

The Ethics of Representation in Literature, Art, and Journalism
Transnational Responses to the Siege of Beirut,
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Sabra-Shatila Commemorative Mural Project
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The globe shrinks for those who own it; [but] for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers-- Homi Bhabha

What can we say to their families who left with Arafat, trusting in the promises of Reagan, Mitterrand, and Perini, who had assured them that the civilian population of the camps would be safe? How can we explain that we allowed children, old people and women to be massacred, and that we are abandoning their bodies without prayers? How can we tell them that we don't know where they are buried?

--Jean Genet, "Four Hours in Chatila."

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A white van, crammed with 12 people, suitcases of paint and brushes, a driver who finesses this large vehicle through the narrowest of alleys and now gets us as close as possible to Mosque Square in the center of Shatila Refugee camp. I have visited the camp only a handful of times, gingerly picking my way through the filth of the market, breathing through my mouth, following my generous friend very closely, afraid to get separated and lost. There are so many people and so many cars. Walking here requires constant negotiation. I find it impossible to stop my mind from superimposing onto these streets of teeming life, images and fantasies of the massacres from photographs, films and writings. I am haunted.

Trauma, creativity, madness and resilience are at the center of my work as both a psychologist and artist/researcher. My investigations include public and collaborative projects with oppressed communities in the USA including youth who are homeless; people living in the maze of public housing; incarcerated in prisons or coping with mental health issues and institutions. In 2001, the occupation of Palestine¹ became the fulcrum for more than thirty public art projects in West Bank, Gaza and USA that explore issues of borders, exile, international solidarity and decolonization and making connections between seemingly disparate issues.

¹ Break the Silence Media and Arts Project (BTS/MAP), www.breakthesilencearts.org, uses community public art and technology, to create spaces for critical thinking and action. The projects make visible histories and relationships that have been obliterated and forgotten; making connections to national and global issues of social justice, borders, precarity, migrations and decolonization.

Beirut's Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts/Al-Jana² invites me to facilitate a community mural workshop at their summer 'Encounter' in August 2012. I suggest that the workshop be linked to the 30-year anniversary of the 1982 massacres upcoming in September. Incredibly, I am able to raise money for plane fares, stipends, supplies and equipment, for three people from the USA³. We plan for a strong media component and have cameras for ourselves and for youth workshops. Al-Jana has invited ten artists, most of whom are Palestinian refugees, from Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan to participate in the workshop.

Ahlam Laje'a (Refugee Dreams), an after-school cultural center run by Palestinians who live in Shatila, helps us locate possible walls in the camp and will host the project. All the workshop participants send the group examples of their work before we meet. In spite of these efforts to plan ahead I know that we are still facing the challenges posed by thirteen people meeting for the first time to work with the Shatila community to create a memorial and to think together about the unthinkable. In addition, there will be ghosts; mistranslations; miscommunications; gaps in understanding; differences in culture and expectations, not enough time or water; hours without electricity; summer heat and humidity and the emotional toll of witnessing the conditions in the camp.

As many goals for the project as people converge in Shatila. I anticipate that the anniversary of the Shatila massacres will go largely unnoticed in mainstream media in the west, particularly in the USA⁴, juxtaposed with the observances of the horrors of 9.11. I want to pose the question of who decides whose life matters and is therefore grievable in as many spheres as possible. All of the participants will promote the project on Facebook and twitter and the US contingent even includes a social media coordinator, Hilary Hacker. Judith Butler said:

...The point of public mourning is to expand our ideas of what constitutes a livable life, to expand our recognition of those lives that are worth protecting, worth valuing. This is, importantly, not an individual activity, but something that not only happens in public, but has the power to redefine the public sphere.

Al Jana and Ahlam Laje'a's goals include teaching the children and youth of Shatila refugee camp about their community's history, and engaging them in critical reflection and self-expression, thus contributing to leadership development. Apart from the two Palestinians in the group who are from

² Arab Resource Center for Popular Art Al-JANA, www.al-jana.org, works with communities that face marginalization in Lebanon and produces historical and cultural resources by and for children and youth.

³ Funding in part from LeftTilt Foundation and Hoping Foundation.

⁴ Notable exceptions are commemorations in UK press by Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn. Seth Anziska wrote an op-ed in the NYTimes that begins to explore US involvement and responsibility.

Lebanese refugee camps, this will be the first experience of Shatila and life for Palestinians in Lebanese refugee camps for the whole team.

We clamber out of the van and start the meetings. We have drawing workshops with youth who attend Laje'a Center, we meet with Center staff, volunteers, and camp residents. The permissions for the walls are not yet secured, as I had been told, but by the end of the day, all camp organizations and political parties (not always given to agreement), grant approval for 2000 square feet of commemorative mural painting in Mosque Square. Even the mosque agrees, albeit with the stipulation that there be no representations of people on their wall.

Most of the streets of Shatila are very narrow alleys in shadow. The concrete structures are right next to each other and two or three stories tall. Mosque Square opens up suddenly into startling bright sunlight. The three main roads of the camp run through the chaos of the square. There is often a traffic jam as cars, trucks, scooters and pedestrians compete with each other, honking and yelling. Worn electric cables and rubber tubing for water hang in a low tangle throughout the camp and are even denser in the square. Sometimes electric sparks fly from the cables; we are told that people are occasionally electrocuted. Trucks get caught in these tangles and everyone around jumps in to help free them. It is here that we spend our days struggling for space and control over the throngs of children who are very excited by our presence, have nothing to do with their time, and are eager to paint the walls, their faces, everything.

For the first week, as early in the morning as possible, we drive about an hour from Brumana, a beautiful wealthy town in the mountains. We are all staying in Brumana for the duration of Al-Jana's Encounter, a weeklong global gathering held each summer, that includes artists, performers and activists. The comparison between Brumana and Shatila is shocking. Acknowledging the ease with which we are able to physically traverse one universe to the other adds an additional layer to the mind-bending discrepancies in the conditions in which people are living.

Shatila is one of the few refugee camps that are easy to enter, in that a permit is not required. Most of the refugee camps require a permit from the Lebanese military, and these are not given easily, if at all. One of the workshop members, Husam Rahil, is from Ein el Hilweh Refugee camp, to the south of Beirut. A wall, topped with barbed wire and guard towers, surrounds this camp. Husam would not be able to invite us to his home for tea, for example, without a permit. Husam is the lead artist for a six-foot by eight-foot section that is entirely filled with a face and flowing hair depicted from the nose up. The iris of one eye shows an image of Al Aqsa Mosque, and in the other, is the Dome of the Rock. Both these holy sites are in Jerusalem, which, due to travel restrictions, the vast majority of Palestinian refugees, including Rahil, will never see.

The hair of Husam Rahil's portrait leads into the wall US workshop member Fred Alvarado organizes. Alvarado is a Chilean/Guatemalan American, and an interdisciplinary artist and community muralist. He likes to

say that ending colonialism starts with his own mind. For the mural, Alvarado uses images from the many books that Al-Jana has produced of children's artwork. He includes clouds, a flying dove/hand with an eye in the center and an aerial view of children sitting in a circle. In the center of the circle, is a geometric shape reminiscent of Palestinian embroidery patterns. A line of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish connects these sections of the mural and translates from the Arabic:

Have you seen an outcast... his eyes two stars- his hands baskets of basil, his chest a pillow of the stars and moon and his hair a swing for the wind and flowers.

The next images on the wall are several five-foot prickly cactus leaves in flower. 'Sabr' is the word in Arabic for 'cactus' and also for 'patience'. The roots of the sabr grow so deep and wide that they did not die when more than 500 Palestinian towns were razed in the formation of Israel. The sabr has slowly grown back, showing where the destroyed villages once stood and patiently awaiting the return.

The image of the cactus leads to a field depicting the Palestinian national flower, red anemone. Tania Nabulsi, a Palestinian refugee living in Bedawi Camp, directs this section. She adds traditional Palestinian embroidery patterns to the red flower petals. The first time I visited Palestine in 1989, I met an artist named Adnan Zubedi, who told me that he was arrested and imprisoned for painting this flower. Zubedi told me that many artists had been imprisoned on charges that they were painting the colors of the outlawed Palestinian flag. The Israeli soldiers would say: 'You can paint, but don't use red, green, white or black.' Zubedi said when he was released from jail he painted thousands of red anemones. Nabulsi said:

People resist in any way they can. Some people paint. We succeeded with the camp children who painted with us.

Nidal El Khairy, a Palestinian refugee living in Jordan, is a graphic artist and political satirist. The Palestinian flowers run into Nidal's 6 x 5 foot depiction of a wheelbarrow guided by two strong arms. Wheelbarrows and carts traverse the square constantly, often stopping to make a sale. The wheel in El Khairy's painting is designed with a flower motif that echoes the embroidery on Nabulsi's flowers. The body of the wheel barrow is graced with El Khairy's signature sea of humanity; small faces piled on top of each other that fill up the space like packed sardines. We are all connected and affect each other. Here, Mahmoud Darwish's phrase may be translated as:

To hand of stone and thyme this anthem.

Nidal says:

What I would like to tell the world about the massacre is that people think it is historic, an event that took place and now it is over. {But} it is not over – the people who suffered through this massacre are continually reminded every day that this happened to them-- through nightmares, through flashbacks through poverty-- it is still there and people need to be reminded that this massacre is one of the darkest moments in Palestinian history.

An accomplished artist and portraitist, 28 -year-old Mohammad El Dirri is a Palestinian refugee⁵ who is outside Gaza, where he was born and raised, for the first time. Applying for permits to leave Gaza is a surreal experience, and usually an exercise in futility and humiliation. To reach Lebanon, Mohammad must travel a circuitous route through Egypt and Jordan. He is stopped at each border for periods of several days to more than a week; fear looming that he will be turned back altogether. When he finally arrives in Beirut, and sits with us in the restaurant where we take refuge each evening, he breaks down sobbing. Later that evening, people line up to pay their respects, bringing him cups of tea. He has managed to arrive from Gaza -- it is a miracle. Later that week, Mohammad remarks:

This is the first time I feel this -- it is a very nice feeling, especially as it is the first time I am out of Gaza, but in a very similar place to where I live - I feel like I am between my people and my family. I feel people here are my family- I feel like I am in Palestine – not outside- it is a great feeling...I feel proud because I am painting about Palestine, outside of Palestine...This week I spent in Lebanon I felt physically free- I could go and come, I was not afraid of aircrafts but psychologically I still feel that I am under siege, in a war, under occupation, stateless, still not free.

El Dirri is the author of two walls in Shatila painted with spray paint. The first depicts a soldier wrapped in a kufiyeh who defiantly holds an oud instead of a gun. The line of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish on this wall reads :

Friends - leave us one wall for a washing line and one night for songs.

The second wall El Dirri paints is an 8-foot high portrait of Rachel Corrie, an American activist killed by an Israeli military bulldozer during a nonviolent protest in Rafah, Gaza Strip, in 2003. On August 28th 2012, the Corrie family's suit was dismissed in an Israeli civil court, absolving the military and eliciting international condemnation and a record number of tweets. The objective of the lawsuit was to illustrate, in Rachel's mother's words

⁵ Palestinian refugees are the only refugees in the world to exist solely under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and therefore outside the realm of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in their host countries. [Palestinian refugees] are excluded from the international system for the protection of refugees. Under this system many Palestinian refugees find themselves in a perpetual limbo without any affiliation to a nation with attendant rights. Ironically, like the Lebanese law barring [Palestinian refugees] from owning property in Lebanon, the Convention and the Statute do not explicitly exclude Palestinian refugees; rather, they exclude anyone who receives assistance from other organs of the United Nations.

“the need for accountability for thousands of lives lost, or indelibly injured, by [Israel’s] occupation.... we hope it will underscore the fact that so many Palestinian families, harmed as deeply as ours or more, cannot [gain] access Israeli courts.” In the month Rachel was killed, B’tselem reports that 48 Gazans were killed by Israeli military.⁶

Mohammad El Dirri has painted portraits of Rachel in Gaza and now wants to make a connection to the martyrs of Shatila. (A martyr is defined as someone who has been killed, in any way, in the context of occupation). The people in Shatila are intensely interested in Rachel Corrie’s story, in part because she is a foreigner who risked her life when she did not have to.

A jumbled vista of pastel-colored buildings extends off into the horizon and rounds the corner of a building on the square. Several clouds, each with a scene of Jerusalem, transcend the mural’s metropolis. The perspective of the painting puts the viewer equidistant from both the city and the clouds. The principal artists for this section are Ala Albaba, a Palestinian refugee and interdisciplinary artist living in Ramallah; and Omar Abu Stayteh, from Jbeil, who works as a computer designer and engineer. (The technology industry is one of the few in Lebanon in which Palestinians are permitted to work.) The Mahmoud Darwish quotation on this wall is:

How many times will you keep traveling and to what dream?

Ammar Abo Bakr, is an Egyptian artist who painted murals prolifically in Cairo during the revolution. He engages very directly with the environment, putting existent elements to use. Abo Bakr paints portraits of Shatila youths; one portrait is modeled after Handala, the cartoon figure that famed cartoonist Naji Al-Ali used as his signature on each cartoon. Naji Al-Ali grew up in Ein el Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon after he was expelled from Palestine as a child in 1948. Abo Bakr’s ‘Handala’ is a naturalistic portrait of a young man wearing a kufiyeh gazing up at the moon. He is depicted in Handala’s typical stance, facing away from the viewer, hands clasped in back. Two more portraits of youths face each other on either side of an alley off the square. Abo Bakr retains years of posters overlaid on one another, layers of old paint and grime, making

⁶ List of 48 Gazans killed in March, 2003 <http://old.btselem.org/statistics/english/Casualties> Muhammad Farouq Tafesh,16; Iyad Khalil Fiad,31; Ihab Sa'adi Mahmoud Jerisi,21; Wa'el Jum'ah Hamdan Barhum, 25; Nabil Muhammad a-Dawidar, 40; Iyad Bashir Abu Zariq,18; Muhammad Tawfiq Salameh Abu Yusef,17; Omar Hassan Darwish,16; Ilham Ziad Hassan el-'Asar,4; Sa'id a-Tawil, 27; Ibrahim al-'Athmani,22; Muhammad Ragheb a-S'afin,34; Ramez Mansur Hassan a-Sadudi,19; Shadi Harb 'Abdallah Kharis,23; Alaa Muhammad el-Kahlut,22; Muhammad 'Issa 'Abd al-Hadi,17; Ahmad Ahmad a-Najar,43; Awad Ahmad Abdallah a-Sifi,52; Emad Abu Gharqud,19; Muhammad Iyash,19; Ibrahim Maqadmeh,53; Khaled Jum'ah,29; Alaa Shukri,24; Abd a-Rahman al-Amudi,27; Mufid Sa'id a-Da'ifi,23; Imad Amin Fanuna,20; Alaa Muhammad Kerem,20; Yusef 'Ali Mansur,20; Tareq Maher Ahmad a-Najar,13; Muhsen 'Awad Abu Odeh,30; Muhammad Shahadeh al-Biari,61; Ihab Ahmad Nabhan,23; al-Mansi 'Abd Rabo Saleh al-Mabhut,84; Muhammad Hassan Mahmoud a-Zinati,36; Abdallah al-Ashab,75; Aziza Dib al-Qeyser,55; Rami Yusef Awad,21; Maher Khamis a-Rifa'i,24; Muhammad 'Ali al-Babli,22; Walid 'Abd Allah al-Khatib,24; Mu'atasem Hamed Aqel,24; Tareq Sami 'Aqel Abu Matar,14; Fadi Fa'iz Muhammad al-Huajri,16; Nuh Sabri Abd al-Hamid al-Maqadmeh,33; Saleh Thiab Abu 'Atias,44; Mahmoud Mar'l 'Abd al-Hadi,25; Abd Rabo Dib Abd Rabo el-'Asar,50; Abd a-Rahman Mustafa Muhammad Jadallah,9.

the portraits appear like palimpsests, layered back and forth through time. He remarks:

... every day when I come to Shatila I am shocked in my heart. I am very sad, very sad. I don't know why -- I always try to be happy and make jokes with people but it becomes so hard to have this feeling every day... But also this feeling, it gives you power. How to use this difficult feeling?

Hamza Abu Ayyash was born in Lebanon to Palestinian refugees. The family was forced to leave in 1982. He is now an artist living in Ramallah in the West Bank. Abu Ayyash paints a graphic horse that fills up an entire section of wall with such tension that it seems about to burst through; an echo of his exuberant personality. Abu Ayyash says:

*When I first entered the camp, it shook me.
I got a flashback of the massacres of Shatila; then after a while,
I felt somehow like I am home, as if my extended family is in the camp.*

Mustafa Al Khatib is a Palestinian refugee also living in Ramallah. He was the principal artist on a large section of the mural painted in bright yellows and greens that refer to the sun, to cacti, trees and traditional Palestinian designs and architecture. One day, I enter the camp from a different street than usual and perceive the mural's visual impact from a new angle. Way down the main street, which is wider than most, I can see the bright colors of Al Khatib's work leaping out. The contrast with the surrounding darkness and drabness is breathtaking. Again, from the poetry of Darwish:

Sabra and Shatila - two roads crossing over a corpse. Sabra and Shatila- the identity of our era till infinity.

The design for the Mosque wall features a waterfall that spills from the window that overlooks the mosque graves. There are clouds, a tree with roots that along with the waterfall, metamorphoses into lines that run along the bottom of the walls, echoing the wires and cables above. 1500 victims of massacres are buried under concrete on the first floor of the mosque. Due to the vagaries of occupation, the bodies could not be moved from the camp to the actual graveyard. Tania Nabulsi describes it thus:

We adorned the center of the camp and Shatila Mosque wall, which was built at the tomb of the second massacre of Sabra and Shatila. We wanted to spread hope for the thirtieth anniversary of the Sabra-Shatila massacre, and draw strength from the camp Martyrs' victory and from their stories. They did not die in vain.

Towards the end of our time in Shatila, while I am painting the waterfall on the mosque wall, an ancient woman dressed in rags frantically tries to get my attention. With some help I am able to understand that she is telling me her son is buried in the mosque. She cries and moans; her face increasingly contorted

with pain. She repeats the same phrase over and over in Arabic. She goes inside the mosque graveyard and tries to get my attention through the window. Everyone knows her and tries to shoo her away so she won't bother me, but she doesn't give up trying to communicate, becoming more and more agitated. I do not speak Arabic and in desperation I start to say in English: 'I know, I understand, I know, I know.' She calms down and stares off into the distance and then, with a start, begins again: "Listen, listen, Khalid is in here...See? See?" A young man from the camp goes in and quietly talks to her, puts his arm around her shoulders and gently guides her outside and down the street.

People, ranging from curious and friendly to desperate, talk to us all day long. They have painting suggestions and offer us many cups of coffee and tea. They tell us the story of their lives and how it is they have wound up in this refugee camp. I hear many stories of Palestinian refugees who were successful professionals in other countries when suddenly, in their middle years, they were deported with no where else to go.

Hilary Hacker held media workshops with Shatila youths at Ahlam Laje'a center. They interviewed each other and other Shatila residents about their lives and dreams. The youths posed the question: How is your life in Shatila? Among the responses, here is a selection:

...One of my wishes is to be able to put water in the fridge for it to get cold, or drink cold water, we just don't have that. The water is very polluted.. the well's water is just very salty...Then the youth, most of them they don't have work ...most of them are just sitting around...

Our sufferance is tragic...we're doomed as people...on all aspects, electricity, water... the trash gets as high as buildings, it's as bad as it could get ...

I want to be an artist so I can make life here better.

A young woman stops me in the Square. She is very excited and says:

Did you paint this? I swear (wallah), it is nice. You made our camp nice. The camp is nice now...beautiful...really beautiful, beautiful. Beautiful.

Ellen Siegal is a Jewish American nurse who worked in the UN-run Gaza Hospital in Sabra refugee camp during the massacre in 1982. She went on to testify before the Kahan Commission of Inquiry in Jerusalem regarding the massacres. Ms. Siegal returns to Sabra and Shatila every year to participate in the memorial observances. She said:

Those living in the immediate vicinity seem like their spirits have been lifted by the lovely pictures, vibrant colors. I believe it gives those in the camp a sense of living in a normal place.

What is 'normal' in the context of Shatila? I think what feels more 'normal' is what is acknowledged by the project's very existence. First and foremost, that people actually live in Shatila, where three decades later, there has been no accountability or historical reckoning for the massacre committed. The mural publicly -- and necessarily obliquely -- manifests the memory of the massacres and the courage, aspiration and resilience of the survivors and their descendents. It recognizes both the potential as well as the necessity for witnessing, commemoration and redress. To that end, since August 2012, there have been 2500 views of project photos and blog entries on Flickr, Facebook and Tumblr; with plans to continue to gather contextual data and promote the project and relationships using multi-platform media and exhibitions in US galleries.⁷ The ultimate goal is for the project to contribute to organizing, education and activism in the USA. Avery Gordon writes:

...haunting is an emergent state: the ghost arises, carrying the signs and portents of a repression in the past or the present that's no longer working. The ghost demands your attention. The present wavers. Something will happen. What will happen of course, is not given in advance, but something must be done. I think this emergent state is also the critical analytic moment.

The Sabra-Shatila Commemorative Murals are both a recognition of and a response to the phenomena of such forms of haunting, to the unquiet ghosts of the slaughtered; demanding attention, analysis and justice.

On our last day we have an opening celebration for the murals that have transformed Mosque Square. The youth of Ahlam Laje'a center dance and recite poetry bringing many to tears. Several Arab newspapers and TV stations interview us and I have an opportunity to talk about the project in a global context, including the idea that art can touch hearts and minds and therein people may be transformed, making new connections, opening space for discourse and seeing things in different ways.

I film the receding main street of Shatila from the back window of the white van. I am filled with bittersweet sadness to be leaving and, at the same time, excited to be soon returning to my world; knowing that this project is ongoing and that I will be back. All this, however, is framed with a sharp awareness that I exercise my right to move freely about the world, as very few people here are able to do. I have a sense of accomplishment, even though it is yet to be fully determined what it is, exactly, that we have accomplished and what fruit it might bear, what meaning it may have. The sun is setting, and the street is bathed in radiant 'magic hour' light. The fruit and vegetables on the

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Tumblr: <http://btsmap.tumblr.com/>

Flickr: <http://bit.ly/T1eiR1>

The youth media/journalism project is ongoing, currently lead by Ahmed Alyadi, a young artist from a neighboring refugee camp. Exhibits in 2013 in Washington, DC and San Francisco.

stands we pass by resemble shimmering jewels, and light sparkles off the windows. I think of Jean Genet's references to beauty in "Four Hours in Shatila":

...let us mean by beauty a laughing insolence goaded by past unhappiness, systems and men responsible for unhappiness and shame, above all a laughing insolence which realizes that, freed of shame, growth is easy.

Indeed, there is something like beauty present.