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Graffiti in Palestinian Refugee Camps: from palimpsest walls to public space

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Abstract

Walls and graffiti in Palestine's refugee camps tell a border story. As people in camps continue to consider themselves refugees from the 1948 Nakba, and as long as their freedom of movement is either denied or at the least controlled by Israel, the border is embodied by each inhabitant of the camp, who is transborderized (Iglesias-Prieto, 2012). The graffiti movement was born in the camps as part of the resistance during the first Intifada, both as a means of expression for the community, and as a way to build the community through public space. This paper aims to explore the relationship between the particular urban structure of a refugee camp (focusing on Dheisheh and Aïda in Bethlehem) and graffiti. Through an examination of visual elements on the walls of refugee camps today, I propose an understanding of the relationship to public space as one where politics is at play, outside of any institutional structures.

Index terms

Keywords : graffiti, refugee camps, public space, borders, commons

Full text

- ¹ The phenomenon of Palestinian graffiti takes place primarily in the refugee camps of the West Bank, established in 1948 after the *Nakba*, the exodus of the Palestinian population during the Arab-Israeli War. Today, these camps consist of urban neighborhoods appended to or engulfed within cities administered by the Palestinian Authority, but are managed by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

Palestinian Refugees in the Near East). The Palestinian refugee camps of the West Bank are characterized by high population density. The absence of free space and the population density of refugee camps make it impossible to provide a formal space that would then institutionally be defined as public.

2 The Palestinian graffiti movement took off during the 1st Intifada (the first Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation between 1987 and 1993). Graffitiing walls to disseminate messages aiming at encouraging and organizing resistance was a way of exchanging information in a context where the Israeli State controlled the means of communication. To paint during the night was to risk arrest, at a time when the mere use of the Palestinian flag was considered an illegal act. A global movement of civil disobedience including a boycott and a number of demonstrations, the first Intifada is commonly referred to as the “war of stones”. Indeed, the unarmed Palestinian resistance used stones against the Israeli army. This practice is still largely in use and the image of stone throwers has become iconic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Intifada used stones as weapons of defense, but also as weapons of communication (Peteet 1996). The organization of the resistance thus passed largely through messages written, or graffitied, on the walls of Palestinian cities and notably of camps. Today, the context has changed and social media offers simpler and more effective means of communication. Nonetheless, a Facebook status can lead to an arrest on the grounds of inciting violence. For example, the presence of the logo of a Palestinian political party designated as a terrorist organization by the Israeli State (like the PFLP) can be used against the accused in court. While communication tools have evolved, camp walls continue to be covered in messages, portraits, and drawings which are difficult to decipher for non-Arab speakers or for the eye accustomed to a graphic language consisting of bubble letters and colorful lettering.

3 This study is situated within a tradition of geographers who have approached the question of borders from the study of the artistic productions associated with them. A number of artists have indeed taken the border as theme and/or support for artwork (Iglesias-Prieto 2007, Amilhat-Szary and Fourny 2010, Giudice and Giubilaro 2014). In this respect, the study of graffiti at the borders in the Israeli-Palestinian space often takes as object the separation wall (Hanauer 2011, Toenjes 2015). Graffiti on the walls of refugee camps have for their part been discussed across a number of publications prior to the second Intifada (Steinberg and Oliver 1990, Peteet 1996). Beyond proposing an update of these studies, it seems interesting to question the persistence of this phenomenon of which the primary function, tied to the organization of resistance, appears to have lost its relevance.

4 By concentrating on the walls of refugee camps, this study seeks to inscribe itself within a body of work produced in the context of border studies, where the border is defined as a mobile object (Amilhat Szary and Giraut 2015). From this perspective, the walls of Palestinian refugee camps can be apprehended as a means of staging and symbolizing the border. The right of return and restrictions of mobility placed on Palestinians as a result of the occupation define this border. In this space of exception of the camps, which are urban by default and traversed by borders, public space does not seem to exist for lack of physical space. We will develop the sense in which camps can be seen as a space of exception later, as we address the landscape of camps and how it differs and is opposed to that of cities. Regarding the presence of material or digital exchange or meeting places, we must mention a few things. Indeed there are some specific places that are devoted to encounters, such as the Kotchena Café at the main entrance of the camp where people gather to play cards, or the political room on the main street passing in front of the camp where people gather to demonstrate and express their political demands. But those places are all either ruled by a political party, or related to the private sector. For these reasons, we will not include these elements in the analysis, nor than the digital sphere. When talking about the walls of the camp, we refer to private house walls and we will discuss the status of that privacy. Here, we are

situated in isolated border spaces within larger agglomerations, which are in this sense dotted with their own local borders. Ties to the cities in which they are implanted are complex, and the camps are the spaces in which the demands relating to exile are acutely expressed. The objective of this article is to demonstrate how the paintings on camp walls reveal a common space within which a public debate is rendered visible. Through the conception of community expressed in spatial terms, the space studied can lay claim to certain characteristics of public space, notably in communicational terms (Habermas, 1992).

5 This approach is based on fieldwork employing visual methods; what is presented here is the result of the analysis of roughly 100 photographs taken from a collection of 1,300 pictures constituted in collaboration with the photographer Alberto Campi, and following the methods put forward by Gillian Rose. In a chapter entitled “Making Photographs as part of a research project: photo-elicitation, photo-documentation and other uses of photos”, Rose states that “photos are subordinated in some way to the researcher’s interpretation” or “are used because they are seen as excessive to the researcher’s interpretive work.” I will use photographs according to the first statement. More precisely, the collection studied was built in collaboration with Alberto Campi, who produces photo essays for the collective We Report and has previously worked with geographers. We envisioned working together and based on previous research I undertook involving taking a walk as a way of making the landscape/borderscape, I reproduced this method with Alberto Campi and a camp inhabitant. It is through guided walking and random exploration inspired by the situationist’s *dérive* that we created the collection of photographs. Then, I organized the collection according to thematic patterns to identify the recurrence of symbols. What I will present here is a typological essay of what one can find on camp walls; it is a first attempt at analysing and organising the photographic sample we built. While scouting took place in a number of camps in the West Bank, this paper concentrates on the city of Bethlehem and the three camps within it. Unfortunately, the pictures are not geo-located. This is due to the fact that I was unable to obtain a proper map of Dheisheh camp, highlighting the very political nature of this space. Administered by UNRWA, I requested a map from the organization but was instructed to ask the Palestinian Authority instead, as they do not have any kind of map. Moreover the Google Maps application does not provide any information about these spaces: Google simply has not mapped the streets of the camp. This is one reason why I chose to work on the photographic collection with a former inhabitant of Dheisheh, Mohammad Abu Laban, who was able, while translating the Arabic into English, to provide me with locational information. The photographic collection is analyzed in light of interviews conducted with artists, graffitiists, and residents of the refugee camps. I mostly conducted the interviews in English on my own, though sometimes with the kind help of translators. These were semi-structured interviews that I sought to reproduce at least twice with the same interviewees. The interviews were conducted between the first fieldwork I undertook in February 2015 and the most recent, led during the summer of 2016. They mostly took place in the camps, at the interviewees’ homes or in cultural centers or coffee shops.

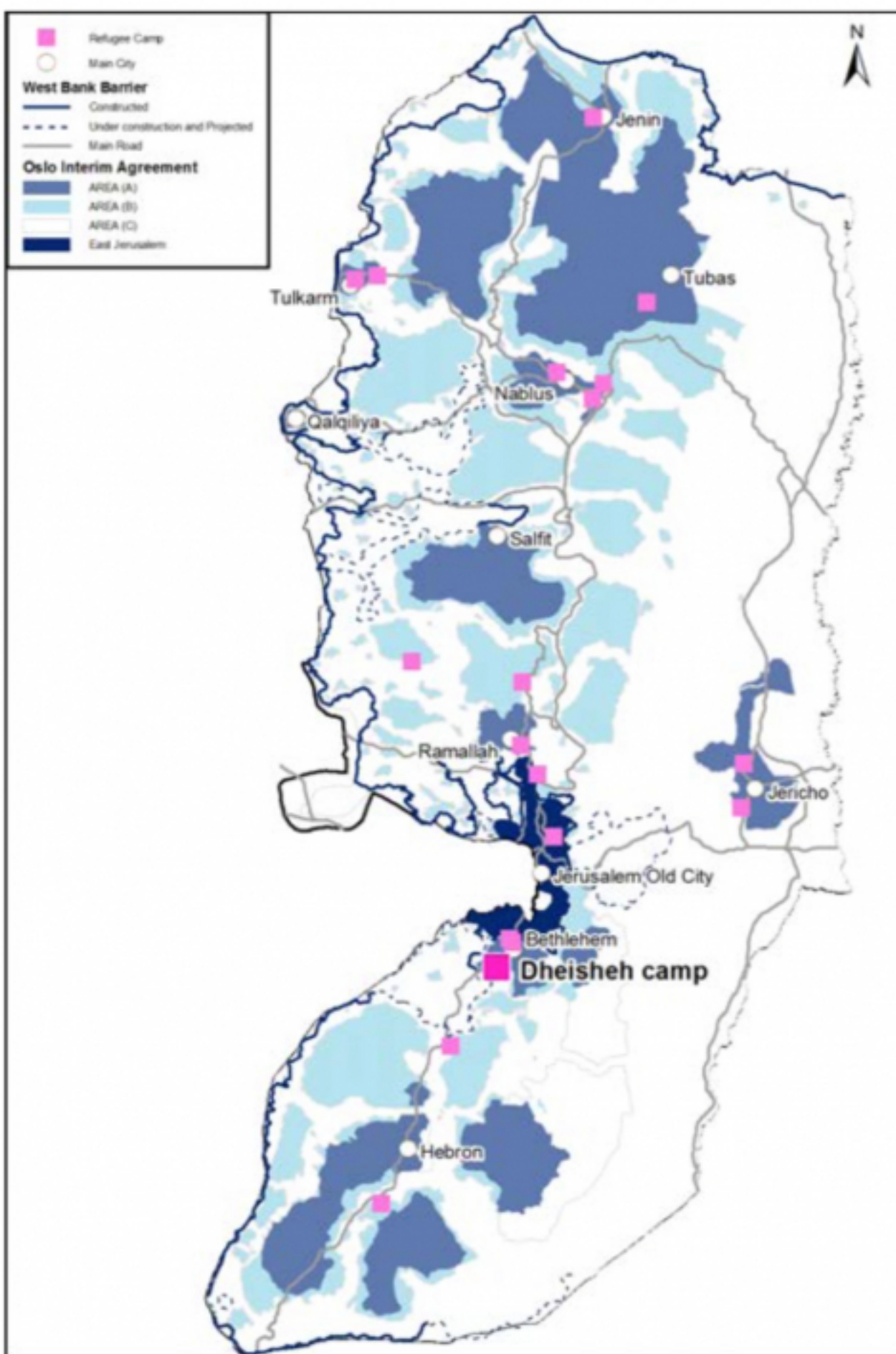
6 First, contextual elements will be provided with an explanation as to how the walls of Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank can be considered palimpsests. We will then turn our focus towards the camp walls themselves, and show how they can be envisioned as mobile borders and border art carriers. Subsequently, the study of the functions of messages present on the walls will take place in three parts: first, the religious, economic, and social messages, followed by the symbols and identity they create. Finally, messages of a political nature will be addressed.

Palestinian refugee camps in the West

Bank: palimpsest walls

- 7 The walls of Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank have the specificity of being covered with paint. Whether it is graffiti, tags, or murals, no wall is left bare. The plethoric production of graphic elements, written or figurative, constitutes a particular urban landscape that is common to Palestinian camps in the West Bank.
- 8 This plethora of painted elements takes place alongside an anarchic urban construction in which there is no pre-established plan. Construction of the camps continues to evolve today in accordance with the growth of families within them; a wedding translates for example into the construction of a new story to the home. Where economic resources permit it, certain families decide to live outside the camp. This opportunity only reaches the most well-off portion of the population. The unclogging of these spaces is necessary with regards to population density, and the movement produces new towns in the periphery of traditional Palestinian cities: such is the case of Doha, a town built across from Dheisheh camp, in the periphery of Bethlehem. The majority of houses are built of cinder blocks and concrete, the latter of which is often left bare, rather than covered with Jerusalem stone commonly used for trimming in Palestinian towns. This information must not be underestimated as it shows how refugees themselves maintain the exceptional status of their neighborhoods, at least visually. By refusing to use the Jerusalem stone, they refuse normalization and bring to light their demands to not be forgotten or diluted into broader Palestinian society.
- 9 The nineteen camps present in the West Bank contain a population of 774,167 inhabitants (UNRWA statistics as of 1 January 2015). These camps were established as of 1948, when the Arab-Israeli War saw the exile of thousands of Palestinians. The tents used at the time were replaced by small constructed units, of which some traces remain today. The high population density is a common denominator of all the camps. The city of Bethlehem, on which this study is based, contains three refugee camps: 'Azza, established in 1950, counts 1,337 inhabitants; Aïda, established in 1950, contains 3,150; and Dheisheh, established in 1949 contains 15,000. The estimated population density of Dheisheh nears 45,000 inhabitants per square kilometer, or roughly twice the population density of Paris (INSEE statistics, 2013). While they are situated in the West Bank, in the urban continuity of cities under the Palestinian Authority, the public services and internal organization of the camps are managed by UNRWA, which does not have a police force, does not administer, and is not the owner of the space of the camp.

Figure 1. Locations of refugee camps in the West Bank



Mapped by UNRWA in Profile Dheisheh Camp – Bethlehem Governorate

10 One of the marking visual elements that can be found in every camp is a mural presenting the list of villages of origin of their inhabitants. In Dheisheh camp, for example, three different murals establish the list of forty-five villages that had to be abandoned by their inhabitants. One of these murals is situated at the entrance of the camp, and contains in its center an excerpt of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, establishing the right of return for refugee populations as fundamental (Figure 2). And yet, nearly seventy years after the *Nakba*, the refugee camps continue to exist and the right of return has not been applied. It is these dozens of years that are visible across the walls of the camps. First, through the presence of the first walls constructed: the shacks UNRWA helped build in the initial years the camps were established. Then, the numerous paintings which make reference to this past and which have covered one another since the end of the 1960s, when the first graffiti appeared on the walls of

Dheisheh. The history of the camps is thereby rendered visible, and the walls of the camps can thus be qualified as palimpsests. They are the memory of the camps, and testify to the evolution of debates within the refugee community.

Figure 2. UN resolution 194 with the symbol of the key above, entrance of Dheisheh camp



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Refugee camp walls as mobile borders and border art carriers

11 First of all, it is necessary to remember that if the refugee camps are not closed today, this has not always been the case. During the Intifada, a fence surrounded Dheisheh camp, and only one door permitted access to it. If there is no longer a fence, we should not forget that there is a legal border that defines the inside and the outside of each camp, and by doing so defines the status of its inhabitants. In this extremely complex context, where people are refugees in their own land, the borders we examine cannot simply be envisioned as linear objects separating two states. The evolution of border studies over the last two decades has provided the conceptual tools we need to face this complexity. After attempts to produce an atlas of international borders, such as that undertaken by Foucher (Foucher, 1986), borders have increasingly been viewed as dynamic processes through the act of debordering/rebordering (Amilhat-Szary, 2006; Popescu, 2011). In a text tasked with the question: “what is a “border”?”, Balibar puts forward some key elements of the border’s contemporary definition. Among other things, borders are no longer located at the margins of space, and they are polysemous (Balibar, 1994). These elements allow for the conception of borders as networks and relational objects. Following this development, researchers have come to envision borders as mobile objects (Amilhat-Szary, Giraut 2015). In a refugee context, borders are even embodied by people, since they have what Iglesias-Prieto calls a transborder condition (Iglesias-Prieto, 2012). This is to say that the border crosses their lives: through their refugee status, people carry the border within their own bodies. This assessment is also relevant when applied to camp walls. Since refugees are still living in camps and are still asking for their rights to be applied, they are symbolically enclosed in those spaces until their demands are met.

12 After envisioning camp walls as borders in a legal and symbolic way, it is necessary to distinguish them from the separation wall. This border, which supposedly keeps Israelis and Palestinians apart, has been unilaterally built by the Israeli State since 2002. It is very often studied in academia, especially when researchers come to work on graffiti, seeking to understand more about the borderity of this landscape element (Toenjes, 2015; Hanauer 2011). Even if Toenjes affirms that “It is simply impossible to know what is painted by local Palestinians and what is painted by transnational activists,” after conducting a first study on the separation wall, I estimate that most of the graffiti and paintings located on the separation wall are made by internationals. Few Palestinians paint on it because this is seen as an act of normalization. Painting on it, whatever the message or the goal, can be seen as accepting the wall’s presence. This is why I decided to focus my study on graphic expression in refugee camps, as Palestinians mostly paint on camp walls. What is visible on those walls is mainly produced by Palestinians, and only a very few paintings have been identified as made by internationals. It is then clearly relevant to look deeper at what is brought forward in the camps. Moreover, this does not mean that Palestinians do not deal with the thematic of borders. To the contrary, as long as we can envision camp walls as a crystallization of a legal and symbolic border, the paintings can fall within the category of border art.

13 A final argument must be put forward envision graffiti in Palestinian refugee camps as a case of border art. Indeed, we have not yet explained the extent to which these paintings can be called “art”. Far from discussing the aesthetics of the paintings, we will only bring to light how the actors of this movement perceive themselves. On the one hand, there are the actors who claim to be artists. According to the social status that they occupy by doing so, they claim that what they produce falls within the category of art. They envision their work in this manner, and are even sometimes called upon by camp inhabitants to make a painting, since they are seen as specialists. On the other hand, there are the actors who do not necessarily call themselves artists, some of whom even reject this label. In any case, how they produce their paintings always takes into consideration how the message they want to deliver is going to be displayed. It reveals a reflection on technique and style that we presume to consider artistic in the sense that it involves an aesthetic perspective. Moreover, in terms of intericonicity, what the second group of actors produce directly refers to what the self-called artists are doing. Despite their own rejection that what they create could be called “art”, their paintings enter into dialogue with artwork. In a context of colonization, some consider art as a tool for resistance, whereas others do not claim to create art, considering their actions to be subsumed within resistance.

14 The following section will examine more closely what these walls express; through an analysis of highly represented symbols and themes it will be possible to understand what is publicized on and by the walls.

Using the walls to disseminate religious, economic, and social messages

15 The walls of camps are spaces where a large quantity of messages is delivered. It is important to question the function of these writings and/or figurative elements. First of all, the presence of religious elements must be noted on the walls of the camps. Drawings of the Al Aqsa mosque can be found with a high regularity. This testifies to an attachment to the third holiest site of Islam. The motif also recalls the occupation, since the majority of Palestinians of the West Bank are not authorized to travel to Jerusalem

in order to pray in this site, unless they obtain a permit delivered by Israeli authorities. Drawing the Al Aqsa mosque, therefore, is to recall the restrictions of mobility to which Palestinians are subjected, whereas this site is located only a dozen kilometers from the city of Bethlehem. As Amanda Dias explains regarding Palestinian artists in Lebanon, the use of the mosque goes beyond painting Islamic symbols since it also represents an aspect of the Palestinian identity (Dias, 2007). The paintings have also taken on the responsibility of an ancient tradition, which consisted of placing palms at the entrance of homes when their inhabitants have returned from pilgrimage to Mecca. This tradition has been modified, with paintings staging the scene of the Kaaba and palms taking its place (Figure 3). Prayers equally accompany these figurative elements, such as “Allah, welcome. May Allah accept your pilgrimage and forgive your sin.” These prayers and benedictions are not only made in view of all, but have a very new temporality since they are fixed on walls across these representations. We can also suppose that it is a question of pride for the family of which a member has accomplished the pilgrimage.

Figure 3. The Kaaba and the symbol of the palms, painted on the wall of a house in Dheisheh



© Alberto Campi, 2016

16 In addition to modifying a religious practice, graffiti can come to occupy a more economic function. On this same photograph (Figure 3), the inscription in red signifies “Second hand shop there is everything you want in it.” The promotion of a boutique situated nearby is being communicated; the advertising and economic function of the inscription is manifest. Here again, we see to what degree the walls of camps are palimpsests. The entanglement of messages, not only temporally but also in their different natures and functions, is flagrant. It creates a sort of mosaic that should be questioned in itself with regards to what it might produce for the audience.

17 Other inscriptions and paintings deliver messages of a sanitary order. Often, they are paintings undertaken by associations within the camps or in the context of UNRWA programs. One mural, for example, depicts a boy disposing of refuse in a trash bin. The objective is to incite respect for the environment of the camp, by throwing trash in designated spaces. They depict respect for the environment on one hand and attention to public health and to the body, on the other: in Dheisheh camp, we can find a mural encouraging people not to smoke. Even if this type of message is not dominant in the camp, it demonstrates a will to use the walls of the camps to pass social messages tied to respect for the environment or public health.

18 Walls are talkative, whether it is a question of prolonging a religious tradition by transforming it, or promoting economic and social elements. These messages are explicit; they function by denotation, and do not call on connotation, or only do so in a very limited way. We will now turn towards the predominant symbols present in the camps and what they produce.

Across symbols: the creation of a grammar of refugee and Palestinian identity

19 A number of paintings in the refugee camps call on symbols that utilize the language of nationhood (Thiesse, 1999). By their recurrence, they reinforce an identity. As said by Massey and Rose who were discussing what could be called public art based on a case study in Milton Keynes: “It might also connect with a role for public art as ‘a collective mirror’, ‘offering each member of society an image of that membership’, while leaving those who are not allowed to be members unseen and unseeing (Lefebvre).” (Massey, Rose 2003). Through the use of nationhood symbols displayed by art, the creation of a refugee community feeling is at stake.

20 First of all, there is the key (Figure 2). This simultaneously symbolic and material element refers to keys that families have conserved to the homes they had to leave upon exile. This object is transmitted from generation to generation, even when villages of origin have since been razed and the doors to be opened have themselves disappeared. At the entrance of Aïda camp, a giant key has been placed on an arch, a highly symbolic object for a population claiming the right to return. It is indeed for this reason that the key is often associated with representation of the land, notably through the symbol of the olive tree. We find, in this regard, a painting representing an olive tree of which the leaves have been replaced by keys in Dheisheh camp. The relationship to land lost is very present, and the olive tree is one of its representations for these rural populations who found refuge in camps that have become urban spaces within the last seventy years. The confiscation of agricultural land continues to be of relevance, notably with the construction of the separation wall, allowing for the appropriation of land by the Israeli State (Alsajdeya, 2016). Effectively, the construction of the separation wall, recognized as illegal by the international community, allows the Israeli State to include or exclude certain portions of territory. For example, Palestinian villages such as Bi’lin are cut off from their agricultural land by the separation wall, while other villages like Kafr Aqab, which lies within the limits of the municipality of Jerusalem, has been cut off from Jerusalem since the construction of the wall. This relationship to the land is thus not only the lot of refugee populations, but also the experience of a large part of Palestinians.

Figure 4. Portrait of the martyr Kifah with the symbols of the map, the keffieh and the palestinian flag



© Alberto Campi, 2016.

21 The use of the map as symbol is equally frequent. The map represents a territory extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. It is always tied to lost land, sometimes explicitly, as testified by the words next to the map in Figure 4, “I am a root that don’t live outside of my land...” Here, the map contains the existential relationship to land. Outside of it, beyond the limits presented by this map, the root dies; there is no life possible. If the map can be seen as a symbol for refugees claiming a right of return, it is also an element used more widely to define a national Palestinian identity. It is for this reason that the map is very often associated with two other symbols that can be qualified as national symbols: the keffiyeh and the flag. Matching the flag and/or keffiyeh with the geographic map is very common. Adding the symbols is a way of symbolically reconquering a lost territory: the maps presented on Figures 4 and 5 correspond to the territories of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Israeli State. The existence of the latter is denied once the Palestinian flag and keffiyeh come to cover the geographic space of the map. The unity presented here is created through the coinciding of a geographic space, the flag – national symbol if there is one –, and the keffiyeh – symbol of Palestinian resistance. It is important to recall that the use of the flag was banned by Israel during the first Intifada. By using symbols that do not directly reference the refugee condition, but which represent more globally the situation of Palestinians, the intent here is the construction of a message of unity. The same goes for the use of symbols tied to the occupation, such as barbed wire or the separation wall. These latter motifs recall the violence of a situation that affects refugees and inhabitants of cities under the Palestinian Authority.

Figure 5. Copy of Handala, a caricature of cartoonist Naji Al Ali



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22 The personification of the Palestinian refugee through Handala, a caricature of cartoonist Naji Al Ali, has the same status (Figure 5). This young character with messy hair is always depicted from behind, with his hands behind his back: he thus looks to Palestine, a land lost. His torn clothing is patched up, symbolizing how he has lost everything. The character first and foremost represents the refugee condition. Nonetheless, the caricatures of Naji Al Ali speak more largely of Palestine. The assassination of the cartoonist in London in 1987 made him a symbol of the resistance, since he died as a consequence of his drawings. The caricature presented in Figure 5, reproduced on one of the walls of Dheisheh camp, prefigures the death of the cartoonist. The words accompanying the drawings are: “From our blood to our blood is the border of the earth. Palestine is our land. Palestine is our land. Palestine is our land. Palestine is our land.” An organic link is established between a physical body, blood, and the relationship to the land. The quaternary iteration “Palestine is our land” acts as an invocation. It is a proclamation, but also a reclamation of land lost. An old bald man often accompanies Handala, this young boy with messy hair, recalling that Palestinians have had a refugee status for dozens of years. Once again what artworks publicized through the reproduction of this cartoon is the refugee status and membership. If Handala symbolizes the Palestinians, it refers more specifically to Palestinian refugees.

23 After having elaborated a rapid grammar of identity symbols that can be found on the walls of refugee camps, it is important to look towards other types of messages, delivered not by symbols but through the textual inscriptions at times associated with figurative elements, oftentimes portraits. As Ismail Nashif explains, “the massive loss of the land’s body was replaced by the political body as a substitute carrying the diverse possible Palestinian bodies” (Nashif, 2015). It is thus a question of changing scale: by passing from national identity symbols to the study of portraits of martyrs, and from the analysis of symbols tied to the definition of Palestine as a social and citizen body to the study of the individual body. But what Nashif help us to understand is that even the individual body can not be considered out of the political sphere. He showed how individual bodies became “tool and arena of resistance”. Where we analyzed a discourse relating to *the political*, this last section will turn towards the staging of *politics* (Mouffe, 2010) on the walls of camps.

Politicizing walls: defining a public

space?

24 The majority of the paintings within the camps take on a function of memory. Indeed, most figurative and textual elements painted on the walls of camps refer to persons, whether heroes, political leaders, or martyrs. Figure 4, for example, depicts Kifah, a 13-year-old Palestinian youth killed by the Israeli army in a confrontation during the second Intifada. His brother painted his portrait near their old residence. Moreover, his name is written on the walls of the camps at least a dozen times (according to the sample of photographs referenced). Numerous times, the names of martyrs are accompanied by the note “We will not forget...” It is therefore a question of maintaining the memory of these individuals who are considered to have given their lives for the cause. Marking the memory of individuals is very common. In certain places in the camps, those where people died as martyrs, small monuments are erected. They are composed of a mural presenting the portrait of the martyr and are accompanied of a small, engraved marble tablet. The murals are there to glorify the memory of the individuals they represent, as well as to ensure they will not be forgotten.

25 While maintaining the memory of martyrs is sometimes tied to political parties, we will concentrate our attention on explicit political elements, whether they accompany the portraits or not. Among the painted elements on walls can be found the logos and/or names of certain political parties. In the sample of photographs studies in Dheisheh camp, for example, we can find the People’s Front (PFLP) inscribed 51 times, and Fatah inscribed 57 times. These two inscriptions are often in competition, in that they are placed in proximity to one another, or one comes to cover the other. Graffiti are used to ensure the visibility of a given political party. Some inscriptions even go as far as to incite support for a particular politician. Political confrontations are thus staged across the inscriptions on walls, which complement the political flyers and posters that would merit a deeper study.

26 The walls of refugee camps are primarily the walls of family homes, the remaining walls being those of NGOs. Inhabitants are not owners of the land on which the houses are built, as it belongs to the Palestinian Authority. In addition, it seems the walls of homes can be considered private spaces. However, the practice of graffiti brings into question this status. Indeed, when an individual or group of individuals come to paint a wall of the camp, they do not necessarily ask the inhabitants of the house for permission, at least any more than they hide to create their murals. Often, residents come out of their homes when the painters are starting their work. A brief discussion then follows during which inhabitants are informed of the mural project. The paintings currently undertaken on the walls of camps cover other murals and graffiti since no wall is left bare. If the inhabitants accept this practice, beyond the fact that all the walls are painted, it is because the space of the camp is considered a common space in which each is free to express themselves and where representations institute the idea of community itself. This is advanced in a publication produced in the context of the *Campus in Campus* project. One of its authors, Mohammad Abu Alia, establishes a comparison between the space of the Dheisheh camp and the space of the city of Doha with the help of keywords he defines. Concerning public space, he says of Doha, “The municipality has some public space. However, the park of Doha, which should theoretically be a public space, is outsourced, privatized and under surveillance.” And of Dheisheh: “NGOs’ spaces and the camp’s streets are public spaces.” What is implied in this differentiated characterization of space is a definition of public space according to the following criteria: the idea of the commons, self-management, and independence.

27 The different functions taken on by murals and graffiti on the walls of the camps reveal a “rendering public” of certain themes and messages. If the use of the walls is of a

public type, it does not seem to suffice in qualifying them as public space. By taking greater interest in the political function taken on by the majority of painted elements, it becomes nonetheless possible to affirm that the walls of camps are spaces where a form of public debate takes place. Public space is therefore to be understood in a philosophical sense, considering that it is a space where political debate spreads and where a debate of opinions constitutive of democracy is produced (Berdoulay, 1997). It is also possible, when considering the walls of camps as a space for expression and debate delivered to the community, to re-characterize the status of these surfaces. The walls of camps, as places where public debate takes place, are public spaces in political and social terms.

28 In conclusion, a high population density, private residences or NGO buildings, and a peripheral position within Palestinian agglomerations characterize the space of Palestinian refugee camps, which seems to prevent in a first instance the creation of public spaces. Nonetheless, through the graffiti and murals on the walls of refugee camps, it has been possible to demonstrate the exercise of a public space in communicational terms. The walls of camps are covered in paintings, murals, and graffiti, making them palimpsests. Religious, economic, social, historical, and political functions taken on by these paintings, publicize identity symbols and a public debate. The positive relationship to the act and object of graffiti can appear surprising, but it reminds us that we are situated in a space of exception where the memory of the use of these inscriptions is still deeply tied to resistance.

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List of illustrations



Title Figure 1. Locations of refugee camps in the West Bank

Credits Mapped by UNRWA in Profile Dheisheh Camp – Bethlehem Governorate

URL <http://journals.openedition.org/articulo/docannexe/image/3399/img-1.jpg>

File image/jpeg, 572k

Title **Figure 2. UN resolution 194 with the symbol of the key above, entrance of Dheisheh camp**



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URL <http://journals.openedition.org/articulo/docannexe/image/3399/img-2.jpg>

File image/jpeg, 388k

Title Figure 3. The Kaaba and the symbol of the palms, painted on the wall of a house in Dheisheh



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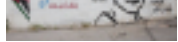
URL <http://journals.openedition.org/articulo/docannexe/image/3399/img-3.jpg>

File image/jpeg, 280k

Title Figure 4. Portrait of the martyr Kifah with the symbols of the map, the keffiyeh and the Palestinian flag



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Title Figure 5. Copy of Handala, a caricature of cartoonist Naji Al Ali



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File image/jpeg, 304k

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