



WALL ART AND THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

It is striking ... that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: "you see, here there used to be..." but it can no longer be seen. Demonstratives indicate the invisible identities of the visible: it is the very definition of a place, in fact, that it is composed by a series of displacements and effects among the strata that form it and that it plays on these moving layers.

—Michel de Certeau (108)

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It was difficult to know where to begin this paper because it is both ethnographic and autobiographical—and the autobiographical emerged in the course of the ethnographic research that led to its emergence.¹ In this paper, I take the reader on a walking tour through Wadi Nisnas, Haifa, Israel, where art appears on walls and where walls become art. Using de Certeau, I reflect on the way that these pieces represent the political and cultural histories of Palestinian displacement and belonging. I will also

1. This paper is dedicated to my father, Noman Habib, whose grandparents' home once was in Wadi Nisnas, to Haya Toma who always made her home my own, and to my mother, Amit Habib, whose incredible delight in seeing the photographs that I took on these walks inspired this work. My thanks to Virginia Dominguez, Giorgio Mariani, and Jane Desmond for encouraging me to participate in the exciting IASA panel at Laredo, Texas, where this paper was first presented. To Emily Metzner who so carefully edited my first draft. And especially to Amalia Sa'ar for her critical engagement on the topics of walls, Israel, Palestine—and wonderful companionship as we tried to make sense of Laredo, which never seemed to have a center but whose borders were abundantly clear.

discuss how an imaginary of coexistence emerges in the course of these reflections for those with whom I traveled through these spaces. Writing this essay has taken many twists and turns. It was conceived as a piece that I hoped would speak to an unexpected phenomenon, and especially in these times; it is a piece that asks us to think about how some walls may be used not to keep people out but as spaces that might open up opportunities for discussion and engagement.

We live in a time of great anxiety but I remain convinced that it is in these spaces and on these walls that one may experience the politics of what's possible. It will no doubt sound naïve to those who come to the Israel/Palestine conflict through a discussion about walls—when most can think only of *the* wall that meanders across the Israeli and Palestinian landscapes fracturing communities, securitizing and immobilizing at the same time. It is that wall that rightfully dominates nearly every discussion about walls and borders in Israel (and I have discussed it in the past as well, see Habib, “B’tselem” and “On the matter”) but it’s not those walls that I’m interested in here. It could not go unnoticed that we initially took up this study of walls and borders at a conference in Laredo, Texas, the future site of the US wall that will be built to keep out Central and Latin Americans. But what might the study of walls that are not borders lead to?

I have not been at all satisfied with the direction or parameters that have been set by the so-called *new* debates on borders and migration in Sociology, International Relations and Politics, nor Anthropology for that matter. Too often the focus of disciplinary attention has been at the level of policy—for example, how immigration policies must be reassembled or rewritten in order to better care for those left behind; or on the limits of multiculturalism, alerting us to the rise of ethnonationalist parties or recurring racism; or even detailed descriptions about the rise of populism and the political leaders that promote wall-building and securitization of borders, especially those that are meant to block those in the Global South from entering the Global North.

Perhaps what I have been searching for can only be more fully exposed through art and literature and perhaps this desire expresses my own skepticism about all the limitations of the Global North’s

political and sociological wordsmiths and even their intentions. Would another policy paper really push us to consider the nature of a world whose every official border has been securitized and which, in all senses of the word, *protects* our own very privileged places within it? By literally drawing attention to the creativity of artists, and their meaning-making practices, in an unexpected place where borders may be crossed, I set out to expose a history of displacement, an ongoing political and creative process, and what's possible in Israeli politics, while also recognizing the need for a reflexive and critical understanding of Israeli and Palestinian identities.

I am interested in engaging with wall art as a way of thinking differently and critically about what is always and already represented as a seemingly impossible 21st century political conflict. It has an assortment of recognizable labels: the Israel-Palestine conflict; the Arab-Israeli conflict; the Zionist occupation of Palestine; settler colonialism. I hope to push the work on coexistence along a different trajectory from that taken by international relations scholars and their ilk; away from the political table where 'peace' seems to be interpreted through the frameworks of permanent war (with its attention to border security, markers of identity, and boundaries for exchange, etc.).

One cannot understand the conflict without appreciating the contexts within which it emerged, among them: the decline of two empires, Ottoman and British, and the rise of another, American; the emergence of modernist forms of death and destruction and the organized, institutionalized, bureaucratized, securitized, and militarized responses to them (in the form of such things as identity cards, passports, customs agents, and refugee camps); and with the move to decolonization, and the ascendancy of new nations and states, came the increase in the number of humanitarian organizations needed to support those who were literally if not figuratively out of place (e.g., refugees, migrant workers, etc.).

But there is another reason for putting together these ideas about art and experience. While this paper is concerned with Israel Palestine, and in particular the way one might find to account for the radical dis/placement of Palestinians, it is also engaged with the epistemological panorama in which mass migrations of war-affected populations are occurring across the Middle East

and Europe; and in which Israel's official politics have shifted drastically to the Right on nearly every measure, but particularly on the Israel/Palestine fronts (and here I use the plural). In order to believe in any new futures for Israel/Palestine, we also need to understand how the politics of displacement and belonging have forced a radical shift in our understandings of politics.

That is, I argue that by looking at these walls, experiencing their surroundings, considering the artists whose practices made these expressions of resistance and co-existence possible, we may solve critical analytical problems. How are we to rethink the symbols of nation, state, and identity? How do we refine or redefine contemporary multicultural politics so that they embrace rather than displace? What is it that our nationalist frameworks—the very borders that bound and separate an 'us' from a 'them'—also reproduce as frames of analysis that we so casually adopt in our scholarly discussions about the world's conflicts and political challenges? By sketching out as well as posing these questions—and their answers are myriad and layered, I understand—my approach and my intention is to further the Israeli and Palestinian artists' project of envisaging alternative world orders and concomitant post-national/post-political/post-international relations.

The walls of Wadi Nisnas have, for more than the last decade or so, been spaces for Palestinian, Druze, and Jewish artists to express themselves; to share their perspectives on what Israel and Palestine have become, as well as what's possible. Walking through the neighbourhood, it would be difficult for many to reconcile the degree to which so much of this art was created by Israeli Jewish and Palestinian citizens of the state who would also be identified as among its most politically radical. The art works throughout Wadi Nisnas offer symbolic representations of coexistence, return, and a peaceable future at the same time that they also *disguise* the wide range of activities that are necessary in order to resist nationalist identifications, state enclosures, and models of militarized security, so as to survive the ever present and everyday experiences of violence.

*Walls,
Material and Rhetorical:
Past, Present,
and Future*

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I went on my first walk through the Wadi Nisnas as part of a group of Israel Studies scholars at a conference in 2012. It was an entirely chance opportunity. I had spent much of my time in 2012 conducting research in another part of Israel as well as meeting with family, friends, and colleagues. Many if not most of those with whom I traveled were of Jewish descent and many if not most had traveled to Israel from the US. A couple of us had been born in Israel but were now ensconced in academic positions outside the state. The conference was the event that capped off my visit but, truth be told, I wasn't exactly looking forward to it. I wasn't sure what an Israel Studies conference would offer although I had been encouraged to attend by an Israeli scholar who promised there was going to be room for what he called "other voices" and, fortunately, he turned out to be right about that (but I won't digress).

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In the end, I decided I would make the most of this experience and take up the ethnographic mantle that had led to my first book (Habib, *Israel*). Finding out how Israel was represented to others had been the core of my doctoral and ongoing research. I thought this particular tour of Haifa would offer me the opportunity to listen and to see how Israel would be represented to those interested in Israel from a scholarly (not necessarily personal) perspective.

My excitement lay in the fact that the tour was of Haifa, the city where I had been born and that I most identify with as 'home.' Since I was a child, nearly all of my trips to Israel have included a visit. Prior to the Israel Studies conference, and the tour that I took, I had never heard of the Art Walk, the Museum without Walls, the Festival of Festivals. Nor did I know that my family's home was in the midst of the Wadi Nisnas. My father's family home is situated just a few hundred feet from one of entrances to the Museum without Walls in the Wadi Nisnas.

Let's begin our walk. The photos I have selected to share with you were taken in the years 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2016.



“Rain on Borders” by Francoise Schein, and “Palm Tree” by Dan Zaretsky, at entrance to Beit Hagefen, Haifa. Photo courtesy Jasmin Habib.

One begins the tour with a stop at the Beit Hagefen Community Centre—which promotes coexistence between the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities of Haifa. Most telling is the artwork that one immediately encounters at its entrance: ironworks adorn the entrance symbolizing the crescent, cross, and star of the three faiths.

Further along, on a wall near the entrance is a large tiled mural titled “Rain on Borders” as well as a tall palm tree without the palm fronds. Constructed of iron, it is no longer labeled but its starkness set against the soft limestone and lush gardens cannot be overlooked.

Rather than attempting to draw boundaries around their neighborhood—and to draw themselves in – and one could easily imagine both the desire as well as the fear that might prompt Palestinians living in Israel to do so, boundedness does not appear to be the goal. With art walks bringing new people through their alleyways and gates, one experiences an open air political environment unlike any other in Israel.

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Artist and title unknown, posted at the entrance to Wadi Nisnas. Photo courtesy Jasmin Habib.

Take a look at the humour in the statement of a simple but now faded poster, framed and found (if one searches carefully) near the entrance to the neighbourhood. A rough translation: "With a delay of 30 years we finally got the street asphalt paved, but in the manner of co-existence. Visitors and Jews walk in the asphalt paved street, the neighbourhood residents walk on the unpaved margins. We thank the mayor and the authorities." I interpret this as a statement that speaks to the experience of all of the neighbourhood's residents! Powerful in its very simplicity, this announcement speaks both

to the frustrations of those living their day to day lives in a marginalized setting while also poking fun at the administrative authorities who promote the very production of the walk. Here the author or artist remain unknown.



“Window to a Dream” by Lela Wydra Yanor. Photo courtesy Jasmin Habib.



“Impression” by Natalya Diatlov. Photo courtesy of Jasmin Habib.

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Not surprisingly, perhaps, there are several representations of windows and doors throughout the neighbourhood (see above). Diatolov's piece is particularly interesting for what looks like a window is a window on a wall—the perfect representation of the presence of an absence.



Art as a part of everyday life. Artists and titles unknown, Wadi Nisnas. Photo courtesy Jasmin Habib.



"The Tree of Life," by Haya Toma, quoting Deuteronomy. Photo courtesy Jasmin Habib.



“Family Album,” Haya Toma’s mural depicting her two sons. Photo courtesy Jasmin Habib.

Compare this poster with the poetic elements of a work of sculptor Haya Toma, one that reaches out through sculpture as well as scripture, pointing to the destruction of the olive trees in the West Bank. Toma quotes from Deuteronomy, 20: 19-20: “When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down.” Toma became a fairly well-known Jewish-Israeli sculptor later in her life. She was married to Dr. Emil Toma, a well-known Palestinian member of Israel’s Communist Party. Her work speaks to questions of identity, displacement, and war, as well as what it means to be a family. In another piece, her two sons, one Jewish and the other Jewish and Palestinian are shown together, prompting one to consider how each of their lives is affected by these identities in a space where being Jewish is dominant and freeing, while being both Palestinian and Jewish remains a rarity.

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Boarded windows painted sky blue, reflecting on the possibility that one day, its inhabitants will return to look out upon the sea. Artist and Title Unknown. Photo courtesy Jasmin Habib.

As one walks around this neighbourhood, it is hard to find signs of the violence that displaced its inhabitants in 1948. One finds instead representations of a future. Boarded windows of long-uninhabited buildings are now painted a sky blue, recognized as a hopeful sign. On another wall (not pictured here), you'll find a door without a keyhole, signifying the absence of a way in, or way back for those refugees. And look up and there's a wedding photo, signifying belonging.

This very space and its open alleyways speak to a form of coexistence and a form of welcoming that is not easily found elsewhere in the city or the state. It is not that Jews and Palestinians do not live in mixed cities (as they've been called) such as Haifa, Acco, Jaffa, among others. But it is quite rare for Israeli Jews, Muslims, and Christians to promote coexistence and of course extremely rare for any Jewish Israelis to be exposed to narratives of the return of Palestinians. Artistic renderings that focus on relationships within and between 'national' communities (already recognized as not being spatially determined or defined) allows for the consideration of a multi-cultural future with the resources assembled by understandings of politics that do *not* assume a linear and bounded temporality and spatiality.

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“Eye-Level Monument” by Hassan Khater, Sculptures and mural emerging from the ground up, with dove symbolizing peace, life, and possibility. Photo by Jasmin Habib.

The artists’ and of course also Wadi Nisnas’ residents’ aspirations for peaceful inter-cultural and communal relations counterpose any nationalist sentiments and policies that have historically been imposed by the state. Instead, images of past and future open up a sense of what’s possible.

While the artists’ and the organizers’ of the Museum without Walls approach to politics is muted (there are no political slogans, for example), it is useful for identifying contradictions and for prompting reflection and perhaps also engagement. Just walking through is a form of participation (and there’s more to walking than simply putting one step in front of another, as we learn from de Certeau, among many others). Occupying this space in the everyday is both evidence and symbol of survivance (Vizenor) and resistance.

BEYOND THE WALLS OF WADI NISNAS

The rise of fascist ideologies and the re-emergence of stark nationalisms within Israel (and across Europe and the United

States) doesn't just pose a problem for activists who are immersed or engaged in challenging the State for its vision of the present and future Israel/Palestine. I believe that what seem to be new surges must be thought through or understood as symptomatic of much broader political and social processes that have been emergent since the establishment of the state. Returning to the originary sites of displacement, or what I would call the living ruins, helps us to appreciate not only the military and social destruction that followed the establishment of the new state but what might have been possible as well.

As we entered a new military century, with the rise of a militarized UN system that transformed peacekeeping practices and foci into Orwellian versions of 'responsibility' which took only the form of military interventionism, the region's enduring crises only intensified. An analysis of oil politics, petrodollar financing, or the geopolitical maneuvering that protect ever-expanding corporate interests and their comprador classes rarely make it into the analyses of our televisualized spokespersons and think-tank experts. But it is these very practices that have made the ravages of the wars of the Middle East and the experiences of so many war-affected refugees so disastrously inclusive. If our politicians and humanitarians are guided by militaristic sensibilities, our collective political imaginations will forever be constrained; the boundaries of what are considered political projects will continue to shift ever more to the extreme.

Given the dangers as we already know them, debates and actions about migration should no longer be made on grounds that assume the legitimacy of nation-state arrangements. That is, nationalist arrangements must not be taken as the parameters for those debates. If anything new is to come in response to the *new old fascist nationalist* political ecologies, it is that the very bases on which we can meaningfully resist and engage must shift. The very grounds on which we might build new alliances may mean we also turn back to what might (in 2017 anyway) be considered archaic notions of human security, peacebuilding, recognition, and coexistence.

As one wanders through the narrow streets of Wadi Nisnas, I suggest it is impossible not to appreciate the political significance

of its artistic renditions of displacement and resilience. It is a space that remains autonomous but which symbolizes an outcome of change that is not strictly rendered with reference to the original displacement of the Palestinians. In other words, in their utopian renditions of a future, the artists as a collective suggest there will be more to look forward to with a return to and for Palestinians and Israelis *together*.

As such, and instead of trying to envision Wadi Nisnas literally and figuratively as a ghetto, these residents and the artists rethink a common ground at a time when their own social and political coordinates are constantly in peril. Marking these spaces with art and poetry, and with the rise of a radical Israeli right, this is nothing short of remarkable.

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