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Beyond the Wall in Dheisheh Camp: From Local to Transnational Image-Making

Philip Hopper¹

Murals and graffiti on the Israeli separation barrier near Bethlehem have been well documented by journalists and discussed in academic journals. Though the image and texts on the barrier may be “transnational” they are of little consequence to the local population. Murals and graffiti within the nearby Dheisheh Palestinian Refugee Camp consolidate local public opinion, generally about the occupation and dismemberment of the West Bank and specifically about individual martyrs or shaheed. The performative nature of these images goes beyond the act of painting them. Children from the Camp pose with these images, identifying with the abstraction of justice and also the heroic outward-looking martyr. In moments captured in these photographs, they transform their own image and in that way transform themselves. This photo essay displays and explains the images in detail.

All refugee camps are worlds unto themselves and the Dheisheh Palestinian Refugee Camp a few kilometers south of Bethlehem on Hebron Road is no exception. In addition to family dwellings, there are religious and cultural institutions, schools, grocery and butcher shops as well as businesses that specialize in metal fabrication and woodworking. In 1948 the camp was a tent city sponsored by the Red Cross. In the late 1950s the United Nations Relief and Works Authority (UNRWA) began building small, one-story cinder block dwellings. Today, buildings crowd two hillsides around a central depression where the main gate to

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the camp is located. After sixty-four years, the original structures have spread out and grown vertically with the oldest generation in a family often on the ground floor and the youngest on top. The camps, like Dheisheh, are exceptional and “despite harsh conditions, have developed into relatively autonomous social and political spaces” (Meador, 2013).

Murals and graffiti on the Palestinian side of the nearby Israeli separation barrier have been well documented by journalists and conflict tourists. Images on this wall in and around Bethlehem have also been discussed in academic journals. *Concrete Messages: Street Art on the Israeli – Palestinian Separation Barrier* by Krohn and Lagerweij is an example of the former. *The Materiality of Resistance: Israel's Apartheid Wall in an Age of Globalization* by Gould and *The Wall Speaks: Graffiti and Transnational Networks in Palestine* by Toenjes are examples of the latter. These articles explicate the problematic nature of public image-making on a massive concrete wall that is the tool of a repressive state apparatus. Both essays, which respectively appeared in *Social Text* 118 and *Jerusalem Quarterly*, build on the work of Laleh Khalili. Khalili's 2007 book *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* eloquently describes the twinned narratives of heroism and victimhood that inform popular visual discourse in Palestinian refugee camps on the West Bank and elsewhere. This discourse is complex and not simply bifurcated. There are discernable trends, however. Graffiti and murals on the separation barrier tend to be executed by international protest tourists who are then free to leave. Graffiti, murals, and posters within Palestinian enclaves, especially within refugee camps, are usually anchored with Arabic text and speaks in visual symbols of local concern.

In 2014, Rebecca Gould wrote that “such graffiti attest to the interconnectedness of a world in the age of world picture...they also call into question a homogenous narrative of local resistance” (p. 5). Images on the wall in locations like Bethlehem and Abu Dis have very little impact on the daily lives of resident Palestinians except to provide another destination for other tourists, and in that way, potential income. Messages on the wall (if they contain text) are predominantly in English though French, German, Italian and other languages may be encountered. In 2015, Ashley Toenjes (2015) noted the:

complicated interplay between Palestinians and transnational activists. While Palestinians are in control of the messages they paint, it is not always clear who paints which messages on the wall.

Further, it is generally images from transnational activists that circulate in the West” (p. 58).

These image/texts may be “transnational” but they are of little consequence to the local population. As a result of the lack of local participation and also what seems to be competition between protest tourists or protest tourist groups, murals and graffiti on the wall are often painted over, defaced or become a form of, if not actual, advertising.

Images painted on the barrier are “heavily interpolated by the perceived expectations of a globalized public sphere” (Gould 2014, p. 8). Many Palestinians pass through Israeli checkpoints in the wall on a daily basis and to these residents it is more than an impediment; it is a tool of oppression most prefer not to decorate. There are of course exceptions to this trend where the wall is in close proximity to Palestinian properties. However, over a period of nine years, starting in 2006, I found these exceptions to be rare.

Beyond the Wall, Inside the Camp

In 2006, while on a teaching assignment in neighboring Jordan, I secured an invitation through a Non-Governmental Agency named [Open Bethlehem](#) to visit the Dheisheh Palestinian Refugee Camp. I stayed there at a hostel in the [Ibdaa Cultural Center](#), which runs programs for children and young adults from the camp. I have visited Dheisheh every year since then except 2008, often staying at Ibdaa for a few days or a week. Ibdaa in Arabic means “something out of nothing.” During my 2012 -2013 West Bank Fulbright Scholar Award at [Al-Quds University](#), I was based in Ramallah, which meant that longer visits to the camp became possible. Again this was true during 2013-2014 when I remained to teach at the [Al-Quds Bard Honors College](#). Former students of mine are residents of Dheisheh and I maintain regular contact with some of them as they try to negotiate uncertain futures. Some of these former students are also graffiti and mural artists.

Unlike the work of protest tourists on the Israeli separation barrier, the visual, vernacular work on the walls of the camp by local Palestinian artists is consistent in theme. It is consented to by the community and well maintained. If an image is painted over it is rarely defaced and more likely to be a planned replacement. In this way the work within the enclave of the camp serves to consolidate opinion generally about the occupation and dismemberment of the West Bank and specifically about individual martyrs or *shaheed*.

As a general note, someone who is *shaheed* in the Muslim faith has died in battle with enemies of another faith. In Christian narratives, the victims more commonly have been put to death through torture for their beliefs. In Judaism the closest way to render the word martyr is *kadosh me'unekh* which literally means "answering saint." All three Abrahamic religions then approach the issue of faith-related death with variants of closely related though not directly translatable words or phrases. Another linguistic point is that these terms, martyr from the Greek and *shaheed* from the Arabic, have root meanings in the term "witness" (Habib, 2014).

Outsiders to the camp rarely see images that represent the *shaheed* or other symbolic acts of visual resistance to the Israeli occupation. I argue here that these works on refugee camp walls are of much greater importance to local Palestinians as a form of resistance than anything painted on the separation barrier. They grapple with ways to represent Palestinian refugee life without normalizing that experience. They transform Dheisheh Camp by constructing visual space. They also provide a backdrop for transformational human activity.

The performative nature of these images goes beyond the act of painting them. The children identify with the abstraction of justice and also the heroic outward-looking martyr. In Figure #1 a young boy stops rolling a tire down a steep camp street for the benefit of an unknown photographer. The mural text reads: "My weapon comes out and tells me not to stop (or to continue) to fight for our land." The conductor raises his "weapon" a baton—or is it a paintbrush?—above sheet music where the notes are red and

dripping like blood. The ruins of some buildings are in the background. To the right, Handala, the cartoonist [Naj Al-Ali](#)'s barefoot boy, looks into the image with us. Handala is a witness and so too is the boy whose outward gaze serves as a focalizer for the audience of this photograph.



Fig. 1: The boy, Badran Abedrabu whose family lives in Dheisheh, was fourteen at the time this photograph was taken. Like the symbolic figures in the mural behind him, he too is a witness. Dheisheh Camp, Copyright 2009, Philip Hopper.

Figure #2 depicts a memorial mural to a young man named Qussay Al-Afandi. As reported by the [Ma'an News Agency](#) on January 28, 2008, Al-Afandi, age seventeen, was killed by a bullet wound to the stomach sustained during a clash with Israeli Defense Forces in Bethlehem. The mural is based on a family photograph and is framed by an elongated Palestinian flag and a single strand of barbed wire. The text above the image reads simply "The martyr Qussay Soliman Al-Afandi." Beyond the formal two-dimensional

framing devices is the human frame. In this case, a young girl who saw a photographer and actively entered their composition. She stands, looking directly into the camera, echoing the gaze depicted in the painted image as if to say; "I am Qussay and Qussay is me."



Fig. 2: I was photographing the mural of Qussay Al-Afandi, a young man who was shot and killed at a demonstration, when a young girl stepped in to my frame. She waited for me to take a series of photographs and then, before I could ask her name, a woman's voice called out "Baba?" and she disappeared into a nearby doorway. Dheisheh Camp, Copyright 2009, Philip Hopper.

In both images the children's pose is a gesture. The visible identification with the *shaheed*, the martyred dead, is palpable. At the same time, the children are not simply victims. They are also heroic and embody the most complicated discourse regarding local Palestinian commemoration and attitude in general: *sumoud*, or steadfast. To be *sumoud* is, in the words of Lelah Khalili (2007), "at its core the quiet dignity of "hanging on," no matter how battered, assailed and embattled one becomes" (p. 217).

I was lucky enough to meet Raja Shehadeh at the Friends School of Ramallah Meeting House in late 2012 shortly after the publication of his book *Occupation Diaries*. Shehadeh is best known for his 2008 Orwell Prize winning book *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape*.² In response to an audience question regarding his intent to stay in Ramallah he replied, "We're not going anywhere." He then went on to specifically identify as *sumoud*.

Process

The two photographs in the body of this text are both by a loose collective of young people. At the center of this group is a young man named Ayser Al-Saifi who I spoke with during June 2014. Al-Saifi, age twenty-eight, was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Dheisheh Camp. He believes in the murals as "art" and that they make the camp a source of, in his words, "political and social knowledge." This knowledge is transmitted at a young age to all residents of the camp and it is precisely this: that the Israeli occupation is unjust and these are the individuals, the *shaheed* as in Figure #2, who died battling this injustice. Images broadly depicting a condemnation of the occupation are also often of a symbolic nature as in Figure #1. Images of the *shaheed* are specific and direct though they may use some of the same icons and symbols as the purely symbolic images. Residents of the camp, especially children and youth (*shabab* in Arabic), identify with both types of image.

When Al-Saifi's collective paint their images, the walls are first cleaned and prepared with a base of

² The Ramallah Public Library has most of Shehadeh's extensive earlier work in English language editions.

white paint. Then, the murals are executed with a projector of some kind, casting outlines on the walls, which are then painted in black usually with a single additional primary color, red, as in Figures #1 and #2. On occasion, a secondary color (often green) is also added to reflect the red, green, and black construction of the Palestinian flag. The collective production of these images in the evening and at night (because of the nature of projection) is a community performance. The audience comes and goes, often commenting on the proceedings.



Fig. 3: A group of schoolchildren on their way home in Dheisheh Camp pass a mural of Abo Ali Mustafa, who was the Secretary General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. His name in Arabic is written in red paint to the right. To the left a slogan reads, “We came back to resist and fight, not to compromise” attributed to Mustafa by the artist, Ahmed Hmeedat. Copyright 2014, Philip Hopper.

Other artists within the camp paint images and text in a variety of styles. Figure #3 is by an artist named Ahmed Hmeedat who prefers to work alone and paint freehand rather than use stencils or outlines. The boy on the left wanted to stop and pose but the older boy on the right said “*ya’la*” or “let’s go” in Arabic.

A Spontaneous Theatre of the Oppressed

I have many other photographs of children and young adults posing with murals and graffiti in the camp. The act seems to be an act of curiosity and at the same time a spontaneous dialogic invitation.

Though I have no evidence of PTO practice in the camp, these performative acts are, in Boal's words, an example of "members of the community creating their own drama in scenes that reflect their own experience" (Agnew, 2001, p. 39). In the case of these photographs, "their own drama" educates a photographer who is a westerner and profoundly naïve about their children's lives. The choice of theatrical backdrop is not accidental. I did not choose it—the children did by simply stepping in to the frame. The camera's frame is, after all, a metaphor for the proscenium and a conduit for a performance. Everyone, but especially children, seems to know this intuitively.

When strangers enter the camp the children are powerless to stop them, but the children also have power as the subject and object of the camera's gaze, simultaneously looking outward at the photographer and inward, perhaps unconsciously, as they construct an image of themselves. Again, in the words of Boal and exactly in line with the children's spontaneous acts of identification and curiosity: "If I transform my image I transform myself" (Agnew, 2001, p. 63). In these photographs, their curiosity has not yet been changed into Freire's "epistemological curiosity" nor has it yet been "anesthetized" (Lewis, 2012, pp. 27-28). Similar to any resolution to the Israel-Palestine question, these children are complicated, unfinished works. Will the question of statehood resolve itself in their lifetimes? Will their curiosity develop or be put to sleep? As a present-day witness who is impatient with the current occupation, the children's gestures have both a rhetorical and a practical dimension.

The open nature of the child or children seems to invite participation. In the case of my own work, that participation is to spread these uniquely Palestinian responses to the military and militant occupation of their land outward (like the better-known work on the separation barrier) to a transnational audience. The children in these photographs are not discussing a possible solution or outcome—they are performing steadfastness within an ongoing tragedy. Their pose is a gesture of hope and resistance.

The danger is that we, the world community, lose another generation of young Palestinians to hopelessness and apathy. We know the effects of this all too well. As Susan Sontag wrote in *Regarding the*

Pain of Others, "The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia, are full of feeling; the feelings are rage and frustration" (Sontag, 2003, p. 112).

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