in spite of their technological simplicity, Palestinian graffiti joined the electronic age of fleeting imagery.[6] The hurriedly inscribed images, often read rather quickly, resembled in intent and reading those of television advertising and Sesame Street. The former aims to convince viewers to consume, often in as short a time as 30 seconds, while the latter uses rapidly shifting sets of short segments to develop conceptual thinking and impart specific knowledge. Intifada graffiti shared both these aims.

The mere presence of graffiti—their simple production and signification of resistance and defiance—assumed primacy in the construction and potency of meaning. Minimal aesthetic attempts merely heightened that primacy.[7] On occasion the time and risk were taken to impart an aesthetic effect. Once I saw a very elegant kufic-style graffito in East Jerusalem.[8] Painstakingly painted in bright red, it read "nar wo nur" (fire and light). This graffito I definitely wanted to capture on film; precisely because of its aesthetic qualities I wanted to give it a permanent imprint. By the time I ran around the corner to grab my camera and ran back—all of 15 minutes—it was blackened out. Once a graffito has been inscribed in the anthropologist's or journalist's notebook or captured on film, it is accorded a permanence not intended in the practice of its production. The image and message are fixed and can circulate across time and place, providing grounds for a distant, differently positioned reading.

Carrying Relationships

As cultural artifacts of resistance, graffiti are not inert. Reading is an active kind of behavior and a text is a "carrier of relationships" (Davis 1991). We thus must ask, What kind of relationships did graffiti carry and how did they intersect with other forms of resistance? Because the conditions in which graffiti were produced were so furtive and could incur deadly violence, the perilous act of writing points to contextualization, for it testifies to an intense desire to fashion

and galvanize an audience. In their production and consumption, or reading, graffiti established and reinforced certain relations and intervened in and disrupted others. Addressed to two publics/audiences, the occupier and the Palestinian community, graffiti were polysemic; they elicited multiple readings and galvanized readers for different actions. In both instances they relied on fairly predictable relations given experience and the organization of power: an antagonistic one with soldiers and settlers and a generally favorable one with Palestinians.

Graffiti took their place in a constellation of resistance tactics to intervene in relations of domination. Both the act of writing and the reading of its content disrupted dominant-subordinate relations in various ways. The sheer ubiquitousness of graffiti was a constant reminder both of the abnormality of everyday life under occupation and of the mass uprising. They worked with the daily general strike to imprint on the landscape abnormality and resistance. The writing on the walls challenged Israeli claims to surveillance, constituting a glaring index of the Israeli state's inability to observe and control every place. In circumventing censorship and setting up a direct relationship with a public, graffiti invited an active response from readers. Most importantly, graffiti were part of a repertoire of actions of civil disobedience. Prominent among these were nonpayment of taxes, boycotts of Israeli goods, and flying the Palestinian flag or using its colors in items of dress or adornment. Graffiti were the silent narrative accompanying acts of resistance yet were themselves an act of resistance. They encouraged resistance, cajoled, demanded, critiqued, and provided running political commentary on the progression of the uprising. At the same time, they were an act of civil disobedience. They made dramatically visible and public an action, writing without censorship, deemed illegal by the occupying forces.

As an accompaniment to standard mobilization strategies of visiting and persuasion, and of confrontations, graffiti suggested and beckoned people to resist, to take action. Private property in the form of walls—which demarcated residences or businesses—was mobilized. Aside from declaring the popular communal nature of the uprising, taking over privately owned walls for inscription was also an act of internal politicization and mobilization, since owners of walls of print would be confronted by soldiers demanding erasure and payment of fines of roughly 700 Israeli shekels (about $350). A standard tactic of the uprising was "days of confrontations" with the occupation authorities. Designated by the leadership, these were days when people were encouraged to take part in activities designed to engage soldiers in confrontations, such as stone-throwing or setting up barricades. They were intended to spark mass mobilization, drawing people out of their homes and everyday lives into the melee of resistance activities. Sometimes wall owners would rush to paint over graffiti to save themselves the fine and the humiliation of erasure under the eyes of the soldiers. In the battle for control, the leadership's stance on such a practice could be read in this graffito: "Don't paint over graffiti voluntarily. First Warning!"[9] Palestinians were to desist from taking on the functions of policing themselves for the benefit of the occupation authorities.

The process of producing graffiti contained the capacity to transform internal relations and harness them to resistance actions. Writing graffiti could be a performative element in a rite of passage into the resistance.[10] To be more than a mere supporter of a political organization, to join the ranks of members and potential leaders, one had to prove oneself. The act of writing graffiti constituted a sort of rite of passage into both adulthood and the underground resistance movement. A young woman schoolteacher, in whose home I spent much time and who was in the process of being mobilized by a political organization, kept me informed of each stage. First she had received several ostensibly social visits from members of a political group. They engaged her in political discussions to get a feel for where she stood on a number of political issues. After a few weeks she sensed they were going to suggest involvement in resistance activities.

> They visited yesterday afternoon and since my parents were out of the room they asked if I would go out tomorrow night to paint graffiti with some of the other people in our neighborhood. They suggested that if I didn't want to confront my parents I could sneak out quietly after everyone was asleep.

When I asked what she had decided to do she said:

> I can't do it. I just can't deceive my parents. I'm not ready yet to take on this action. Maybe later. But not now. I feel really guilty because I know some of the others now in our neighborhood who do risk arrest.

This initial task of a new recruit measured readiness and tested and validated commitment to the uprising and the capacity to face danger. For young women, it was a test of their willingness to defy common parental restrictions on nighttime movement beyond the home. In short, the act of making the stones speak was simultaneously an aspect of acquiring revolutionary credentials and entering the realm of political membership or affiliation.

An unintended audience was the outside observer, the graffiti aficionado, such as myself and others, who photographed the graffiti especially as they developed into wall murals. The small street that led into the neighborhood where I lived had a large wall that could easily be seen from the road as one drove or walked by. This wall was always covered with either an elaborate wall mural or a fresh application of black paint. Each day as I walked to the main road I approached the wall with anticipation. What would have transpired during the night? The murals were painted at night and blocked out during the day. So between the time I left in the morning and the time I returned in the late afternoon, the face of the wall was often transformed. Eventually word got around to journalists and researchers that Beit Hanina was full of fabulous, colorful graffiti and wall murals. When I came home or passed by the street during the day, I saw journalists snapping photos of the wall. In photographing the wall they were doing much as I am doing in writing this article. We have both fixed in a permanent imprint these fleeting images and narratives of resistance. We have given them longevity and taken them on journeys for others to read. The intifada may end

up being one of the most well researched and well documented uprisings in this century.

On occasion graffiti were deployed to speak to the West. While usually written in Arabic, English graffiti appeared now and then, particularly when a foreign delegation was known to be coming to an area. A student in a village told me an interesting story about writing graffiti in English:

> The night before a visiting group of American observers and supporters were to come to our village, the *shebab* [young boys or men] came and asked me to help them write graffiti in English. I had lived for a few years in the United States so they figured my English would be better than theirs. I agreed and they gave me a list of things they wanted to write on the walls and on banners. We stayed up all night translating these slogans and messages. We painted them on banners to hang in the village and then we went out and painted some on the walls.

In press accounts of the intifada, the accompanying photo often contained a graffiti-covered wall. Sometimes the writing was translated, other times not. In any case, the narrative had been fixed and circulated in the global information network and media. In this sense, graffiti took their place among other forms of resistance. Graffiti constituted a voice for those who felt voiceless in the international arena.

Writing in the Censored Zone

The walls of shops, homes, and offices were littered with a jumbled profusion of graffiti; the quantity was a barometer of discontent and resistance.[11] Aside from the afternoon shutdown in observance of the general strike, the most ubiquitous sign of the intifada was writing.[12]

As a form of cultural production, graffiti were a way of communicating in spite of official censorship.[13] But they were also much more. What was to be written on the walls was usually assigned to young writers by local or neighborhood leaders, although it was not uncommon for young writers to take to the walls without directions. The content of graffiti was both uniform and cacophonous, much as the uprising itself. Their ubiquitousness and their highly charged rhetoric marked the crossing of a forbidden threshold. An uncensored and emboldened Palestinian public space and voiced presence emerged in the graffiti— "Death to the settlers wherever they are —PFLP [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine]";[14] "Our people are stronger than all modes of repression —PFLP"; "Let us seek complete freedom —UNL [Unified National Leadership]"; "No to occupation." These voices signaled an end to a semipublic transcript where resistance had been fragmented and proceeded in fits and starts. "Nonpayment of taxes and tickets is a national obligation and an act of struggle —UNL." "A generation that awakens in the interrogation room under the police baton makes a party of the people and of all comrades —PCP [Palestine Communist Party]." These signaled civil disobedience and a self-reflective moment. In announcing that policies of violence were constitutive of political consciousness, of "awakening," of affiliation and unity, they deny, if not indeed subvert,

the intent behind applications of bodily violence. As items in an archive, the graffiti also inscribed, however fleetingly, a chapter in Palestinian social history.

Cockiness was encoded in graffiti such as "Prison is for relaxation, deportation policy is for tourism, throwing stones is exercise —UNL." A riposte in stones was both a diagnostic and a refusal to acquiesce. It diagnosed occupation tactics such as detention and deportation while denying their effectiveness to wear down resistance. Palestinians were registering their willingness to take punishment—indeed were displaying their capacity to defy punishment creatively and even to take pleasure in defiance. Humorous bravado could also be read internally as a means of preparing young boys for the likelihood of a prison experience.

The anonymity of graffiti, their signature by political groups rather than individual writers, suggested the sense of community and assertiveness of a readership bound by common political experience and language. Perhaps that was why the Israelis were so responsive to graffiti. To the occupying forces, the hurried images were more crucial than their actual contents. Soldiers responded to the social practice of writing—and to the possibilities it suggested for the emergence of a readership exploring and affirming its collective identity. Erasure and its accompanying violence indexed fear both of a community producing and circulating knowledge and of an experience and sentiment being inscribed and shared among people not in actual face-to-face contact. Circulations of sentiment and experience could lead to incitement.

Under Israeli military rule, everyday life was highly regulated by the need for a permit for just about any activity—from building onto one's home to bringing in books to planting a tree. Over 1,500 military orders regulated Palestinian daily life. Writing on the walls—not seeking permission to write—was defined as illegal behavior and was responded to as such.[15] Thus Israeli soldiers scrambled to ensure that graffiti were blackened out. The majority of the soldiers could not comprehend the actual content of the writing; they responded to images, in a public space, whose mere appearance signaled the social practice of defiance and reminded them of their inability to impose control without resistance.[16] The signatures were often well-known icons, such as the red hammer and sickle of the Palestine Communist Party or the fist of the Strike Forces— markings that do not require literacy in Arabic.

The conditions under which graffiti were written are central to locating their meaning and efficacy. Censorship effectively underwrote the production of graffiti. Graffiti were a means of circumventing denial of voice. They were what Foster refers to as "a response of people denied response" (1985:48).[17] They were a way of breaking rules that limited speech and thus can be cast as the crossing of boundaries erected to fragment and isolate. Along with rumor and *al-bayanat* (the leaflets produced by the underground leadership and banned by the Israeli state), graffiti assumed primacy as a means of communication. Denied access to an uncensored print media, people took to the walls, creating a print in stone and readers of stones. Graffiti were evidence of an attempt to re-

cover voice and to fashion a "public sphere," that is, to quote Habermas, an arena in which "such a thing as public opinion can be formed" (1991:398).[18] In the intifada's initial phase (1987–90), graffiti writers assumed a Palestinian public as a fairly homogeneous community defined in relation to a foreign occupier. However, as I will discuss later, Palestinian social and political heterogeneity was represented in both reading and writing, suggesting not Habermas's liberal and singular public but rather the notion of multiple publics, arguably singular in their opposition to occupation, but often in obvious tension with one another.

Writing and Erasure

The Israeli response to graffiti certainly suggested that they saw graffiti both as creating and as galvanizing its audience. Slyomovics argued that Israeli "censors perceive any live performance in front of an audience to be dangerous thanks to theatre's acknowledged capacity to incite audiences, while reading a book is deemed a private, solitary act" (1991:27). Yet numerous books were banned in the occupied territories for fear they would inform and therefore incite people. The violence done to the reading process suggested a recognition of it as a particularly dangerous social practice.[19] Indeed, censorship was perhaps the clearest recognition of the social and collective nature of reading and the potential for consciousness and agency in a public sphere. Censorship effectively destabilizes notions of the private nature of reading.

To produce graffiti required no more than a can of spray paint, a wall, and an idea or instructions. Much as stones were the primary weapon of confrontation and defense by a largely unarmed people, the walls lent themselves well to print warfare. Graffiti were serious business, indicating a successful defiance of surveillance. They appeared in the most public and visible of sites—main thoroughfares and squares, commonly traveled roads, and walls in densely packed commercial areas. There was little that was private or hidden about graffiti, except their actual transformation from idea to image, a risky endeavor. Late at night, from my windows, I would crouch down and peep through the curtains to watch groups of three or four boys, under cover of darkness, scrawl on the walls. One boy would be posted as a lookout, and at the slightest sound of an approaching vehicle or group of soldiers they would dart over walls or across open spaces between houses and wait until all was clear. Although graffiti were written in the dark hours of night or the early morning, soldiers were often on patrol and did occasionally catch writers in the act. While reading graffiti posed no particular danger, their production certainly did; it was illegal to write for public dissemination without submission of the text to the censors. Moreover, the writing of graffiti frequently led to violent encounters as soldiers occasionally shot graffiti writers or beat them.[20]

Part of a deadly cat-and-mouse game, the appearance of graffiti underscored the incompleteness of Israel's surveillance. By 1990, colorful wall murals appeared side by side with graffiti. Most often by the evening they were gone, blackened out by an application of paint. A few mornings later, the murals

would reappear in the exact same spot. Israeli soldiers did not themselves paint over the walls. In Beit Hanina, I often saw jeep loads of soldiers round up five or six boys and march them at gunpoint to the walls to blacken out graffiti and murals.[21] These same boys were often the ones I had seen writing graffiti or painting murals the night before. Striking disparities in technology were also evident in the battle of the walls. Much as stone throwing was responded to with live ammunition, graffiti at times elicited a technological response.[22] Automatic paint sprayers mounted on trucks, able to reach higher graffiti, were a second means deployed for erasure. The game of inscribing and erasing went on daily, taking on the appearance and quality of a deadly contest over who would have the final word.

Inscribing and Claiming Place

The riot of signs on stones, and their erasure, signaled a contest over place and its definition. It made the stone walls into encoded tablets, public, didactic, archival, and interventionist spaces of riposte—"No to Shamir, Mubarak and Baker's plans and a thousand yesses to the independent Palestinian state — UNL."

Under military rule, Palestinians were denied cultural and political expression in public space. Writing on the walls was a dramatically graphic and visible way of simultaneously responding to and resisting an assignment of public space that attempted to exclude them. Occupation policy and practices categorized Palestinians as movable, not in need of permanency and continuity of place. Graffiti proclaimed place as one's own and asserted one's power in it—"Fatah passed by here." They registered a desire for connectivity to and power in place. Yet "passed by" stated a recognition of the contemporary fleetingness of presence. They also suggested possible futures where an empowered Palestinian community would be in place. Fatah, as the major political faction of the PLO, embodied the organizational force for Palestinian autonomy.

On occasion, graffiti proclaimed the unity in resistance of a spatially and experientially fragmented community. Depending on geographic location and its temporal referent, an always positioned Palestinian discourse suggested degrees of being "inside" *(dakhil)* and "outside" (either *al-ghurba,* in the diaspora, or *shatat,* part of the dispersal or fragmentation of the Palestinians). Being "inside" can refer to those Palestinians residing in the areas of Palestine that became Israel in 1948, if one is in the occupied territories. If one is in the diaspora, "inside" can refer to those Palestinians inside Israel and those under occupation.[23] "Palestine from water to water —Hamas" and "From sea to sea —Hamas" declared a geography of continuity. "No to settlers" denied a Zionist claim to and presence in Palestinian space and registered a resounding rejection of fragmentation and dispersal (shatat). In doing so, a political stance was stated as well. Equally, graffiti were an attempt to break out of spaces of confinement, which in their discontinuity obstructed and fragmented Palestinian communication.

Graffiti transformed contested space into a communicative arena in which directives were sent and visions of a future were encoded. For instance, announcements of strikes ("Monday is a strike day") were ubiquitous. To cite a more complex example, "Woe! Israel sneaks its soldiers into Arab areas wearing the uniform of the popular army —PCP" was a warning of possible danger but also an announcement of the ability of a leadership to know and to disseminate knowledge about Israeli military tactics. "Nonpayment of taxes is a national duty and an act of struggle —UNL" was a civil disobedience directive. And the graffito "Intifada activities do not contradict the pursuit of education" indicated a critical concern with internal developments in the community and an assumption of leadership, political as well as social.

Graffiti were also "territorial marker[s]" akin to street maps with territorial demarcations (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974). Readers knew which areas were under whose control simply by the sheer density of graffiti and their signatures.[24] I soon caught on to reading the signatures for clues as to which factions were contesting each other in an area.

Signatures most commonly seen were the acronym Fatah, the PFLP's symbol (a map of Palestine traversed by a horizontal arrow directed westward), the symbol of the Communist Party (red hammer and sickle), the acronyms Hamas, UNL, and its Arabic equivalent, qwm (for al-qiyadi al-wataniyya muwahhida), the symbols of the Strike Forces (either the sign of the fist or the initials qd for *quwaat al-darb*), and Islamic symbols such as the Dome of the Rock. Although graffiti were usually written in black, occasionally they appeared in color. Hamas sometimes used green, the holy color of Islam; the Communist Party and the PFLP used red; and Fatah, the Unified National Leadership, and the Strike Forces used black. Baudrillard refers to graffiti signatures as "totemic" (quoted in Foster 1985:51), symbols of group belonging and sentiment. Signatures and colors non-euphemistically proclaimed presence and control in a neighborhood.[25] Indeed territorialization read through political signs encoded an ability not only to be there but to mobilize youth in an area to undertake risky actions, such as writing on the walls.

Aside from the content of the graffiti and their signature, the political affiliation of the author was often apparent in the message. "Salute to female students wearing Islamic dress" was obviously written by supporters of Hamas or Islamic Jihad. Beit Hanina had a preponderance of graffiti signed by Hamas, an initial and fairly reliable indicator of the political orientation of a substantial segment of the neighborhood. But interspersed countergraffiti, signed by Fatah or the Communist Party, pointed to the presence of other political forces, underscoring the political diversity and complexity of any one neighborhood.

Historical moments of transformation and crisis were accorded centrality in stating Palestinian national sentiment and identity by recourse to the simple but formulaic logic of a mathematical model: "1948 + 1967 = All Palestine." References to 1948 signaled a historical consciousness of critical moments in time and place and an attempt to recover a history and a geopolitical and social continuity denied or marginalized. Such a graffito also laid out the association

among place, time, and identity. These two defining historical moments—1948 and 1967—are metonyms for the loss and subsequent transformation of Palestine and the fragmentation of its people. These dates are the spatiotemporal reference points that in the present bind Palestinians, wherever they are, in the struggle to unite what has been fragmented: the space of Palestine and its people, those on the inside (dakhil) and in the diaspora (al-ghurba).

Reading the Walls

Particularly appropriate to a discussion of graffiti is Said's remark that the politics of interpretation are preceded by questions such as "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?" (1983:7). He also notes that "no one writes simply for oneself. There is always an Other, and this Other willy-nilly turns interpretation into a social activity" (1983:9). Reading— or the reception of—graffiti occurs in a historically and culturally constituted arena. How they are read is inextricable from their conditions of production and their content.

Because there was no apparent selection of texts by readers, reading graffiti was not akin to browsing the shelves in the library and bookstore and choosing reading materials. Graffiti were not produced and packaged as are different genres of books and newspapers, nor did they establish an aesthetic distinction between readers.[26] The only cultural capital necessary was literacy in Arabic, and even that was not always a requisite since people read for and to others.

Signatures were, however, akin to Radway's "cover iconography" in identifying "category" readers (1991:469). Standardized signatures registered factional affiliations and thus endowed graffiti with authenticity and legitimacy. Because graffiti were nearly always written in Arabic (and because few Palestinians are literate in Hebrew), I suspect that their semantic content was directed to an internal audience. By 1990, few people actually stood around reading graffiti. Reading, I would suggest, had taken on a subliminal quality. The sheer ubiquitousness of graffiti made them difficult to avoid. As a result, readers took graffiti home, to work, and to social occasions where they often sparked political and social discussions.

Graffiti assumed, yet simultaneously fashioned, audiences. That graffiti could be read in multiple ways suggested a multiplicity of experiences and audiences. When I say that writing graffiti assumed an audience, I am referring to a discontented Palestinian readership that collectively experienced occupation— and that at some level can therefore be considered an interpretive community, constitutive of a reader category. Radway says of reader categories, "as readers they are united by common purposes, preferences and interpretive procedures" (1991:470). Such a characterization has applicability to graffiti's various readerships. Reading graffiti, like reading any text, does not occur in a vacuum but is a critical matter of historical time, place, and experience. The battle lines of occupation were drawn along ethnic-political, national, and ideological lines. But within the broad division between Israelis and Palestinians, there were bor-

der areas, sentiments and stances that did not always neatly fit. Diversity within these two interpretive communities should not be glossed over.

Once I began to collect graffiti, it became obvious that I could not easily understand their meaning unless I had some idea of the process of reading graffiti. So I began to ask Palestinians if they read them. I hardly needed to ask additional questions since most people easily offered their sentiments and opinions. A young woman from Ramallah told me when I casually asked if she paid any attention to graffiti, "Of course, when I wake in the morning and see new graffiti I know that resistance continues. It tells me that people are risking their lives and that they live right here in this neighborhood." A friend who worked in a grass-roots community group and lived in a Jerusalem neighborhood full of graffiti said that for her,

> It's kind of like reading the newspaper. As I walk to the main road, I scan the walls quickly to see what is newly written. I already know the old graffiti and usually they are blocked out after a few days anyway. I try to quickly read the new graffiti. I think of it as a way of getting the news. Often I laugh because some of them are funny.

Sometimes when I asked people about graffiti they suggested that we go for a walk so I could see "some really great graffiti" in their neighborhood, or a graffito that they found particularly meaningful. Once, my neighborhood shop-keeper insisted we go for a walk in the afternoon so he could show me the graffiti of the area not visible from the main road and those that he found memorable. It was he who pointed out to me the graffito "1948 + 1967 = All Palestine." He thought it a fantastic formulation, simple but to the point, and said, "The soldiers can certainly read that!"

Although the actual act of reading graffiti could be accomplished individually or in groups, interpretation was not a private solitary process removed from daily events and experiences. Many people told me they made a point to read graffiti when "things are hot" or when "things are happening." A writer and scholar explained that he paid particular attention to graffiti as he rode in the shared taxi in the mornings. He found it useful in getting a "reading of the street."[27] Indeed Palestinians often read and discussed graffiti in small, intimate groups of family and friends. For one elderly lady I used to visit in Jerusalem, graffiti were often a point of departure for political discussions with her children. She found graffiti informative of the stances of the various resistance factions. Having read a particular graffito she would ask her children their opinions of the stance taken in it, and then a discussion would ensue. As we will see, graffiti were a crucial medium in debates over political and social issues such as the veiling of women.

As a social practice, reading graffiti is grounded in position and experience —in the situatedness of a readership in a power structure and the graffiti writer's place in it, and the implication of his product for that structure. In short, multiple optics are involved. For the most part, Israelis in the occupied territories read graffiti as defiance and lawless anarchy. But the Israeli readership was not ho-

mogeneous. Some soldiers read them as defiance to be met with a violent response. For others their presence and content reaffirmed the sense that it was time to withdraw from the territories—to heed the writing on the walls. For soldiers, graffiti might have reinforced their daily experience of the occupied territories as spaces of either lawlessness or unstoppable resistance—or both.

Graffiti assumed and affirmed difference on more than one level, while simultaneously assuming and affirming unity of sentiment and identity. Palestinians, as a nationally defined readership, read in the writing defiance and resistance, as well as a call for unity and action. Graffiti suggested a continuous reaffirmation of relations between leadership and the populace through print dialogue: "The UNL calls upon you to unite because there is strength in unity." And it warned those who deviated from a position of unity: "Woe to the disobedient and those who dissent from the homeland —Fatah." Yet graffiti also registered divergent stances and locations in the contest between various Palestinian factions. After 1990, the content of graffiti increasingly indexed such competition.

Making Demands, Promising Memory

More than simply a response to prolonged occupation, graffiti indicated a society in the throes of reconstituting itself, trying to establish a set of conditions that would endow it with the capacity to guide an internal dynamic of change and in doing so resist occupation:

> The revolution owns ten bullets: nine for the collaborators and one for the enemy
> —Fatah

Putting one's own house in order was basic to, if not indeed a necessary precondition for, confronting occupation. Graffiti were a pivotal and strikingly public part of this process.

The content of graffiti directed, warned, informed, commemorated, provided critical commentary, and could be a diagnostic of occupation tactics. Graffiti spoke in the context of various political affiliations and the actions expected of different sectors of the community. They made demands on the community for political engagement, commitment, and sacrifice. Graffiti established a relationship with Palestinian readers through their resemblance to a community bulletin board advising readers of strike days and adherence to them. Graffiti identified and warned against collaboration, diagnosing a widespread tactic of the occupying authorities and identifying collaborators in the community: "We've got an appointment soon with the collaborator and spy Abu Hani and drug addicts —UNL" and "Woe to those who see and talk —UNL." Such directives and threats asserted the authority of the leadership of the uprising and warned of their ability to act coercively.

Graffiti announced political positions of various groups: "Through the intifada, miracles will happen, no to concessions" and "A brother with a comrade, we will continue —PCP." Political commentary of an inter-Arab sort was en-

coded in this mathematically modeled, zoomorphic graffito: "Fahd + Asad = a
mouse." In Arabic, *Fahd* means "panther" and is the first name of the king of
Saudi Arabia. *Asad* means "lion" and is the family name of the president of
Syria. This equation cautioned Palestinians not to look to the Arab world for
help, pointing to its weaknesses, its inability to be more than a "mouse," in spite
of leaders supposedly endowed with powerful (lion and panther) qualities and
strong domestic regimes. In short, they directed the transformation of dominant-
subordinate relations and provided commentary suggesting communal self-
sufficiency and autonomy of action.

   Graffiti reported and inscribed sacrifice and martyrdom, evoking senti-
ments of community and loss. "Mourning pronounced for the soul of al-Ram
martyr, Ashraf Abu-Suneineh —UNL." In this graffito, the leadership called
for a day of mourning, to be observed through a general strike in the area. Reg-
istering the name of the dead on the wall elevated his status to that of martyr[28]
and indicated that the national movement had the power and legitimacy to de-
cide who was a martyr and how his death should be remembered. The textual in-
tersected with other Palestinian cultural features rescripted for resistance. The
40-day period of mourning for the dead, customary among Muslim Palestinians,
was extended into a kind of indefinite period of mourning for the martyrs of the
intifada. From the beginning of the intifada, a tone or behavioral code was en-
shrined—and largely adhered to—that permitted no celebrations, no parties,
and no dancing. Young women were discouraged from wearing fancy, colorful
clothing and too much makeup. Even weddings, usually festive occasions, were
supposed to be somber, simple affairs. In short, people were not to indulge in
pleasurable forms of activity out of respect for the dead. The Palestinian popu-
lation was to comport itself much as it would if everyone were in mourning.[29]

   Salutations were sent in the name of the leadership to those who had sacri-
ficed for Palestine: "Thousand salutes to all persons detained, martyrs who gave
their lives so that others may live —UNL"; "Glory to all our martyrs, deepest
appreciation to our injured and prisoners." These graffiti suggested a sense of
connectedness between the larger Palestinian community and those individuals
who had suffered "so that others may live." Inscriptions of sacrifice and martyr-
dom elicited empathy and identification with those who had lost their lives.
They could also induce guilt and self-reflection. As one young man told me,
"When I see the names of the dead on the walls, I feel like I'm not contributing
enough—that I should do more." One's own future prosperity was referenced to
those who were making it possible.

   The promise of memory was central in graffiti; they were imbued with an
assertive desire to be remembered and recorded in the collective archives of
memory. Graffiti encoded a wish to be recognized where existence had been de-
nied. In graffiti, not only was the martyr promised memory, his or her actions
stood as an exemplar to others. The martyr's name and story circulated in the
catalogue of Palestinian cultural links to the past, present, and future. The mar-
tyr entered into a collective memory; possible futures were referenced to his or
her actions and sacrifices. "The martyr's will is that we march forward and resist

—PCP." In making demands, graffiti offered memory and glory. They addressed young men and women, as mothers, and called upon both to sacrifice and thus achieve connectivity. Graffiti were gendered voices; their production was largely by males even when the content was about women. When they addressed women specifically, they did so in a way that affirmed control or authority. Women were exhorted to dress properly or were saluted for activism. A genre of graffiti addressed to mothers carried a message of sacrifice: "If my comrades return without me, mother, weep, for each tear is a drop of fuel that flames the light of freedom."

Graffiti publicly registered competing Palestinian voices and visions on a range of issues. For example, an East Jerusalem wall with the graffito "Morals or else. . . —Hamas" was soon followed by "We salute the women of the intifada —PFLP." These were graffiti as internal dialogue. Graffiti displayed the extent to which the process of self-transformation was multidirectional. "Morals or else. . ." and "Women should wear Islamic dress" revealed that some of the visions of the social order within the intifada were not egalitarian.[30]

Competing visions were part of a larger debate on political issues in which women became the topic around which the debate was carried on. The contest between Hamas and the secular nationalists was often played out over the question of veiling. Polysemy in this instance was an index of exclusion. The Islamist discourse excluded and warned those who deviated from its normative order. It was met by an opposed interpretation conveyed in warnings to desist coercive tactics and not circumscribe women into Islamically scripted roles and dress. Hammami (1990) noted that the intense and often violent debate over the *hijab* (the veil) in the Gaza Strip was communicated in graffiti. In the spring of 1988, she writes, Hamas graffiti "sprang up all over the Strip with statements such as 'Daughters of Islam, abide by *shari'a* [Islamic] dress!' " (1990:25). When the UNL finally responded to an increasingly violent campaign of intimidation by Hamas to coerce women into veiling, graffiti appeared on walls in Gaza proclaiming that "those caught throwing stones at women will be treated as collaborators" and that "women have a great role in the intifada and we must respect them" (1990:25, 27).

Graffiti envisioned possible futures. One common theme of the imagined future was religious equality. In Beit Hanina, one graffito was styled as a two-masted boat. One mast was configured as a cross, the other as a crescent. The text, which formed the boat, read, "Abu Ammar is our leader, Palestine is our home, and Jerusalem is our capital —Fatah." In Ramallah, a graffito signed by the Palestine Communist Party read, "Let the churches and mosques embrace each other in national unity." It thus asserted the primacy of national sentiment and displayed a tolerance of religious diversity. A competing voice concerning the future could be read in a Hamas graffito, which envisioned a different kind of future: "Yes to an Islamic State."

Graffiti carried another kind of relationship as well, one more self-reflective and critical. Fischer and Abedi comment that

> reading is not merely an empowering device; it is (and was understood to be) a means of promoting self-reflection by externalizing, objectifying, and textualizing thought, and thus providing a distanced mirror, a space for analysis and self critique. [1990:400]

The distance that they refer to is constitutive of a space of self-criticism. Critique was in the form of commentary and debates—about collaborators, Palestinian-Arab relations, morals, the place of religion in society, and authority. Reading as self-critical commentary affirmed Palestinian experience and engaged the reader in the possibility of overthrowing the power configuration in which such experience took place. The Palestinian readership was an active one—like Natalie Zemon Davis's urban *menu peuple* in France, who were "active users and interpreters of printed books" (1991:86).

Conclusion

I have argued that forms of cultural production, in this instance during an intense and sustained political conflict, can be a means of resisting in and of themselves. Graffiti did more than signify or reflect, they also intervened in dominant-subordinate relations.

Writing and reading were structured by positionality, and thus audiences endowed graffiti with affirmative, opposed, and alternative meanings. Graffiti stood for and encoded a series of diverse relationships as they attempted to intervene in some and affirm others. For Palestinians, they signaled a fundamental breach in Palestinian-Israeli relations in the territories and were a communicative device in ongoing resistance to occupation. They signaled a refusal to acquiesce, a refusal to normalize the abnormal. They were an open challenge to Israel's monopoly on the circulation of information and knowledge. Israelis read graffiti as signs of defiance and lawlessness or of the futility and unsustainability of occupation.

Like any aspect of the culture of the intifada, the meaning of the social practices of reading and writing is to be located as much in internal Palestinian refashioning via a dialogue of cultural critique as in rejection and overthrow of external forms of domination.

Graffiti should be contextualized in sets of power relations and structures and the forms of resistance these entail. The meaning and potency of graffiti for its various readerships were located in a nexus that simultaneously enabled, sustained, and legitimized their production and yet constrained and delegitimized them. It was in the spaces where these competing, yet highly unbalanced, systems of power interfaced that meaning was constructed. These relationships and structures, and their creative and constricting possibilities, were encoded in graffiti as practice and in each graffito.

Notes

    1. The phase "writing on the walls" comes from Sluka 1992:191, which reports on the uprising in Northern Ireland.

    2. The intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, began in December 1987. The term *intifada* implies a "shaking off," in this instance of foreign domination and, for some Palestinians, of internal hierarchies of gender, class, and age. Graffiti were also written before the intifada but certainly not with the same density or regularity.

    3. All translations of graffiti from the original Arabic are mine.

    4. See Abu-Lughod 1990 for a discussion of resistance as a diagnostic of power.

    5. The Palestinian human rights organization al-Haq notes two types of censorship. "Before-the-fact" censorship includes "measures designed to prevent or discourage journalists from gaining access to information and events" such as use of military closures, detaining and assaulting journalists, "abuse of the journalist's profession" by confiscating film or impersonating journalists, and the closure of Palestinian press offices. "After-the-fact" censorship includes the "requirement that publications be submitted to an official government censor and the destruction or confiscation of camera and film" (1989:597–608).

    6. Graffiti's simple technology and dangerous conditions of production distance them, however, from the electronic media.

    7. In some areas, large and colorful wall murals begin to appear. These are discussed only briefly below.

    8. *Kufic* refers to an angular, geometric style of calligraphy originating in Iraq.

    9. In 1991, the United National Leadership (UNL) issued a directive in a *bayan* (leaflet) that forbade writing graffiti on private property. Israel was collecting too much revenue from fining owners of walls with graffiti on them.

    10. For a detailed discussion of violence as a rite of passage into gendered adulthood see Peteet 1994.

    11. Unlike the Palestinian era in Lebanon (1968–82), in the West Bank resistance was underground. Initially, there were few known leaders or offices and few visible weapons except stones, a natural part of the landscape. In Lebanon, the signs of resistance had been unmistakable: armed young men in khaki, the profusion of weapons on the streets and in homes, the ubiquitous flag in homes and on buildings, and the press and radio stations of the PLO and its various constituent groups.

    12. Sluka notes a similar situation in Northern Ireland where "the writing on the walls" is an essential sign of political struggle (1992:191).

    13. See Rolston 1987 for an examination of the murals and graffiti of the Irish nationalists vis-à-vis state and unionists cultural forms and censorship.

    14. PFLP, Fatah, UNL, Hamas, PCP, and qd are commonly used and recognized acronyms all of which appeared as signatures at the end of graffiti. PFLP stands for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the main opposition group in the PLO.

Fatah, the largest and most powerful faction in the PLO, is an acronym that inverts the initials of the Arabic *harakat tahrir al-filastin* (Movement for the Liberation of Palestine); as a word, *fatah* means "conquest" or "opening." UNL refers to the Unified National Leadership, the underground leadership of the intifada. Hamas is an acronym of *harakat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya;* as a word, *hamas* means zeal, unflinching, steadfast. PCP refers to Palestine Communist Party, and qd stands for the Strike Forces *(quwwat al-darb).*

   15. Hilterman notes that Military Order 101 (1967), Order Regarding Prohibition of Acts of Incitement and Hostile Propaganda, covers offenses such as possession and distribution of illegal materials, raising the Palestinian flag, and membership in organizations deemed illegal. Under Military Order 101, "No publications can be brought in, sold, printed, or kept in someone's possession in the West Bank unless a permit has been obtained for them" (Hilterman 1991:105–106)

   16. In an ethnography of reading in Indonesia, where Muslims recite rather than read the Quran, Baker states, "At the level of social practice, reading involves persuasive forces that do not depend upon the readers' competence to comprehend the text though they influence the subjective evaluations that readers make" (1993:98).

   17. Urban graffiti in the contemporary United States, often the work of inner-city minority youths, register rage as well as associated humorous creativity. Writing graffiti is also illegal in many U.S. cities. A Chicago city ordinance makes it illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to purchase or be in possession of spray paint.

   18. Layoun remarked that Habermas's notion of a public sphere as "an ideal speech situation—in which discursive communication takes place[—]seems an incredible (if arguably theoretically necessary) utopic construct" (1992:422).

   19. E. Long's essay on reading as social practice includes a history and critique of the notion of the solitary reader (1993).

   20. A Reuters dispatch on December 5, 1992, from the Khan Younis refugee camp in the Gaza Strip reported that a clash between Israeli troops and Palestinians in which a child was killed and 13 people wounded began when soldiers surprised a group of five masked men spray painting graffiti.

   21. Military Order 1260 was promulgated in November 1988. Like many Israeli practices of occupation, it is a form of collective punishment. Property owners are held responsible for graffiti on their walls and are obliged to remove it (al-Haq 1989:257–258).

   22. Wall murals in Northern Ireland elicited a similar technological response from the British Army who "paint-bombed" a PLO/IRA mural (Rolston 1987:23)

   23. See Said 1986 for an engaging discussion of the states of being "inside" and "outside."

   24. Graffiti as territorial markers was evident in assertions of turf and its contest among U.S. inner-city gangs.

   25. A Bir Zeit University graduate explained ways of discussing Palestinian political issues before the uprising. She said, "We hardly used the names of factions like Fatah or the Popular Front. You could never be sure who might overhear and to whom you were speaking. We knew who was affiliated with what groups, and we would refer to them as 'the ones who sit in that cafe or at that table.' " With the uprising, factional identifications were not openly circulated in public conversations, but they were certainly no longer so taboo. The graffiti signatures put them in print; some were made into stencils for a quick, standardized signature.

26. In Bourdieu's elaboration on taste, he argues that "taste classifies" and "it classifies the classifiers." "Cultural consumption" and art "are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (1984:6, 7).

27. The term "the street" *(shari')* is used in the occupied territories to refer to popular mass action that takes place in the streets. It also indicates the moods of the population.

28. "Martyr" *(shaheed)* is a commonly used, religious as well as secular term of reference applied by Palestinians to anyone who dies in the course of resisting Israeli occupation or exile.

29. An extended and generalized atmosphere of mourning and appropriate comportment were enforced both by public opinion and local-level leaderships. Young women were criticized by friends and relatives for wearing too much makeup. Neighborhood committees would warn people not to play loud music or dance while friends were visiting. People planning birthday parties or lavish wedding parties would receive anonymous letters or calls warning them to call it off and engage in activities suitable to a time of mourning.

30. See Peteet 1994 for a juxtapositioning of the formation of masculinity and femininity in the processes of transformation and reproduction of structures and relations of domination in the intifada. See also Mitchell 1989:5–6.

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