

# **Painting walls and sculpting barbed wire:**

## Art in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon

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Modern Middle Eastern Studies

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January 2018

## **Content**

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Introduction	<b>3</b>
Chapter 1 - Walls and the enclosure of Palestinians in Lebanon	<b>15</b>
Chapter 2 - Street art in Palestinian refugee camps	<b>26</b>
Chapter 3 - Palestinian art and cultural resistance	<b>37</b>
Conclusion	<b>48</b>
Bibliography	<b>51</b>

## Introduction

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*What did you do with the walls?  
I gave them back to the rocks.  
And what did you do with the ceiling?  
I turned it into a saddle.  
And your chain?  
I turned it into a pencil.*

Mahmoud Darwish, *The Prison Cell*

Walls can be built to provide shelter and security, to divide and separate an area, or to enclose it. In the poem *The Prison Cell*, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish depicts walls as symbols of incarceration. The subject of the poem overcomes the restrictions and confinement of a prison cell with the power of his imagination, returning walls “back to the rocks” and turning his chains into pencils.

In 2016, the Lebanese government started building a wall around the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh, near Sidon, which was described as a “security wall” designed to “control passage” by the Lebanese government.<sup>1</sup> The wall enclosed the camp’s 60 000 Palestinians residents. When I arrived in Lebanon in June 2017, the wall surrounding Ain al-Hilweh was nearly completed. In my first visits to Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut, I saw walls as a central element in the refugee camps, separating Palestinians from the rest of Lebanon and standing as symbols of their confinement and predicament. Prevented from expanding the camps’ area by Lebanese authorities, Palestinians can only build up-wards, so walls are so high and streets so narrow that some areas in the refugee camps are cast in darkness. Despite the dimness of the streets, colours burst through the walls where graffiti and murals have been painted, since many Palestinians use the walls of refugee camps as canvas to express themselves. Like the subject in Darwish’s poem who overcomes walls and turns chains into pencils, Palestinian artists transform the walls of refugee camps by painting on them.

In *Landscapes of Hope and Despair* Julie Peteet (2005) describes Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon as sites of incarceration, poverty and marginalisation, but at the same time as places of remarkable creativity. Writing over a decade before the wall started to be constructed around Ain el-Hilweh, Peteet compared the separation wall in the West Bank to the confining borders

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<sup>1</sup> Obeid (2017)

of refugee camps in Lebanon. She argued that both are part of the same policy of closure which uses checkpoints, permit systems, and walls to contain and control Palestinians (2005, p. 221). As Peteet points out, Palestinian refugee camps are both places of despair and hope, confinement and creativity, oppression and resistance. The camps' walls might enclose and marginalise their residents, but they can also serve as canvases on which to express national and political claims through street art and graffiti. In this thesis I will examine the way Palestinians residing in refugee camps in Lebanon transform their space through art. By focusing on walls as elements of confinement and on the artists who paint them, I will argue that street art is a way of symbolically appropriating space in refugee camps and a form of resistance.

In a thought-provoking article on over-researched communities, Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock (2013) examine the damaging effects of over-research in the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila in Beirut, which they consider the best-known and most widely researched Palestinian community. The authors discuss concerns with the relations between research and expectations of social change, arguing that after several decades of researching poverty and marginalisation in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, researchers have failed to bring enough positive changes or benefits to the residents. Sukarieh and Tannock give voice to Palestinian refugees in Shatila who say they are tired of research intrusion, the exploitation of their misery and the inequality of relations between privileged international researchers and the camp's inhabitants. Tired of seeing Shatila being represented negatively, Khalil, a young man interviewed by the authors asks: "Why don't people write about the talents in the camps?" (2013, p. 505)

As Sukarieh and Tannock point out, abundant research has been produced on Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Most representations of Palestinian refugees across the media and some academic works have either focused on their predicament as stateless refugees, often reducing them to humanitarian subjects<sup>2</sup>, or on the demands for the right of return in a way that depicts them as purely political actors<sup>3</sup>. In scholarly works, Palestinian refugees have been discussed as victims of dispossession and persecution, as peasants turned into revolutionaries during the armed resistance of the 1970s who were later forgotten by Palestinian leadership, and as an oppressed stateless minority with no rights in their country of residence.<sup>4</sup> However, they have rarely been discussed as artists. As Khalil, the young Palestinian man quoted in the article points out, little has been written about the "talents" in the camps. In this thesis I aim to address Khalil's question by discussing Palestinian art and creativity in Palestinian refugee camps. By focusing on the agency and resourcefulness of Palestinian artists, my main concern is to go

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<sup>2</sup> Roberts (2010), for instance, adopts a humanitarian rather than political perspective, arguing that most works on Palestinians have failed to identify the refugee problem as a humanitarian issue for historical and political reasons.

<sup>3</sup> See Diana Allan's (2013) critique of nationalist discourses.

<sup>4</sup> See Sayigh (1979); Peteet (2005); Khalili (2007); Roberts (2010); Allan (2013).

beyond representations that reduce Palestinians to victims<sup>5</sup>, and nationalist narratives that focus exclusively on politics. A critical analysis of both humanitarian discourses of misery and essentialist nationalist narratives will guide my discussion of art produced by Palestinian refugees.

With colours bursting through the walls of the camps' alleyways, street art is the most visible and widespread form of artistic creativity in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. While keeping in mind the issues of positionality, power relations and structural inequality pointed out by Sukarieh and Tannock, I will analyse what is on the walls of the two main Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut, Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh, and Beddawi in the north of Tripoli. I will argue that street art in the camps is a claim for space, a way of fighting against the effacement of Palestinians and a form of cultural defiance. In addition to painting and writing on walls, talented Palestinians use materials from the camps like barbed wire and corrugated metal to make sculptures and crafts. I will explore the meanings of graffiti, murals and sculptures in Palestinian refugee camps, and argue that by using walls, barbed wire and corrugated metal from the camps Palestinians are appropriating symbols of oppression and confinement and transforming them into art. I will problematize both narratives of victimhood that rob Palestinians of their agency and romanticized discourses of resistance by looking at conflicting narratives and contested national symbols in Palestinian art.

While on one hand the need to look critically at nationalist discourses and to refrain from reducing everything to politics is a central concern in my analysis, on the other hand the aim of this study is to highlight Palestinian forms of agency which resist constructions of the Palestinian refugee as a humanitarian subject disconnected from his political and historical context. Taking up the challenge posed by Khalil's criticism of researchers' reduction of Palestinian refugees to victims and his call for someone to write about the camps' talents, I will focus on Palestinian artistic creativity in Shatila, Burj al-Barajneh and Beddawi. This study aims at analysing the role of art in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. What is on the walls of refugee camps and what is the meaning of graffiti and paintings found there? What kind of claims is made on the walls? What does street art say about Palestinian identity in Lebanon? How are paintings and sculptures forms of reclaiming space and agency? How is Palestinian art in refugee camps a form of protest and resistance?

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<sup>5</sup> See Petee's (2005, p. 82) critique of depictions of Palestinian refugees as "universal humanitarian subjects" disconnected from their political and historical context, which she considers to be a form of marginalising Palestinian voices and agency.

## Historical Context

In 1948, the establishment of the state of Israel in the former British Mandate of Palestine caused the displacement of close to 750 000 Palestinians, who were expelled or fled their homes and became refugees in neighbouring countries.<sup>6</sup> The expulsion and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians is known as the *nakba*, catastrophe, which marks the destruction of Palestinian villages and towns to establish Jewish settlements and the erasure of Palestinian presence and culture from the lands that became part of the state of Israel. About 500 000 refugees settled in the West Bank and Gaza, while most of the remaining refugees settled in neighbouring Arab countries.<sup>7</sup> According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), about 110 000 Palestinian refugees ended up in Lebanon.

Although the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 194 in 1948 at the end of the Arab-Israeli war, which determined that the Palestinian refugees displaced after the establishment of Israel should be able to return to their homes or be compensated for the loss of their property, the Palestinian right of return guaranteed by international law was never fulfilled. Many of those who were expelled in 1948 and their descendants remained stateless refugees. Today, Palestinians are one of the world's largest and longest established groups of refugees living under the precarious legal status of statelessness. UNRWA estimates that there are around five million Palestinian refugees, with about a third of them living in recognised Palestinian refugee camps across the Arab world. In Lebanon, UNRWA counts about 450 000 registered Palestinian, of which around 53 per cent are estimated to live in the twelve recognised Palestinian refugee camps across the country. However, a census conducted by the Lebanese Central Administration of Statistics in partnership with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics counted 174 422 Palestinians living in Lebanon's official refugee camps and informal Palestinian communities in 2017.<sup>8</sup> The discrepancy in the numbers may be explained by the fact that UNRWA is unable to track the number of refugees who leave Lebanon. With no prospect of being allowed to return to their lands – now part of the state of Israel – Palestinians are also prevented from permanently settling in Lebanon, where they have no rights to citizenship and restricted access to employment, healthcare and education.

The first years of Palestinian exile in Lebanon were marked by high rates of mortality, poverty and political insecurity. Apart from being exposed to disease, hunger and unsanitary conditions,

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<sup>6</sup> Attacks on Palestinian villages and towns, expulsions and intimidation by Jewish forces led to the mass exodus of Palestinians. The fear of atrocities committed by Israelis and the belief that they would soon be able to return motivated many Palestinians to flee. See Morris (1987) and Masalha (2012).

<sup>7</sup> The numbers of Palestinian refugees vary widely, but UNRWA's figure of 750 000 is usually the most cited.

<sup>8</sup> According to PCB (2017), the numbers of non-Palestinian residents have increased in recent years. In Shatila, for instance, results show that Syrian refugees outnumbered Palestinians.

refugees had to endure the trauma of having lost their homes, property and livelihood.<sup>9</sup> Regional and class divisions in Palestinian society were reproduced in exile in Lebanon, with upper and middle classes staying in cities, and the vast majority of peasants conscribed to refugee camps (Sayigh 1979, p. 109). Although some Palestinians received Lebanese citizenship, the vast majority of the population remained stateless, living segregated from Lebanese society in refugee camps spread across Lebanon.

The establishment of UNRWA in 1949 aimed at responding to the refugees' urgent humanitarian needs which were seen as international responsibility. By cooperating with host governments in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, UNRWA gave Palestinians a unique status separate from other refugee groups. As the only refugee group to have their own UN agency, Palestinians did not fall under the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and were thus subjected to different laws and levels of assistance and protection.

The permanent settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon is one of the most contentious issues, not only because of the Lebanese government's refusal to accept their integration due mostly to its sectarian implications, but also because naturalisation is represented as a betrayal of the Palestinian national cause, a threat to national identity and a negation of the right of return.<sup>10</sup> The restrictions imposed on Palestinians were therefore justified by the Lebanese government with the arguments that because most Palestinians are Sunni Muslims, their naturalisation would disrupt Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance<sup>11</sup>; underlining that the refugee problem is Israel's responsibility and representing the restrictions as ways of preserving the Palestinian right of return.

After being established by UNRWA, Palestinian refugee camps were controlled by the Lebanese authorities, with tightened control in the 1960s under the surveillance of the *Deuxième Bureau* which suppressed all political activities<sup>12</sup>. The defeat of Arab armies by Israeli forces in the 1967 war, disillusion with pan-Arabism, and the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) contributed to a stronger mobilisation in the camps. With the disastrous defeat of Arab armies and the awareness that Arab regimes were using the Palestinian cause for local ambitions grew a tendency towards independent Palestinian action, and refugee camps became spaces of recruitment and mobilisation in a struggle for Palestinian rights.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sayigh (1979) describes how most Palestinians lived under conditions of poverty and exploitation during their first decades in Lebanon, sometimes working sixteen hours a day to earn miserable daily wages.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Khashan's (1994) discussion of resettlement in Lebanon.

<sup>11</sup> According to Sayigh (1979, p. 156) it was a problem especially for Maronites who wanted to maintain their political hegemony.

<sup>12</sup> See Sayigh's (1994, p. 68-71) description of the *Deuxième Bureau*, the repressive intelligence service built by president Fouad Chehab to control political opposition.

<sup>13</sup> See Sayigh's (1979) analysis of the mobilisation in refugee camps that turned peasants into revolutionaries.

Clashes between the Lebanese army and the *fedayeen*,<sup>14</sup> together with a growing pressure from Arab regimes to allow guerrilla action in Lebanon, led to the signing of the Cairo Agreement in November 1969, which recognised Palestinian institutional presence in Lebanon and gave the PLO the right to control the administration of the refugee camps and establish popular committees. After being expelled from Jordan in 1970, Palestinian leaders and political organisations moved to Beirut where they established their offices. Beirut became the centre of Palestinian revolutionary movements and refugees the core of a nationalist movement demanding Palestinian rights. The period between 1969 and 1972 became known as the *Thawra*, 'Revolution', as dispossessed Palestinian peasants became revolutionaries, *fedayeen* influenced by anti-colonial Third-World movements committed to armed struggle (Sayigh 1979).

However, resentment over Palestinian armed insurgence and intrusion into Lebanese politics grew with the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, since the presence of Palestinian militias in the south resulted in Israeli retaliatory attacks and the collective punishment of civilians. Skirmishes between different factions during the civil war from the late 1970s to 1990 devastated the Palestinian refugee camps. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 forced the PLO to leave Beirut and represented a severe blow to the Palestinian armed movement. The Wars of the Camps that followed, between Fatah and the opposition backed by Syria, caused further destruction of infrastructure and a high number of casualties in the refugee camps.<sup>15</sup> With the end of the civil war, pressure on Palestinians to leave Lebanon increased as they were often blamed for starting the civil war and increasingly marginalised. After the departure of the PLO in 1982, Lebanon stopped being the centre of Palestinian resistance. As a result, Palestinian refugees became increasingly vulnerable, suffering from the loss of the PLO as a source of employment and protection.

The camps became places of unemployment and poverty, and educational and health services worsened. The start of the first *intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza marked a shift in the PLO, which started to focus uniquely on the Occupied Territories, further marginalising Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. In the Madrid Conference of 1991 and the Oslo Agreements of 1993, refugees and their right of return were excluded from negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians,<sup>16</sup> leaving refugees in Lebanon with an uncertain future and an increasingly precarious situation that has remained so until the present.

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<sup>14</sup> In Arabic the one who sacrifices his life for a cause, the term used to refer to Palestinian fighters.

<sup>15</sup> In 1982, large numbers of Palestinians and Lebanese Shia were massacred in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by members of the Phalange militia with the assistance of Israeli armed forces.

<sup>16</sup> Sayigh (1995) describes the deteriorating situation of Palestinian refugees, examining the bias in aid allocation that privileges Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and the declining support for refugees in Lebanon.



## Method

During the summer of 2017 I conducted fieldwork in the refugee camps of Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and in Beddawi in the north of Tripoli.<sup>17</sup> According to UNRWA, the number of registered Palestinian refugees exceeds 9 000 in Shatila, 17 000 in Burj al-Barajneh and 16 500 in Beddawi. Streets in Palestinian refugee camps are narrow and dim, since Palestinians are restricted from expanding the camps' area and can only build upwards. As a result, refugee camps are severely overcrowded, a problem that has been aggravated since the start of the Syrian war when thousands of those fleeing war in Syria started settling in the camps, among them Palestinians who have become refugees for a second time.

In my visits to the camps I photographed and collected the graffiti and paintings I found on the walls of the three refugee camps. In my long meanderings around the streets and alleyways of the camps I tried to gather a comprehensive collection of the different types of street art found on the walls. It is important to keep in mind the challenges of documenting street art, as it is not always possible to determine who made the works, when and why<sup>18</sup>. The ephemeral nature of street art is perhaps the biggest challenge for researchers, since what can be found on the walls in a determined period might quickly be erased or replaced. Nevertheless, I believe the data I collected is representative of the different types of street art found in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, despite the short period spent there. Street art's ephemerality makes it inevitable that paintings on the walls will eventually fade away or be replaced. Like palimpsests, the walls of refugee camps are meant to be constantly re-used.

Primary sources also include interviews conducted in Beirut and Tripoli with artists, activists, NGO workers, UNRWA employees and camp residents. In these interviews, artists and camp residents offered interpretations of the artwork, the importance of certain themes and the meaning of different paintings. The interviews served a further purpose: they provided me with information about who commissioned and paid for determined murals and paintings, and more knowledge of the social and political contexts behind the artworks. In addition to the interviews conducted in Beirut and Tripoli, participant observation and informal conversations with camp residents, artists and activists also provided me with valuable insights on the importance and meanings of Palestinian art in the camps and the challenges faced by artists. Keeping in mind that a given image can be read in multiple ways, I will analyse and interpret the murals I found on the walls of Shatila, Burj al-Barajneh and Beddawi, and reflect on the meanings ascribed by artists and camp residents.

Gruber and Haugbolle's (2013) methodology of visual analysis in the modern Middle East was an important source in examining the materials gathered. The authors' focus on the ability of

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<sup>17</sup> My research was also used for a journalistic photo story. See Vidal (2017).

<sup>18</sup> See Ryan's (2017, p.9) discussion of the challenges of documenting and analysing street art.

images to speak of collective experiences though public art was particularly relevant, especially in their analysis of the work of Naji al-Ali, the Palestinian cartoonist who grew up in one of Lebanon's refugee camps, and who remains extremely influential in Palestinian art production. Handala, Naji al-Ali's most famous creation, could be found on the walls of every refugee camp I visited.

In my analysis of graffiti and murals I will use the broadest and most inclusive definition of street art, since I am more concerned with examining its content and symbolic meaning than with discussing what qualifies as art. Although the aesthetic value of works by Palestinian artists is embedded in my discussion, it is an aspect that I will not be able to engage with more deeply due to the limited space of this thesis and my choice of paying more attention to content and social and political significance. The term street art will thus be used to broadly refer to creative interventions on the walls of Palestinian refugee camps, whenever walls are used as canvas to make public statements and as a means of self-expression.

My analysis takes in a wide variety of actors ranging from accomplished artists who have won prizes and exhibited their works in galleries around the world to groups of grassroots activists who use graffiti to make public claims in the refugee camps. Although little may seem to connect the established artist exhibiting his work in art galleries in Paris, the youth defacing walls with political messages, or the old artisan carving maps of Palestine on pieces of used wood in his front yard in a refugee camp in Beirut, I will argue that what they all share in common is the experience of living in Palestinian camps in Lebanon as stateless refugees who use their creativity and talent to produce works aimed at fighting against their effacement. Without overlooking individual experiences and the diverse forms of identification among these actors<sup>19</sup>, I will argue that what connects them is the appropriation of materials from refugee camps to voice claims for justice and dignity and to fight against the historical erasure of Palestinian refugees.

### **Street art and the symbolic appropriation of space**

*The ideal city would involve the obsolescence of space (...) it would be the ephemeral city, the perpetual oeuvre of the inhabitants, themselves mobile and mobilized for and by this oeuvre.*

Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*

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<sup>19</sup> See Allan's (2013) critique of nationalist narratives and ideological frameworks used to portray refugees as a collective political group with little focus on subjectivities and individual lived experience.

In Henri Lefebvre's *Writings on Cities*, the French philosopher defends urban policies that seek to promote justice, inclusion and participation in urban spaces. Lefebvre theorises the "right to the city", which he conceives as a right to appropriate space and to allow residents to participate in the production of the city. According to Lefebvre, the right to appropriate the city is not just a right to live, work and have access to urban resources, but also the right to symbolically appropriate the city by being able to represent it and characterize it, which includes being able to participate in decision-making and to have access to the city's centre instead of being confined to the margins.<sup>20</sup>

In this thesis, Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city will be used to examine street art in Palestinian refugee camps. His conception of the right to symbolically appropriate urban space and participate in its production will inform my discussion of the actions of Palestinian artists, who appropriate walls and disposed materials from refugee camps to subvert dominant discourses, demand rights and to fight against the silencing of Palestinian voices. Street art offers the possibility of increasing participation in urban spaces, since its accessibility enables the inclusion of a multiplicity of voices, as anyone with a can of spray, a paintbrush or even a pen can participate in the production of space by writing or painting the walls of the camps. This study will examine what is on the walls of Palestinian refugee camps, whose voices are represented, what claims are made and the disputes over space and meaning present in street art. Like collective palimpsests, walls are continuously re-used, with graffiti and murals being constantly painted and replaced.

Another central element in Lefebvre's work is the concept of the city as an "oeuvre", a continuous collective work of art that should involve the participation of the city's residents. For Lefebvre, art plays an important role in transforming urban space: the right to the city is conceived as a right to participate in the transformation of the "ephemeral city" which is seen as a creative process and the "perpetual oeuvre of its inhabitants" (1996, p. 173). I will examine the paintings and sculptures produced in Palestinians refugee camps and argue they are creative appropriations of space as theorised by Lefebvre.

Like Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau (1984) also focuses on spatial practices and discusses examples of the appropriation of urban space. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he examines how subordinate groups appropriate resources and claim space in their everyday practices. De Certeau analyses how common people make use of what is available by adapting it and transforming it according to their own interests and needs. The resourceful way of using existing materials is described by de Certeau as "bricolage", a concept I will deploy to examine the transformations carried out by Palestinian artists in refugee camps. By appropriating the walls that enclose them and making use of the camps' existing materials, Palestinian artists

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<sup>20</sup> See Purcell (2014)

demonstrate the ability to circumvent constraints described by de Certeau as “bricolage”, the ability to utilise available materials and adapt them according to need. Similarly, Asef Bayat (2013) examines how urban subalterns redefine meaning and appropriate resources in Middle Eastern contexts through “direct actions in the very zones of exclusion” (2013, p. 5). Bayat’s focus on how marginalised and dispossessed groups voice dissent and defy power in their daily practices will inform my analysis of Palestinian street art. I will draw on de Certeau and Bayat’s notions of how common people assert their presence and interests by circumventing constraints to examine Palestinian artists’ ability to transform and imagine new uses for the materials and resources available in Palestinian refugee camps.

### **Palestinian art as resistance**

The Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata (2009) examines how Beirut became an artistic centre for Palestinians, especially in the late 1960s and 1970s, when it was the place where they could “re-member” Palestine through art and where “defiant memory” could be born. Boullata discusses the work of several Palestinian artists who were based in Beirut, arguing that although they all had different social and cultural backgrounds, their work was an attempt to articulate memory and make sense of the Palestinian experience of loss, displacement and exile. Drawing on Boullata’s notion of “defiant memory”, I will argue that Palestinian artists in refugee camps in Lebanon also use art as a way of remembering Palestine and affirming Palestinian identity. Although I will critically analyse the conception of refugee camps as “mnemonic communities held together by a shared memory” of dispossession<sup>21</sup>, Boullata’s notion of “defiant memory” is one of the central concepts in my analysis.

Similar ideas are brought up by Edward Said in *Culture and Resistance*. Said (2003, p. 159) argues that culture is a way of “fighting against extinction and obliteration” and a form of “memory against effacement”.<sup>22</sup> This thesis will show that these notions are very present in the refugee camps of Lebanon, where many Palestinian artists and activists expressed the concern with using art to preserve memory against historical erasure and to give meaning to their experience. Drawing on Susan Seymour’s (2006) definition of resistance, this study will argue that Palestinian artists consciously fight for the acknowledgement of Palestinian history and against the silencing of Palestinian voices. I will discuss Palestinian cultural resistance as a form of counter-hegemonic cultural production which plays a fundamental role in affirming Palestinian rights.

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<sup>21</sup> See Allan (2013, p.4).

<sup>22</sup> Among the innumerable examples of threats to a Palestinian identity, Israeli prime-minister Golda Meir’s 1969 statement that Palestinians “do not exist” is one of the most famous ones. See Whitlam (1996) Masalha (2012) and Khalili (2007) on the silencing and erasure of Palestinian voices and history.

## **Structure**

The first chapter will explore the symbolism of walls as elements of enclosure, confinement and marginalisation of Palestinians in Lebanon, and argue that street art is a form of claiming back space and taking control of meaning in the refugee camps. As an example, I will discuss the struggles over control of what should be on the camps' walls by focusing on the actions of local youth in Burj al-Barajneh against UNRWA's policies of neutrality. Drawing on Lefevre's notion of the right to the city as a right to symbolic appropriation, it will be argued that groups of young activists deface "neutral" murals on UN facilities as a way of claiming back space and taking control of narratives in the camp.

The second chapter will examine the different themes and meanings of street art in the Palestinian refugee camps of Burj al-Barajneh, Shatila and Beddawi by looking at a selection of paintings on the walls of the camps. It will discuss how street art relates to nationalist narratives and Palestinian political claims, and examine the conflict between nationalist rhetoric and local material concerns in the refugee camps. I will demonstrate that although murals mostly reproduce "official" nationalist discourses which emphasize the right of return, they also reflect local concerns with improving life and services in the camps and demands for rights in Lebanon.

The third and final chapter will look more broadly at Palestinian art in Lebanon; consider the politics of street art and how they are related to theories of cultural resistance. I will argue that Palestinian art in Lebanon is used as a form of "defiant memory", a way of fighting against the effacement of Palestinian refugees which in this way acts as a form of cultural resistance. The chapter will discuss the transformation of barbed wire corrugated metal and other disposed materials from the camp into art. Like the walls built to confine Palestinian refugees, the barbed wire is representative of the oppression and restrictions imposed on Palestinians and the act of turning it into art a form of defiance and cultural resistance.



Vidal, Marta. 2017 *"Calligraffiti"* mural painted on the walls of Burj al-Barajneh. Beirut : Middle East Eye

## Chapter 1 - Walls and the enclosure of Palestinians in Lebanon

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*These forgotten ones, disconnected from the social fabric, these outcasts deprived of work and equal rights, are at the same time expected to applaud their oppression because it provides them with the blessings of memory. (...)*

*You are not going there, and you don't belong here. Between these two negations, this generation was born defending the spirit's bodily vessel, onto which they fasten the fragrance of the country they have never known. (...)*

*And this very sky is a cage.*

Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish uses the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to reflect on exile, history and memory. Under the historical background of the siege of Beirut, the themes of incarceration and confinement are a constant presence in this work. Darwish describes the Palestinians living in Lebanon as marginalised “outcasts” who are expected to “applaud their oppression” and confinement because it is presented as a way of maintaining the memory of Palestine alive.

Descriptions of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon draw extensively on the imagery of prisons, cages and fences to represent the confinement and plight of Palestinian refugees. Whereas Mahmoud Darwish's sky is a cage, Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali's landscapes are filled with barbed wire, prison bars and walls.<sup>23</sup> Al-Ali fled Palestine with his family in 1948, and spent part of his youth in Ain al-Hilweh, a refugee camp in the south of Lebanon. Although he did not live to witness the construction of the first fences in the West Bank in 1994 and the separation wall (he was assassinated in 1987), nor the wall recently built around Ain al-Hilweh where he grew up, his work often depicts walls as symbols of the confinement and repression of Palestinians. In one of his cartoons, al-Ali depicts the flagpoles of Arab countries as jail bars trapping a Palestinian, thus representing the predicament of statelessness and the enclosure of Palestinian refugees. Perhaps not by chance, the first and most visible flag in his cartoon is the flag of Lebanon, which can be read as a statement against the particularly harsh restrictions imposed by the Lebanese government on Palestinian refugees.

Al-Ali grew up amidst hardship in Ain al-Hilweh and soon became politically conscious, participating in demonstrations that landed him in jail. While spending time behind bars, al-Ali

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<sup>23</sup> See the collection *A Child in Palestine* (2009).

started drawing on the walls of his prison cell. He later began decorating the walls of his refugee camp with political drawings.<sup>24</sup> Like Naji al-Ali, many Palestinians use the walls of refugee camps as canvas to express themselves. Street art is a way of asserting the right to a voice and demand visibility in public space. In this chapter, I will explore the symbolism of walls as elements of confinement and marginalisation, and examine the meaning of the appropriation of walls through graffiti and paintings in Palestinian refugee camps. It will be argued that street art is a form of claiming back space and take control of meaning in the refugee camps.

### **Walls as symbols of confinement**

As we have seen, restrictions imposed by the Lebanese government seriously curtail Palestinian refugees' rights to work, own property, move freely, access education and even build homes. The establishment of camps for Palestinian refugees in the late 1940s and 1950s facilitated the control of refugees by Lebanese authorities, but also allowed the maintenance of a distinctive Palestinian identity in Lebanon, related to what Darwish bitterly calls the "blessings of memory". Over the years, tents and huts were gradually replaced by concrete shelters not unlike urban slums, as – despite the Lebanese government's refusal to accept the naturalisation of Palestinians and the Palestinian community's emphasis on the right of return – camps developed from temporary settlements to permanent but precarious homes.<sup>25</sup> Although Palestinian camps around Lebanon remain separate spaces with a distinctive Palestinian identity, they became extensions of poor neighbourhoods in the urban margins.

My first impressions of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon were dominated by the overbearing presence of walls and the notion of confinement. Prevented from expanding the camps by the Lebanese authorities, Palestinians can only build upwards, which means that walls are so high and streets so narrow that many areas of the camps are cast into darkness. While navigating the dim alleys and narrow streets one struggles to avoid seeing walls as central elements in the refugee camps, separating Palestinians from the rest of Lebanon and standing as symbols of their confinement and predicament.

Representations of Palestinian refugee camps as places of poverty, devastation, oppression and victimhood are recurrent across scholarly works and media. However, it is necessary to critically examine these representations. I am motivated by the need to address problematic narratives of victimhood that reduce Palestinians to subjects of humanitarian assistance and deprive them of their agency. The issues of agency and positionality brought up by Sukarieh

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<sup>24</sup> See al-Ali (2009). The introduction written by cartoonist Joe Sacco describes how al-Ali grew up between refugee camps and prisons and began drawing political cartoons on the walls before finding employment in newspapers.

<sup>25</sup> The Palestinian right of return was enshrined in international law but never applied, despite the UN resolution 194 calling for the repatriation of those displaced in 1948.



and Tannock (2012) are a major concern in this thesis. I do not wish to (and cannot) speak for Palestinians<sup>26</sup>, but rather seek to analyse forms of artistic creativity in Palestinian refugee camps. My aim is to respond to the challenge brought up by a young man interviewed by Sukarieh and Tannock (2012, p. 505), who asked: “Why don’t people write about the talents in the camps?”

An important part of the effort to problematize representations of camps that reduce Palestinian refugees to victims and deny them their agency is to acknowledge the issue of positionality: the impressions of a privileged foreign visitor are very different and distant from the way residents perceive their lived space. Unsatisfied with the description I wrote for a journalistic piece on Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, a Palestinian artist from Beddawi in the north of Tripoli, asked me not to “make the camps look bad”. She drew my attention to the fact that the camps’ narrow streets are lovingly taken care of by its residents, and that despite problems with overcrowding, unemployment and inadequate shelters, camps are also places of attachment, affection and belonging:

We love these dim alleys, our childhood was built on these alleys... we had so much fun. The dim alleys are lovely places for kids to play... it is not a bad thing. We love it as it is. The camp is beautiful to us. The alleys mean a lot to us.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, a young Palestinian artist who guided me through the streets of Burj al-Barajneh talked about the camp with affection, in a way that challenged representations of the camps exclusively as places of misery. As we walked along Burj al-Barajneh’s alleyways he greeted his friends and acquaintances, proudly showing me his artwork on the walls of the camp and emphasizing the creativity and resourcefulness of the camps’ residents. He told me that if he had the power, he would make the camp “the best place in the world”. He also added that the camp was the only place where he could feel comfortable and “free”. It is not uncommon for Palestinians who are able to afford renting apartments outside the camps to choose to stay in the refugee camp, where they feel part of the community. Although refugee camps in Lebanon are affected by severe unemployment, overcrowding, and are isolated from Lebanon’s central areas, they also protect its residents, giving them a feeling of safety and a sense of community. They are seen as familiar spaces by many Palestinians, often in opposition to an unwelcoming or even threatening exterior. The notion of confinement is not, therefore, contradictory to the feelings of protection and attachment expressed by residents. A place of enclosure can also be perceived as a safe space where different forms of attachment and senses of belonging are forged.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Spivak (1987) problematizes the act of speaking for the subaltern, and her reflections on the power relations of representing the “other” are a central concern in my analysis.

<sup>27</sup> Personal correspondence, September 2017.

<sup>28</sup> See Peteet (2005) and Latif (2010) on camps as places of attachment and belonging.

Staying in the refugee camps is also seen by some as a way of resisting assimilation and resettlement. For many Palestinians, refugee camps are a symbol of their historic dispossession, and refusing to leave the camp is seen as a way of asserting the right of return.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Palestinian refugees are not only enclosed in camps, but also imprisoned by legal restrictions, the status of statelessness and the inability to either return to their homeland or settle permanently in Lebanon. The symbolism of walls therefore refers not only to the spatial enclosure of refugee camps, but also more broadly to the restrictions imposed on refugees and the impasse of statelessness.

The discrimination faced by Palestinians in Lebanon, which increased after the end of the civil war in 1990, has thus made refugee camps spaces of duality: the camps are not only places of spatial confinement, but also of protection and affirmation of identity. As sites established by the loss and trauma of the *nakba*, they have become spaces in which Palestinians produce new social relations and forge a sense of national identity and belonging.<sup>30</sup> As Peteet (2005) points out, camps are sites of incarceration, poverty and marginalisation, but also of remarkable creativity and resistance. In the late 1960s, refugee camps in Lebanon became spaces of recruitment and mobilisation for revolutionary movements. With the departure of the PLO in 1982 and the end of the Lebanese civil war, however, Lebanon stopped being the centre of Palestinian resistance and pressure on Palestinians to leave Lebanon increased.<sup>31</sup> Attempts to isolate and marginalise the Palestinian community became part of Lebanese governmental policies aimed at avoiding the permanent settlement of Palestinians.

The legal discrimination of Palestinian refugees after the 1990s goes hand in hand with their spatial confinement. Considered stateless foreigners by the Lebanese government, Palestinians are prevented from owning property outside the refugee camps and barred from employment in over 30 professions<sup>32</sup>. Their legal exclusion from social, political and economic life in Lebanon resulted in an increasing incarceration in camps and separation from Lebanese society after the 1990s.<sup>33</sup> The deployment of repressive spatial tactics to isolate Palestinians is examined by Peteet (2005, p. 221), who compares the construction of the separation wall in the West Bank to the confining borders of refugee camps in Lebanon, arguing that both are part of the same policy of closure which uses checkpoints, permit systems, and walls to contain and control Palestinians. With the recent construction of a wall around Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in the

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<sup>29</sup> See Allen's (2013, p. 172-174) discussion of the idea that to leave the camp is to undermine the right of return.

<sup>30</sup> See Peteet's (2005, p. 95-100) examination of how Palestinian identity was shaped in the refugee camps in Lebanon.

<sup>31</sup> Sayigh (1994, p.323) collects the oral history of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, analysing how the departure of the PLO affected refugee camps, Shatila in particular.

<sup>32</sup> Although in 2010 the Lebanese parliament approved amendments granting more work rights to Palestinian refugees, they were not yet put into legal effect. According to UNRWA, refugees remain barred from practicing over 30 syndicated professions.

<sup>33</sup> The post-war settlement in the early 1990s marginalised Palestinians, who were often blamed for starting the Lebanese civil war.

south of Lebanon, described as a “security wall” designed to “control passage” by the Lebanese government, Petecet’s comparison is more timely and relevant than ever.<sup>34</sup>

### **“No neutralisation of Palestine”: subverting humanitarian discourses**

Home to more than 17 000 registered Palestinian refugees, Burj al-Barajneh is the most populous Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut. Streets and alleyways are dim yet colours burst off the walls where murals have been painted by Palestinian artists. One can find a wide variety of graffiti and murals painted on the walls of the camp: religious paintings celebrating the *Hajj*, the holy pilgrimage, with images of the Kaaba or the Great Mosque of Mecca; depictions of Palestinian national symbols commissioned by NGOs and political factions; and murals spontaneously painted and financed by local artists. Although street art is never free from controversy, no murals are as contentious in Burj al-Barajneh as the murals painted on UNRWA facilities.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) was established in 1949 with the aim of responding to Palestinian refugees’ humanitarian needs. The Palestinians displaced after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank in 1967 did not fall under the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and were thus subjected to different laws and levels of assistance and protection. UNRWA plays a complex and often contradictory role in Lebanon. By giving Palestinians a unique status separate from other refugee groups, it enabled the continuity of a Palestinian community in exile. However, as a humanitarian organisation and primary source of aid in the camps, it took a non-political stance which, while allowing for the provision of aid, also depoliticised Palestinian refugees by turning them into humanitarian subjects.<sup>35</sup>

Neutrality is a major concern to UN humanitarian agencies, which see it as a fundamental value needed to operate independently and effectively. Like other humanitarian agencies, UNRWA follows strict policies of neutrality which try to ensure that staff and facilities remain politically neutral. However, maintaining a non-political stance is both difficult and controversial in the highly politicised camps, where some Palestinians refuse to be “neutralised”, underlining that their condition as refugees is a political one. To tackle problems of neutrality in its facilities, UNRWA launched a mural initiative in 2013. The aim of the initiative was to paint colourful murals on the walls of UN buildings in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon with themes such as “sports, environmental health, caring and inclusive communities or peace and friendship

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<sup>34</sup> Obeid (2017).

<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that while Palestinians accuse UNRWA of turning their political condition into a humanitarian one, Israel makes the opposite accusation, saying it is heavily politicized and that it perpetuated the refugee status of Palestinians refugees who could have been assimilated by host countries. See Allan (2013, p. 14-17).

across the world”.<sup>36</sup> Political messages, military posters and national symbols were seen as problematic breaches of UN neutrality policies, so the mural initiative was proposed to erase them from UNRWA facilities. "Before" and "after" brochures published by UNRWA show walls covered with posters, graffiti and maps of Palestine being replaced with images of children cleaning their school and brushing their teeth.

Although UNRWA officials accept murals on Palestinian culture, depicting for instance Palestinian embroidery or traditional dances, flags and other national symbols are rejected as “non-neutral”. Maps of Palestine are also seen as problematic because, as a UNRWA officer explained to me, they could be interpreted as denying the existence of Israel, a member of the United Nations. It is also worth pointing out that most of the funding for the agency comes from the United States, and that the mural initiative was financed by the US government.<sup>37</sup>

The neutralisation of UNRWA walls, however, has created resentment among many of the camps’ residents.<sup>38</sup> In Burj al-Barajneh, the first incident involving UNRWA walls and the neutral mural initiative occurred when an outside artist first came to paint a mural in the camp. Both residents and UNRWA employees told me that the artist was not welcomed in the camp, and that his presence as an outsider coming to paint the camp’s walls was so resented that threats from residents eventually led to the cancellation of the project. After that incident, UNRWA officers responsible for the mural initiative realised that it was important to have artists from the camp to paint the walls and to involve the community in the project. The reaction of the camp's residents and their rejection of outside interference illustrates their sense of ownership. By threatening the outsider hired by UNRWA, residents of that neighbourhood showed hostility towards the mural initiative carried out by strangers trying to change or paint over “our walls”.<sup>39</sup>

An artist from the Palestinian refugee camp of Beddawi who participated in UNRWA’s mural initiative confided with me the reluctance with which she had agreed to be part of the project. Asked to paint a mural with local children, she worried about the policy of neutrality and the fact that the themes for the paintings were always provided by UNRWA.

We have a big problem with neutrality. Children get disappointed when they are told their paintings cannot be about Palestine. When they tell me I can’t paint for Palestine I feel occupied.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> As stated in a brochure published by UNRWA in 2016.

<sup>37</sup> UNRWA (2016).

<sup>38</sup> Peteet (2005, p. 91) examines the conflicted attitudes towards UNRWA: on one hand Palestinians needed its health and education services and humanitarian assistance, on the other hand blamed it for their containment and depoliticization as refugees. Palestinians also saw the agency with suspicion since the UN played a role in the Palestinian displacement by accepting the partition of Palestine.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with UNRWA field operations officer in Beirut, 28 July 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Interview in Tripoli, 6 August 2017.

The artist eventually accepted UNRWA's commission which she saw pragmatically as "just work", in opposition to other projects she felt ideologically attached to and committed with. In partnership with other local artists in Beddawi and NGOs operating in the camp, she painted murals depicting Palestinian traditions and symbols of Palestinian nationalism on camp walls, which would be seen as problematic by UNRWA from the neutrality perspective.

The struggles over what should be on camp walls were more clearly explained by a group of young activists from Burj al-Barajneh, who told me how contentious the issue of neutrality is among the politically engaged youth in the camp. A young activist told me that UNRWA murals were sometimes defaced by his friends, who would go to UN facilities at night to write messages like: "No neutralisation of Palestine" or "No to neutrality" on UNRWA walls.

We are against neutrality. We want UNRWA to be like it was when it was founded; we want it to renounce the neutrality policy and allow its staff to have their political views. We want it to be evidence for refugees.<sup>41</sup>

By emphasising the desire to see UNRWA as "evidence" for Palestinian refugees, the young activists acknowledge the agency's importance in maintaining their rights as refugees, but demonstrate their opposition to the discourse of neutrality, which they see as a way of depoliticising Palestinians. While referring to UNRWA's past role of representing Palestinian refugees and their demands<sup>42</sup>, the activists contrast it with a present in which UNRWA fails to give voice to Palestinian refugees by complying with UN rules of neutrality and not allowing staff to adopt a political stance. Liisa Malkki's (1995) critical analysis of refugees as objects of knowledge and management is particularly relevant here, in the way it problematizes the construction of humanitarian subjects disconnected from their political and historical contexts, which she considers a form of silencing refugees. In the case of Palestinian refugees, the discourses of humanitarian agencies can be seen as a form of marginalising Palestinian voices, despite the complex and often contradictory role played by UNRWA. Although Peteet (2005, p. 82-83) for instance, has argued that Palestinian refugees were silenced more by Israeli and American diplomatic and academic discourses than by humanitarian agencies, her examination of how UNRWA gave Palestinians a legal status and international representation has nonetheless revealed how humanitarian aid has been both constraining and productive.

The way young activists say they express their discontent by defacing UNRWA walls is remarkably meaningful. Although a UNRWA officer in charge of the mural initiative dismissed the defacement of UNRWA murals as "vandalism" done by "kids" in an interview<sup>43</sup>, the political graffiti on UN facilities has an important social and political significance that should

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<sup>41</sup> Interview in Beirut, 19 July 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Peteet (2005, p. 83) examines how UNRWA cooperated with the PLO in the 1960s and 1970s and how substantial numbers of UNRWA workers were affiliated with the resistance movement.

<sup>43</sup> Interview in Beirut, 28 July 2017.

not be so easily dismissed as meaningless vandalism. Graffiti is a demand for public space and a way to assert the right to speak and to have a presence in the public sphere.<sup>44</sup> By writing political messages on the neutralised walls of UNRWA facilities, Palestinian youngsters defy UN policies they believe rob them of their agency, reclaiming the walls of the camp as political spaces and opposing established narratives of neutrality. Refusing to be silenced by the narratives of victimhood perpetuated by dependence on humanitarian assistance, this group of young Palestinians tries to assert the right to a voice in the camp. The “symbolic capture” of walls in the camps is a way of reclaiming public space and subverting discourses in Burj al-Barajneh.<sup>45</sup>

Asef Bayat’s (2013) analysis of urban subaltern movements and the redefinition of the meaning of urban spaces helps make sense of the actions of the politically engaged youth in Burj al-Barajneh. Bayat focuses on movements of everyday resistance in Middle Eastern contexts by analysing how people resist power in their daily practices, and how they voice dissent and assert their presence and interests. His examination of the street as the ultimate arena of politics in the Middle East is particularly relevant, since it illustrates how graffiti, dismissed simply as “vandalism” by UNRWA officials, might play an important role in giving agency to camp residents.<sup>46</sup> For Bayat, public spaces are the main stages of contention for marginalised groups, and where it is possible to make claims and appropriate resources. It is through “direct actions in the very zones of exclusion” (2013, p.5) that Palestinian youth, like dispossessed groups analysed by Bayat, communicates discontent and contests UNRWA values imposed on Burj al-Barajneh’s walls. For Bayat, the power of everyday resistance resides in the ability to circumvent “constraints, utilizing what exists, and discovering new places of freedom to make oneself heard, seen, felt and realized.” (2013, p. 112) Likewise, Palestinian youth defacing walls and painting graffiti in refugee camps makes use of what is available to make their voices heard and defy discourses of neutrality.

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<sup>44</sup> Tripp (2013, p. 261) argues that graffiti is a demand for public space and a way of asserting collective identity. These aspects of graffiti will be further explored in the next chapter.

<sup>45</sup> According to Tripp (2013, p. 307), “graffiti as well as posters have been ways of reclaiming public space, not with the physical mass of bodies (...) but with the symbolic capture of the walls and surfaces of the city streets”.

<sup>46</sup> Bayat (2003, p. 228) defines the street as the “chief locus of politics for ordinary people, those who are structurally absent from the institutional positions of power.”

## **Appropriating walls and claiming the “right to the city”**

*The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become ‘savage’ and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls.*

Henri Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*

In Henri Lefebvre’s *Urban Revolution*, first published in the aftermath of the uprisings of May 1968, streets play a central role in his critique of urban society. The street is at once a space for exchange but also a battleground, a place where disputes over meaning are fought out publicly.<sup>47</sup> Lefebvre’s conception of a “savage” speech that escapes rules and institutions is particularly relevant in examining the disputes over what should be on the walls of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Political graffiti in Burj al-Barajneh contests rules of neutrality and humanitarian institutions by inscribing voices of protest on the walls and demanding visibility of Palestinians as political subjects.

Lefebvre’s defence of urban policies that promote justice and inclusion became widely influential in urban studies. Among his important contributions to the study of urban space is the concept of the “right to the city”, which has been widely discussed, appropriated and developed in urban studies.<sup>48</sup> In Mark Purcell’s (2013) critical engagement with the concept, the right to the city is defined as a radical rethinking of the purpose and content of political communities, and a struggle to move beyond the state and capitalism. It is not a right that could be guaranteed by the state as a form of legal protection in a liberal framework, but a right to be conquered through political struggle, the re-appropriation of space and rethinking of conceptions of rightful ownership.

In Purcell’s reading of Lefebvre, the right to the city belongs to those who inhabit it, thus placing “inhabitation”, rather than formal citizenship, as the source of political inclusion. Moreover, the right to the city encompasses two main rights. Firstly, the right to appropriate the city, which is seen by Lefebvre as a right to not only live, work and have access to resources in urban areas but also a right to represent and characterize the city. Secondly, the right to the city is a right to participate in its production, to be part of the decision-making and to have access to its centre instead of being confined to the margins.

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<sup>47</sup> See Zieleniec’s (2016) analysis of the “right to write the city”.

<sup>48</sup> See Harvey (2012) and Purcell (2003; 2013).

The idea that the right to the city goes beyond the state and is not a right based on citizenship but rather on residence is worth examining in the context of Palestinian statelessness in refugee camps in Beirut. For Palestinian refugees, the denial of access to Beirut is imposed with restrictions on property ownership outside refugee camps and restrictions on construction and expansion of the camps. With limited access to Beirut's centre, most Palestinian refugees are confined to the refugee camps in the southern suburbs of the city. Although Palestinian claims are mostly focused on their rights in Palestine and not in making claims for space and rights in Lebanon, where according to the law they are considered stateless foreigners despite prolonged residence, a sense of ownership exists in the refugee camps, where a shared history and common experience has forged forms of belonging.<sup>49</sup> The idea that the right to the city should not depend on the state nor be defined exclusively in terms of citizenship, and thus that the city should belong to those who inhabit it, is particularly relevant in the case of Palestinian statelessness.

The issue of placing the camps in the categories of camp/city and inside/outside is a highly complex one. When discussing the "right to the city" for Palestinian refugees one could ask how to define the city: are Palestinian refugee camps a part of Beirut, or do they stand as separate spaces, almost separate cities? Although officially a part of Beirut's suburbs, Palestinian refugee camps currently stand as separate, closed spaces in the city, where lack of governance and divisions by political factions are dire.<sup>50</sup> Confined to these marginalised suburbs, most of Burj al-Barajneh's residents would not see the city as "theirs". As in other cities in Lebanon, Palestinians are considered outsiders and the sense of ownership and belonging seems to be restricted to camps for the majority of the Palestinian population.

Lefebvre's formulation of the right to the city is particularly relevant in its assertion of the right to symbolically appropriate the city, to represent it and to participate in its production. The right to the city as an appropriation of space is therefore reflected inside the camps through the symbolic appropriation of walls. By defacing institutional walls in the refugee camps with political graffiti, Palestinians claim their right to the camp more than their right to the city of Beirut. The young activists symbolically appropriate walls by subverting the rules of neutrality and writing political messages against it. UNRWA's attempt to clean the walls of politically charged messages and symbols creates a battleground where meaning and values are disputed. If the camp can be considered a city in itself, young Palestinian activists claim their rights to it by defying the narratives of humanitarian institutions.

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<sup>49</sup> See Peteet's (2005) discussion of identity in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

<sup>50</sup> See Hanafi and Taylor (2010) The Cairo accords of 1969 gave the PLO the right to administer camps, but it was revoked in 1987, leaving Palestinian camps with a governance void, although authorities still accept that refugee camps are off-limits to Lebanese security forces.



As we will see next, however, their actions are not unique: the walls of Palestinian camps across Lebanon are full of graffiti and murals with various messages and claims. The next chapter will focus on the different symbols and meanings of street art in the Palestinian refugee camps of Burj al-Barajneh, Shatila and Beddawi. By examining the most common imagery on the walls of the refugee camps, it will be shown how street art can be both a demand for public space and an assertion of collective identity.



Vidal, M.arta 2017. *A wall painted on the wall: a mural in Burj al-Barajneh depicts the separation wall in the West Bank.* Beirut.

## Chapter 2 - Street art in Palestinian refugee camps

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*The city writes itself on its walls and in its streets. But that writing is never completed. The book never ends and contains many blank or torn pages. It is nothing but a draft, more a collection of scratches than writing.*

Henri Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*

*Faces on the walls – martyrs freshly emerging from life and the printing presses, a death which is a remake of itself. One martyr replacing the face of another, taking his place on the wall, until displaced by yet another, or by rain.*

Mahmoud Darwish. *Memory for Forgetfulness*

The walls of Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut display a rich variety of graffiti, murals and posters. Celebrations of the *hajj*, images of Jerusalem and maps and flags of Palestine are widely inscribed on camp walls. In *Urban Revolution*, Henri Lefebvre (2003) describes the city as a book that is constantly being re-written. In *Writings on Cities* (1996), he conceives the city as a work of art, an “oeuvre” that is creatively shaped by its inhabitants and is continuously being transformed and remade.<sup>51</sup> Street art illustrates the remaking of the city referred to by Lefebvre, as walls are constantly painted over with new murals and posters replacing old ones. Just like in Mahmoud Darwish’s description of the walls of Beirut, where a poster of a martyr is “displaced by yet another” or destroyed by time and rain, the walls of the camps are palimpsests<sup>52</sup> constantly being re-written and re-drawn, with murals being destroyed and replaced. In this chapter I will examine the main symbols and meanings of street art in the Palestinian refugee camps of Burj al-Barajneh, Shatila and Beddawi. While keeping in mind the ephemerality of street art, and drawing on the conception of walls as palimpsests being re-written, I will discuss the possible meanings behind the themes painted and the different narratives inscribed on refugee camp walls. It will be argued that although most murals reproduce nationalist discourses which emphasise the Palestinian right of return, they also reflect local concerns with improving live and services in the camps and demands for rights in Lebanon.

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<sup>51</sup> Lefebvre (1996, p. 101) argues that the city is an “oeuvre, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product”.

<sup>52</sup> Huyssen’s (2003) work on the politics of memory and urban spaces, for instance, explores the notion of the city as a palimpsest.

## Defining street art

As a loose category used to refer to interventions in public spaces, street art evades easy definition. What for some may be called art and considered a form of symbolically appropriating public space, for others might be dismissed as vandalism, as it was discussed in the previous chapter. Nicholas Riggle (2010, p. 245) defines street art as the type of art that “employs the street as an artistic resource”, examining the wide range of artistic practices which can be considered street art.<sup>53</sup> Even though Riggle is concerned with discussing the differences between graffiti and street art, I will use these terms interchangeably, since I am not interested in discussing what qualifies as art or dwelling on the aesthetic value of graffiti and murals, but rather focus on the works’ social and political meanings. Although I will address the aesthetic value of works by Palestinian artists from refugee camps in the next chapter, my main concern is to focus on its content and symbolic meaning.<sup>54</sup> I will refer to those who express themselves on the walls of the camps as artists, and the term “street art” will be used to broadly refer to creative interventions on the walls of Palestinian refugee camps, whenever walls are used as a canvas to make public statements and as a means of self-expression.

Documenting street art presents researchers with some challenges: it is not always possible to determine who made the work, when and why, facts which can lead to lack of information that would help analysing and interpreting the work.<sup>55</sup> Most academic studies of street art emphasise its ephemerality, the issues of capturing street art and fixing what is ephemeral<sup>56</sup> and its social role. Street art’s use of the public space and social impact has been widely explored in academic works.<sup>57</sup> Tsilimpounidi (2013) and Abaza (2015), for instance, focus on street art’s ability to give voice to marginal groups and to respond to problems of disenfranchisement.

Works on Palestinian street art have mostly focused on street art in the occupied territories, with little attention paid to street art produced in exile. Laleh Khalili’s (2007) work on murals and posters as forms of commemoration in Palestinian refugee camps is one of the few exceptions mentioning street art produced in Palestinian exile. Peteet (1996) and Tripp (2013) focus on graffiti in the occupied territories as a marker of defiance and a form of cultural resistance. Peteet (1996) examines the importance of defiant graffiti during the first *intifada* between 1987 and 1991 in the West Bank. As for Tripp (2013, p. 274-276), street art began to express intra-Palestinian political rivalries after the 1990s, and the relevance of graffiti led to the opening of

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<sup>53</sup> Riggle’s (2010, p. 251) wide range of artist practices includes sculpture, painting, video and performances. I will focus on painting since it is by far the most common practice in Palestinian refugee camps. I will mention sculpture in the third chapter.

<sup>54</sup> Although present in the discussion of turning barbed wire into art and the “beautification” of walls in the third chapter, the aesthetic value of street art is an aspect I will not be able to explore due to the limited space in this thesis.

<sup>55</sup> See Ryan’s (2017, p.9) discussion of the challenges of documenting and analysing street art.

<sup>56</sup> Ryan (2017, p.5) focuses on the ephemeral quality of street art and its ongoing cycle of “creation and destruction” but also its ability to move “along with the times”.

<sup>57</sup> Ryan (2017, p. 3-5) discusses how the main debates on street art revolve around its ephemerality, the social nature of street art and its relations with the public space.

graffiti calligraphers' schools in Gaza in the early 2000s. Tripp's focus on street art's ability to create a shared vocabulary and a sense of identity is particularly relevant in the context of Palestinian refugee camps. The development of a "visual idiom" (2013, p. 307) that helped define and express Palestinian identity and political claims first took place in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps in the late 1960s and 1970s, with Beirut in particular becoming one of the main centres for the production of Palestinian art, despite the restrictions faced by Palestinian refugees. According to Tripp (2013, p. 260), during this period Palestinians developed a collective understanding of their history, rights and identity and used visual arts to assert their voice and demands. The ways in which street art can be used to reclaim space and defy established narratives, briefly explored in the previous chapter, are also discussed by Tripp (2013, p. 261), who argues that Palestinian street art is a claim for space and an assertion of collective identity. Visual arts are thus a way of asserting the right to a voice and presence in the public sphere, and an expression of solidarity and defiance.<sup>58</sup>

### **Street art and Palestinian nationalism**

Although the twelve Palestinian refugee camps across Lebanon are different from each other, certain elements can be found painted on the walls of every single one. These range from flags and maps of Palestine, images of Jerusalem and Palestinian villages, keys as symbols of the Palestinian right of return, to Handala, a popular character created by the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali. In Shatila, a run-down house proudly displayed a freshly-painted Palestinian flag on the door, and in Beddawi the walls of several houses displayed the four colours of the Palestinian flag, which can be found abundantly in the camps. Similarly, maps of Palestine are widespread, painted on the walls of houses and shops, sometimes accompanied by other national symbols such as the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem or a key as a symbol of the Palestinian right of return. Since many Palestinian refugees have until today kept the keys of the houses they were forced to leave behind, the key became a symbol of their right to return to their homes. These symbols are so widespread that some Palestinian artists even include them in their signatures. An artist from Beddawi signs her work by attaching a map of Palestine to the last letter of her name, and another artist from the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp shapes the initial letters of his name as a key.

The reproduction of national symbols such as maps, flags, keys and Palestinian landscapes across refugee camps is a way of asserting the presence of Palestine in exile. According to Ilana Feldman (2014, p. 245), Palestinian refugee camps serve as reminders of the right of return and

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<sup>58</sup> According to Tripp (2013, p. 307) "graffiti as well as posters have been ways of reclaiming public space, not with the physical mass of bodies (...) but with the symbolic capture of the walls and surfaces of the city street".

therefore as “symbols of Palestinian national claims”. The strong connection between refugee camps and Palestinian national claims and demands for the right of return, briefly explored in the previous chapter, is also intertwined with the question of memory. The notion that refugee camps are communities held together by a shared memory of dispossession and the collective demand for return is commonly reproduced in nationalist narratives and adopted by most Palestinians artists, who argue that art is a way of preserving memory against historical erasure and shaping and affirming a collective identity.<sup>59</sup> Street art in particular is seen as an important means of asserting Palestinian identity by inscribing the imagery of Palestinian nationalism on camp walls. In Burj al-Barajneh, several murals have been painted by al-Naqab, a local youth NGO. Mohammad Daher, one of al-Naqab’s co-founders, emphasised how most of the murals serve a nationalist purpose:

All our murals are related to Palestine, related to our traditions. When we do these murals our main goal is to preserve Palestinian identity. We use Palestinian flags, embroidery... We commemorate the *nakba* and the *intifadas* (...) Everything we do is related to Palestine.<sup>60</sup>

Daher’s statement illustrates how street art can be seen as way of asserting a distinct Palestinian identity and demanding its recognition. By painting images of Palestinian landscapes, maps and flags of Palestine and by depicting traditional dances and embroidery, artists emphasise their attachment to Palestine and assert their membership in the Palestinian community.<sup>61</sup>

Street art is thus seen as a powerful way to create a collective understanding of what it means to be Palestinian and to give shape to the images that define national claims.<sup>62</sup> This notion was shared by most of the Palestinian artists I met in Lebanon. Abu Marwan, a Palestinian man in his 50s working in construction and decoration, is the author of several murals in Shatila. One of them, commissioned by the local office of Fatah, depicts the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem. While explaining to me his work, Abu Marwan underlined the importance of murals in preserving collective memory and teaching younger generations:

Personally, I have no hope. But I [paint] because I want our children to know how much we suffered, and to remember our villages and our land.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Allan (2013, p.4) critiques the scholarship on Palestinian identity, and problematizes the fact that Palestinians are mostly discussed in ideological and political terms without taking into consideration material realities and individual subjectivities. Her focus on action and pragmatism sheds light on more subjective forms of remembrance.

<sup>60</sup> Interview in Burj al-Barajneh, 19 July 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Khalili (2004) examines how commemorations in Palestinian refugee camps are used as way of asserting membership of the Palestinian community despite being forgotten by Palestinian leadership. She argues that after the departure of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982, grassroots commemorations became fundamental for Palestinian refugees to affirm their rights to Palestine and their belonging to the Palestinian community.

<sup>62</sup> Tripp (2013 p. 260-263) analyses the power of Palestinian visual arts to “create a powerful mnemonic for collective memory and to establish a presence that demands recognition”. His focus on the assertion of a Palestinian identity that is “distinct” and “populist” will be further explored in the third chapter.

<sup>63</sup> Interview in Shatila, 8 July 2017.

The need to preserve memory and attachment to Palestine is highlighted by Abu Marwan, who points out that his main motivation to paint is to ensure that Palestinian histories of suffering are remembered by younger generations. Despite their ephemerality, murals are seen as important ways of commemorating events and remembering Palestine. Artists paint the lost villages of their parents or grandparents and the Palestinian landscapes they only know from the stories told by older generations or from the archives of Palestinian collective memory.<sup>64</sup> According to Khalili (2004), commemoration for the generations that never lived in Palestine is a fundamental part of their political identity and an assertion of membership and attachment to Palestine. Although the attempt to preserve memory by using ephemeral murals might seem paradoxical, for many, street art is the easiest and most accessible way of communicating in the camps. By using walls as a canvas and appropriating public spaces, street artists are able to make their statements public. Even though murals might be painted over, covered with political posters or fade away with rain, they are still the best option for those who want to make their messages visible to everyone in the camp. The relatively low cost of painting walls makes street art an accessible, inclusive and democratic means of expression in the camps, thus creating a space where the margins can be represented.<sup>65</sup>

A further purpose of street art is to provide a means of showing solidarity with Palestinians elsewhere. During what became known among Palestinians as the “knife *intifada*”, a wave of Palestinian “lone-wolf” stabbing attacks in the Palestinian occupied territories between 2015 and 2016, Palestinian artists in Lebanon showed support for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation by painting murals. The same happened during previous *intifadas*, when Palestinians in exile showed their support and solidarity through art.<sup>66</sup> In Burj al-Barajneh, artists associated with the youth NGO al-Naqab painted a man with his face wrapped in a *keffiyeh* holding a knife and a key as if he were playing violin.

During the knife *intifada* we wanted to paint something related to it. Anything happening in the West Bank and Gaza is happening to us too. We are one people. What happens there happens here too.<sup>67</sup>

Members of al-Naqab have also invited Palestinian artists from the West Bank to come to Lebanon to work on murals in Palestinian refugee camps. Street art is therefore also a way of reinforcing networks and connections with Palestinians elsewhere. Events in the West Bank and Gaza are closely followed by Palestinians in Lebanon, and often commemorated with street art.

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<sup>64</sup> Slyomovics (1998), for instance, examines how a Palestinian collective memory was developed and preserved.

<sup>65</sup> Although I heard artists sometimes complain about the difficulty of finding materials and the high cost of paint and art supplies that can be restrictive, the resourcefulness of street artists and the ability to use what is available is an important aspect that will be explored in the next chapter.

<sup>66</sup> See Tripp (2013) on the role of visual arts during the Palestinian *intifadas*.

<sup>67</sup> Interview in Burj al-Barajneh, 19 July 2017.

In the Palestinian refugee camp of Beddawi, artists made several murals honouring Palestinians on hunger strike in Israeli prisons between April and May 2017. In one of the murals on the walls of Beddawi, the eye of a crying dove is shaped as a prison, and behind the bars is a face resembling Marwan Barghouti, a famous Palestinian political figure and leader of the hunger strike.<sup>68</sup>

One character, Handala, is especially prominent in Palestinian street art. Created by the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, mentioned in the previous chapter, Handala became a symbol of the plight of Palestinian refugees, and reproductions of the popular character can be found across all Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Born in 1938 in a village close to Tiberias, Naji al-Ali fled Palestine with his family in 1948 and lived in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in the south of Lebanon. He became one of the most popular and respected Palestinian artists. His most famous creation is Handala, a Palestinian child who stands barefoot and wears ragged clothes. With his hands clasped behind and his back turned to the viewer, Handala represents the Palestinian refugee waiting to return to his homeland.<sup>69</sup> In Shatila, Abu Marwan painted a mural with the popular Palestinian character Handala holding a key and a knife “to remember what was going on in the occupied territories”. As Abu Marwan related, in his depiction the key in Handala's left hand symbolises the Palestinian right of return and the knife in his right the right to armed struggle and solidarity with the knife *intifada*. In another depiction of Handala on a wall of Burj al-Barajneh, the child stands next to rubble with a flower in his hand. Widely reproduced on camp walls and familiar to all Palestinians, Handala is a “mnemonic icon” and a symbol of Palestinian refugee identity and resistance.<sup>70</sup>

However, not all national symbols on the walls of refugee camps are so widely accepted and respected. Portraits of Yasser Arafat, which can be found frequently in areas where Fatah has a strong influence, are a source of contention in the camps. While for some the Palestinian leader can be seen as a “freedom fighter” and a symbol of Palestinian nationalism, for others he is the “traitor” who forgot about Palestinian refugees in the Oslo negotiations of 1993, excluding them from negotiations and thus renouncing the Palestinian right of return. Ashraf el-Chouli, a musician from the southern Palestinian refugee camp of Rashidieh, told me he would prefer to see portraits of Palestinian writers like Ghassan Kanafani and Mahmoud Darwish instead of Yasser Arafat on the walls of the camps. When he opened a cafe in Burj al-Barajneh, he chose to decorate the walls with paintings portraying the writers he saw as more deserving Palestinian

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<sup>68</sup> In Burj al-Barajneh, artisans carved maps of Palestine shaped as prisons to commemorate the hunger strike. The work of artisans in Palestinian refugee camps will be further explored in chapter 3.

<sup>69</sup> The importance and symbolism of Handala will be analysed in chapter 3.

<sup>70</sup> Haugbolle (2013, p. 245) analyses Naji al-Ali's cartoons, and suggests that their popularity can be explained because “they speak powerfully of collective experiences refracted through public culture” and can bring people together in a shared understanding of the Palestinian experience.

national symbols.<sup>71</sup> A young artist from Burj al-Barajneh, however, proudly showed me a big portrait of Yasser Arafat he helped maintain and retouch. Made by a Palestinian artist from Gaza who came to Burj al-Barajneh in 2012, the mural depicts Yasser Arafat with Jerusalem reflected in the lenses of his sunglasses, and is surrounded by small yellow flags with the symbol of Fatah.

Street art is an important channel for political organisations in the refugee camps and many murals were commissioned by factions to commemorate events and political figures.<sup>72</sup> Portraits of Yasser Arafat in various camps were commissioned by Fatah, while other factions make their presence in the camp visible through military posters and graffiti. It is important to point out the fact that a great part of the artwork on the walls of Palestinian refugee camps was either commissioned by political factions or NGOs. While the aim of political factions in commissioning paintings and spreading posters on the walls of the camps is obvious, the agenda of NGOs is not always clear and sometimes is received with suspicion by camp residents.<sup>73</sup> Regardless of being commissioned by different factions or by NGOs, most murals emphasise nationalist themes and affirm Palestinian culture and identity.

### **Beyond nationalist rhetoric**

Although nationalist symbols like flags, maps, keys and images of Palestinian landscapes are dominant in refugee camps, they are not exclusive, and other themes can also be found on the walls. In Burj al-Barajneh, for instance, colourful murals commemorating the *hajj* are abundant. Camp residents celebrate the Muslim pilgrimage by painting images of the Kaaba and the Great Mosque of Mecca on the walls of their homes. In Shatila, on the other hand, street art related to political factions and sponsored by military groups is more common, which reflects the fact that despite their similarities, Palestinian refugee camps also display their differences on the walls, with each camp exhibiting a distinct character.<sup>74</sup>

The case of Jihad Moussa, a self-taught artist and university student from Burj al-Barajneh, reveals how it is possible for artists to work on different themes and for many different purposes. He took commissions from UNRWA to paint murals in Palestinian refugee camps in

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<sup>71</sup> Khalili (2007, p. 67) examines the influence of Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani in disseminating Palestinian national symbols. It is interesting to note that they themselves became symbols of Palestinian culture and nationalism. Khalili argues that commemorative practices are fundamental in shaping nationalist narratives.

<sup>72</sup> According to Khalili (2007, p. 83) murals, posters and flags “become a barometer for gauging the moods and agendas of various political organizations”.

<sup>73</sup> The resentment of UNRWA’s narratives of neutrality has been discussed in the previous chapter, but other organisations working in the camps, especially those which receive funding from US Aid, are viewed with suspicion by camp residents who feel their work depoliticises Palestinian refugees.

<sup>74</sup> Peteet (2005, p. 127) discusses how each Palestinian refugee camp developed a distinct character and how camps were at once “productive of similarity and difference”.



Beirut, but also painted *haji* motifs on the walls of Burj al-Barajneh, all the while also working spontaneously on several murals that he financed himself. Jihad also took part in an initiative financed by the Red Cross to paint the walls of Burj al-Barajneh in cheerful colours to improve the camp's appearance. He told me he enjoys painting trees and animals on the concrete of Burj al-Barajneh and that his goal is to inspire inhabitants and bring colour to the camps:

I believe that colours give hope. People need colour in their lives more than guns. (...) I believe that people inside the camp are facing very difficult situations but I give them hope and shiny bright things to look at.<sup>75</sup>

Moussa's concern with improving life quality in the camps and choice of themes that are not exclusively nationalist illustrates the need to go beyond nationalist rhetoric and ideological frameworks when analysing artistic practices in Palestinian refugee camps. Diana Allan's (2013) critique of Palestinian nationalist narratives and her focus on the conflict between nationalist rhetoric and local material concerns in the refugee camps is particularly relevant in this context. Allan highlights the dissonance between nationalist discourses of an idealised Palestine and the material reality lived by younger generations, who she argues have difficulty absorbing narratives of the *nakba* and pre-1948 Palestine. According to Allan, Palestinian nationalist discourses are "out of sync with local and national realities" (2013, p. 61) and therefore she defends the need to include other forms of subjectivity and conflicting views.<sup>76</sup>

While according to Khalili (2004) commemoration of pre-1948 Palestine is considered fundamental for the generations that never experienced it, and along with the right of return an essential part of their political identity and an assertion of attachment to the Palestinian community, Allan (2013) questions the reiteration of nationalist rhetoric, asking what it would mean for younger Palestinian generations to return to a place they never left. For Palestinian street artists, this issue also involves the question of memory. Can a street artist who never left his refugee camp in Lebanon remember Palestine when he only has access to second-hand accounts provided by older generations? Are the older generations' depictions of an idyllic pre-1948 Palestine sufficient to give meaning to younger generations' political identities and national claims? When Palestinian artists paint images of Palestine are they remembering it or imagining it? The diversity of views within the camp mean these complex questions have a number of different answers. While some artists reproduce nationalist narratives that focus almost exclusively on the right of return, others adopt more pragmatic approaches that reflect concerns with improving life in Lebanon. The discourses reproduced should also be looked at

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<sup>75</sup> Interview in Shatila, 8 July 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Feldman (2015, p. 245) argues that the relation Palestinians have with the refugee camps they inhabit "cannot be wholly captured by either the perspective of nationalist politics or the viewpoint of humanitarian provisioning" and thus must go beyond nationalist politics and humanitarian assistance.

critically with the question of audience in mind, since certain nationalist responses are more likely to be given to foreign researchers and journalists.<sup>77</sup>

Drawing on Mohammed Bamyeh's (2003) conceptualisation of return as a "restoration of justice", Allan (2013, p. 66) examines the meanings of return for different generations of Palestinian refugees and argues that slogans regarding return can be reductive. She draws a distinction between a physical return to the places lost by older generations and a more abstract return understood as a demand for justice and dignity by generations who never lived in Palestine.<sup>78</sup> This is reflected in the views of some Palestinian artists. While explaining to me the conflict between UNRWA's rules for what should be on the walls of their facilities and what people in the camp wanted to see on the walls, Moussa described it in terms of dignity:

UNRWA people want colourful things related to peace, but people in the camps want dignity. They want things related to Palestine and the right of return. (...) I think it is important to both fight for the right to return and the rights we are entitled to in Lebanon. My life is here but my heart is there. I can't separate them. One is a dream and the other is reality but I want to connect both.<sup>79</sup>

In Jihad's account, references to Palestine and the right of return are a way of asserting justice and dignity. Mentioning both the right of return and rights Palestinians should be entitled to in Lebanon as important rights that need to be fought for, Jihad sees them as inseparable. Return is represented as a "dream" and life in Lebanon as "reality", in a way that reflects his more pragmatic approach.

Other artists and activists in Palestinian refugee camps also reflect concerns with material realities and the need to fight for rights in Lebanon. Al-Najdeh, a non-governmental organisation working in refugee camps across Lebanon, organised several initiatives to promote the right to work in Lebanon. Young people who were part of a group known as the "Right to Work Coalition" painted colourful messages in Arabic and English<sup>80</sup> on the walls of several camps in Lebanon to demand the right to work for Palestinian refugees. In Burj al-Barajneh, their messages were painted along colourful hand prints of the artists. Symbolising the Palestinian's right to work, the hand prints delivered a powerful message. When questioned about her views on the right of return and basic rights in Lebanon, Wissal Jisha, an active member of al-Najdeh, underlined that the two set of rights were not mutually exclusive:

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<sup>77</sup> According to Allan (2013, p. 61), the need to emphasise the salvaging of Palestinian cultural heritage and history is particularly strong in the presence of foreigners. Khalili (2007) also distinguishes the commemorative discourses deployed to address international audiences from those used with domestic audiences.

<sup>78</sup> See Bamyeh (2003) and Allan (2013).

<sup>79</sup> Interview in Burj al-Barajneh, 19 July 2017.

<sup>80</sup> It is worth pointing out that the use of English graffiti indicates that the campaign was also aimed at an international audience.

We started the campaign in the 1990s and made workshops all over camps in Lebanon. The aim was to promote the right to work. (...) We painted the walls with a committee of young people. In our vocational training centres painting it on the wall was a way of raising awareness of the right to work (...) We must work to stand on our feet to demand the right of return. If people can't work here they leave and go to other countries. We ask for the right to return but we need to live. We need basic rights to resist.<sup>81</sup>

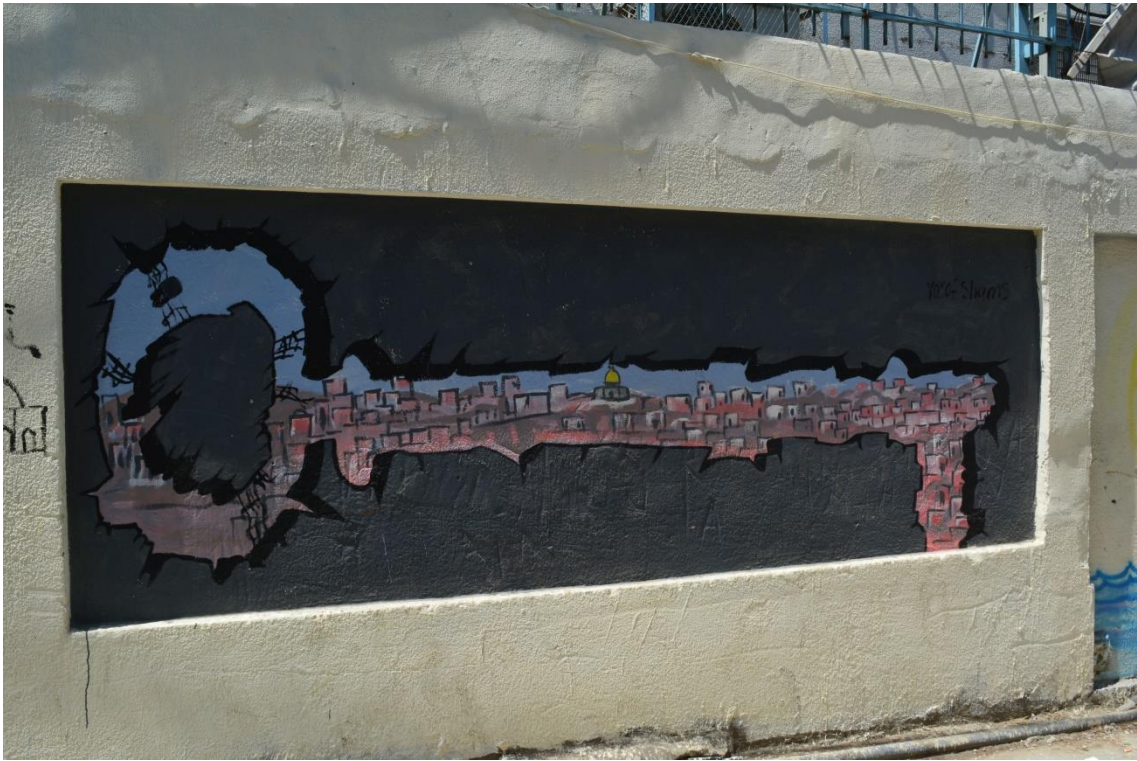
Jisha sees the right to work as a necessary step to demand the right of return and to be able to “resist”. Concerned about the fact that if they are not allowed to work Palestinians will leave the camp and migrate to other countries, she reflects the idea that to leave the camp is to undermine the right of return.<sup>82</sup> Jisha’s active campaigning for the right to work in Lebanon reflects how, although still being integrated in nationalist discourses centred on return to a Palestinian homeland, her more pragmatic approach seeks to improve material conditions in the camp, which are seen as necessary to achieve national goals. The use of street art to demand basic rights in Lebanon demonstrates that, despite the dominance of nationalist discourses on the walls of Palestinian refugee camps, graffiti and murals also reflect local concerns and the need to improve life in the camps.

The walls of the camps are palimpsests where diverse claims are inscribed and effaced, put forward and replaced. In the many layers of camp walls, overlapping nationalist, religious and human rights discourses reclaim space and meaning in the refugee camps. Street art is thus a way to make a variety of claims and to demand the visibility of Palestinian refugees. The use of street art to fight for the rights of Palestinian refugees and to resist silencing and effacement will be explored in the next chapter where I will examine how Palestinian art can become a form of “defiant memory” and relate it to theories of cultural resistance.

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<sup>81</sup> Interview in Shatila, 31 July 2017.

<sup>82</sup> See Allan (2013, p. 173) for discussions on leaving Palestinian refugee camps and seeking asylum in a third country. The collective logic of commitment to Palestinian resistance implies living in the refugee camps and maintaining the refugee status as a way of preserving Palestinian identity and national claims.



Vidal, Marta. 2017 A mural in Beddawi depicts Jerusalem seen through a key-shaped hole in a wall. The key symbolises the Palestinian right of return, and the hole in the wall can be interpreted as the overcoming of obstacles that restrict access to Jerusalem. Tripoli.

### Chapter 3 - Palestinian art and cultural resistance

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*Perhaps we should also recognize that revolutions or liberations aim obscurely - at discovering or rediscovering beauty, that is the intangible, unnameable except by this word. But no, on the other hand: 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.*

Jean Genet, *Four Hours in Shatila*

“There are not many ways of resisting, so murals raise awareness and are our form of resistance”<sup>83</sup>, Mohammad Daher, the co-founder of a youth organisation in the refugee camp of Burj al-Barajneh, told me. He considered painting murals on the walls of the refugee camps a way of fighting for Palestinian rights. The idea that art can be a source of defiance and liberation was shared by most of the artists I met in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, who considered painting national symbols on the walls a way of asserting Palestinian identity and demanding justice. Abdul Rahman Katanani, an accomplished artist from the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp, told me he believed that “art is one of the strongest weapons for Palestinians to affirm their rights.”<sup>84</sup> By painting national symbols, signs of solidarity with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and collective demands for the right of return, Palestinian street artists resist the injustices of dispossession, occupation and confinement.

In the previous chapter I examined the main themes painted on the walls of three different Palestinian refugee camps, and discussed the dominance of nationalist symbols in Palestinian street art. In this chapter I will argue that Palestinian art in Lebanon is used as a form of “defiant memory”, a way of fighting against the effacement of Palestinian refugees and therefore as a form of cultural resistance. I will problematize notions of cultural resistance and critically analyse forms of Palestinian resistance through art in refugee camps in Lebanon. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s conception of the right to the city as a right to symbolic appropriation, I will focus on how symbols of oppression can be appropriated by camp residents and turned into art. As an example, I will discuss the work of Palestinian artist Abdul Rahman Katanani, from Sabra and Shatila refugee camp, who uses barbed wire and corrugated metal in his artwork. Like the walls built to confine Palestinian refugees, the barbed wire is representative of the oppression and restrictions imposed on Palestinians, and the act of turning it into art a form of cultural resistance.

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<sup>83</sup> Interview in Burj al-Barajneh, 19 July 2017.

<sup>84</sup> Interview in Beirut, 30 July 2017.

### **“Re-membering Palestine”: Palestinian art in Lebanon**

Palestinian art is frequently associated with the processes of decolonisation and ideological resistance to imperialism that became widespread after the 1950s. The context of resistance to the occupation of historical Palestine and the dispossession and dispersion of Palestinian refugees is an essential part of Palestinian art production, which relates to movements of decolonising cultural resistance. Edward Said (1993, p. 216) identifies the main topics in cultural resistance to colonialism and imperialism, which include formulations of communal memory, expressions of pride and defiance, and putting forward alternative ways of conceiving history which shed light on marginalised histories. Cultural resistance is therefore presented as a counter-hegemonic cultural production which attempts to defy dominant and oppressive narratives, and force the acknowledgement of “other” or “subaltern” histories. These are essential elements in Palestinian art production.

The Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata explores how art production can be an act of defiance. In an article on Palestinian art in Lebanon, Boullata (2003, p. 158) argues that Beirut was “not only where Palestinian artists could re-member Palestine in their art, but it also was the place where defiant memory could be born”. Borrowing the concept of “defiant memory” from Edward Said<sup>85</sup>, Boullata argues that art is a way of remembering Palestine and resisting the effacement of Palestinian refugees. Unwilling to forget their attachment to Palestine, their history of dispossession and the right of return, Palestinian refugees use art as a way of affirming their resilience. As it was discussed in the previous chapter, Palestinian street artists in the refugee camps of Shatila, Burj al-Barajneh and Beddawi continuously reproduce this understanding of art as a way of remembering Palestine, maintaining Palestinian identity and claiming Palestinian rights.

For Boullata (2003), memory plays a central role in the works of most Palestinian artists. The memory of the homeland is the “driving force giving body to their art” (2003, p. 36) and a legacy that he considers to be passed on to the next generations of artists. Despite the isolation and dispersion of Palestinian communities living under occupation and in exile, Boullata (2003, p. 103) argues that memory is the connective link that enables the assertion and continuity of a distinct Palestinian identity, and the “fuel that replenishes the history of their collective resistance”. The idea that memory can challenge dominant discourses can be traced to Michel Foucault, whose concept of “counter-memory” emphasised the ability to resist hegemonic versions of history and oppressive ideologies. In remembering what is omitted and by defying

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<sup>85</sup> In a short article on the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, Said examines how her works are “mundane instruments of a defiant memory facing itself [and] unwilling to let go of the past.” Quoted in Boullata (2003).

dominant narratives, counter-memories give voice to those who were silenced and present alternative versions of history.<sup>86</sup>

The relations between culture, memory and resistance are also explored by Edward Said (2003, p. 159), who argues that in light of the threats to a Palestinian political entity, culture is a “form of memory against effacement” and a way of “fighting against extinction and obliteration”. Faced with the silencing of Palestinian voices and the erasure of Palestinian presence in what became Israel, Palestinians resort to memory as a collective means of preserving identity, which according to Said constitutes a form of resistance (2003, p. 183). Several other authors have denounced the systematic erasure of Palestinian history and the destruction of Palestinian material culture, records and archives (Whitelam 1996; Pappé 2006; Masalha 2008, 2012; Khalili 2007), therefore highlighting the fundamental importance of preserving collective memory and affirming a Palestinian national entity through cultural resistance.

In the absence of a state and official forms of “organised memory” (Said 2003, p.182), Palestinian voices become marginalised within hegemonic historical narratives and the production of art. The Palestinian director Elia Suleiman, for example, saw his film denied entry in the Oscars film competition in 2002 because Palestine was not formally recognised as a country.<sup>87</sup> Despite restrictions and obstacles, Palestinians have from very early on used art to subvert dominant narratives and affirm their identity and rights. During the first and second *intifadas*, art played an important role in the occupied territories, with Palestinians using graffiti, literature, visual arts and dance as means of defiance and protest.<sup>88</sup> Palestinian resistance very often took artistic form, with literature in particular playing an important role. Figures such as the writer Ghassan Kanafani and the poet Mahmoud Darwish helped shape a collective imaginary by disseminating Palestinian national symbols<sup>89</sup> and by writing about the Palestinian experience of dispossession and exile.

Ghassan Kanafani was the first to apply the term resistance to literature in a study of Palestinian literature.<sup>90</sup> He helped theorise a notion of cultural resistance, which he considered no less valuable than armed resistance, and emphasised the importance of representing the silenced Palestinian perspective. In Palestinian visual culture, the works of the cartoonist Naji al-Ali also left an important legacy. In Haugbolle’s (2013, p. 255) analysis of Naji al-Ali’s work, his cartoons are considered “mnemonic icons for the Palestinian struggle”, images that speak to

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<sup>86</sup> See Medina (2011) and Foucault (1977).

<sup>87</sup> In an article about the film, Wazir (2002) quotes a spokesperson for the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the UN who defends that “in addition to the denial of other rights ... [Palestinians] are now being denied the ability to compete in a competition that judges artistic and cultural expression.”

<sup>88</sup> See Naji al-Ali (2009, p. 97-98).

<sup>89</sup> See Khalili (2007, p. 67).

<sup>90</sup> Kanafani published a study on “Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine”. Harlow (1987) discusses how Kanafani defended the importance of cultural forms of resistance, inserting Palestinian literature in the context of counter-hegemonic cultural production.

ordinary people and represent their struggles, drawing on subaltern aesthetics and discourses that al-Ali had access to as a Palestinian refugee. His creation of Handala, the popular character reproduced in every refugee camp discussed in the previous chapter, became an icon of the Palestinian refugee. The popular character is represented as a 10 year-old child, the same age as Naji al-Ali was when he was forced to leave his village in the north of Palestine and settled with his family in a refugee camp in southern Lebanon. According to al-Ali, the character would remain a child until he returned to Palestine. Always with his back turned, as if unwilling to let go of his past, Handala gave expression to the experiences of loss and dispossession of Palestinian refugees and became symbol of their resistance against forgetting.

### **Problematizing Palestinian cultural resistance**

In the previous chapters I argued that Palestinian street art can become a form of cultural resistance as theorised by Said (1993; 2003) and Boullata (2003). However, it is necessary to define resistance and problematize this category. In recent decades, the increasing popularity of the concept of resistance has led to what Michael Brown (1996) considered an indiscriminate use of the labels of cultural resistance that undermines its analytical utility. The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies<sup>91</sup>, in particular, has been responsible for the popularity and widespread use of a terminology of resistance, appropriation and reclamation that I have also deployed in my analysis. However, as several authors have warned (Abu-Lughod 1990; Garnham 1993; Brown 1996; Seymour 2006; Sabry and Ftouni 2017), the excessive, vague and uncritical usage of these terms can turn them into “generic rhetorical devices” that are emptied of their meaning.

Susan Seymour (2006, p. 305) defines resistance as “intentional, and hence conscious, acts of defiance or opposition by a subordinate individual or group of individuals against a superior individual or set of individuals”. Using Seymour’s definition of resistance, one can consider street art in Palestinian refugee camps a form of conscious opposition that constitute cultural resistance. However, it is necessary to further explore what or whom exactly are Palestinian street artists resisting against. As it was mentioned above, the threats to a Palestinian national identity caused by the expulsion of Palestinians from what became the state of Israel and the erasure of their history and material culture led to the need to affirm Palestinian identity and rights. For the Palestinians who became stateless refugees in Lebanon, the need to remember Palestine and resist effacement became a fundamental part of their political identities and national claims. Most of the Palestinian street artists mentioned so far, indeed, articulate their

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<sup>91</sup> See for instance Stuart Hall’s *Resistance through Rituals* (1976).



struggle as an attempt to win recognition of their rights and affirm their identity and attachment to Palestine.

Abu Marwan, for instance, a Palestinian artist living in Shatila, emphasised how his work aimed at remembering the villages left behind in 1948, and to ensure that Palestinian stories of suffering were remembered by younger generations.<sup>92</sup> As I mentioned in the previous chapter, street artists in Palestinian refugee camps see their work as a way of not only remembering Palestine and affirming their identity, but also as a demand for justice and dignity. While most primarily see themselves as resisting Zionist discourses by affirming Palestinian rights and attachment to historical Palestine, some also resist the restrictions imposed by the Lebanese government by demanding basic rights in Lebanon. Naji al-Ali's work is perhaps the most illustrative of the various sources of oppression and forms of resistance among Palestinian refugees. In al-Ali's cartoons, criticism of Israeli aggression and US interests are as present as denunciations of corrupt and oppressive Arab regimes. The fact that his most famous creation, the iconic character Handala, is reproduced by artists on the walls of Palestinian refugee camps to both demand the right of return to Palestine and the right to work in Lebanon is highly suggestive.<sup>93</sup>

Seymour's (2006) analysis of theories of resistance argues against explanations of resistance that focus exclusively on dominant cultural discourses without examining the power relations of everyday life. Her arguments closely relate to Diana Allan's (2013) critique of Palestinian nationalist narratives, discussed in the second chapter. Seymour's examination of the contradictions between cultural systems and individual needs and desires corresponds to Allan's focus on material realities and everyday practices in Palestinian refugee camps, underlining the need to go beyond nationalist discourses.<sup>94</sup> Their observations also relate to Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) critique of the tendency to romanticise resistance. Abu-Lughod argues that most studies on resistance are more concerned with "finding resisters" than with examining the workings of power. She argues that resistance should be rather used as a "diagnostic of power" (1990, p. 42), and that studies should take into consideration the conflicting and intersecting structures of power. Abu-Lughod argues that some forms of resistance also support existing systems of power and even other forms of oppression.

The contradictory aspects of resistance pointed out by Seymour (2006) and Abu-Lughod (1990) are present in street art in Palestinian refugee camps. By painting symbols of Palestinian

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<sup>92</sup> Interview in Shatila, 8 July 2017.

<sup>93</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, one can find depictions of Handala holding a key as a symbol of the right of return, but also depictions of Handala with his hand raised to demand the right to work in Lebanon.

<sup>94</sup> Allan (2013) offers a critique of scholarship which addresses memory as the primary source of resistance among Palestinian refugees. She problematizes notions of collective memory presented as weapons of resistance by focusing on material realities and individual pragmatism.

nationalism on the walls of refugee camps, Palestinian artists resist effacement but are also imposing particular forms of remembrance and nationalist discourses, which might also be seen as forms of reifying national identity.<sup>95</sup> The fact that many of the murals in the refugee camps were commissioned by political factions and NGOs that define what should be on the walls according to their agenda is particularly relevant. By commemorating particular events and people, NGOs and political factions try to receive funding and support for their organisations, in a way that regulates the narratives of resistance that can be on the walls.<sup>96</sup>

However, Palestinian camp residents sometimes reject murals by defacing them or painting them over. Besides the already discussed defacement of UNRWA walls as a way of protesting against the imposed narratives of neutrality on UN facilities in Burj al-Barajneh, another example is the erasure of murals painted by the international art collective Art Forces in 2012 in Shatila. Art Forces, an American organisation whose mission is to make visible “histories that have been obliterated and forgotten”<sup>97</sup> through public art, was invited by al-Jana Resource Centre for Popular Art, a Beirut based organisation, to work on a mural initiative that gathered Palestinian and international artists to commemorate the 30-year anniversary of the massacre of Sabra and Shatila. In cooperation with Ahlam Lajee, a community centre in Shatila, the artists painted several murals on the walls of the refugee camp depicting Palestinian landscapes, trees and iconic Palestinian imagery. Although many camp residents showed appreciation for the murals, most of the work was painted over or covered with political posters a few months after. Susan Greene, the founder of Art Forces, considered that the initiative in Shatila failed because not enough groundwork had been done with the community. Greene told me “there was a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding and not enough time to gain the trust of the community”. The fact that the project was activated by only one organisation from the camp and that posters were removed to prepare the walls for painting also proved problematic. In the end, Greene felt that “the community didn’t own the murals” which she believes led to their being covered and erased.<sup>98</sup>

Art Forces’ mural initiative in Shatila highlights the fact that there are multiple ways of reading resistance. It could be argued that both the artists participating in the international mural initiative to commemorate the anniversary of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, and the camp residents painting over the murals are resisting, albeit in their own ways. What the group of local and international artists saw as commemoration and a way of affirming resilience, some camp residents saw as unwanted interference. Underlying the struggles over meaning on the

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<sup>95</sup> According to Allan’s (2011, p. 173) “Every person becomes an embodiment of the Palestinian, who keeps the struggle going through acts of overt resistance as well as simple steadfastness, stubbornness and resilience”.

<sup>96</sup> See Khalili (2007) for more on the ways NGOs and political factions use commemoration to gather funding and support.

<sup>97</sup> Art Forces (2017).

<sup>98</sup> Interview via Skype, September 2017.

walls of refugee camps is the irony of seeing the murals that were painted to preserve memory so quickly erased. There is a paradoxical aspect in Palestinian street art's aim of affirming memory and fighting against erasure with ephemeral paintings on walls that, like palimpsests, are meant to be constantly transformed, erased and repainted. The ephemerality of street art makes it inevitable that paintings on the walls will eventually fade away or be replaced. Nevertheless, street art is used to assert memory and identity, and the symbolic appropriation of walls in an empowering way of claiming public spaces.

The mural initiative in Shatila thus illustrates how artistic interventions carried out by Palestinians cannot be reduced to a single model of cultural resistance.<sup>99</sup> Street artists resist the effacement of refugees, but at the same time might be imposing particular nationalist discourses or forms of remembering. However, there is always space on the walls for dissent, since murals can be defaced or painted over by those who disagree with the claims made or who would prefer to see something different on the walls. Street art in refugee camps thus illustrates the complex workings of power and resistance in Palestinian refugee camps, since for Palestinians in Lebanon there is no single source of oppression and no single form of resistance.<sup>100</sup>

### **Turning symbols of oppression into art**

I have argued that Palestinian art in refugee camps in Lebanon is seen by artists as a form of “defiant memory” and a way of affirming an identity that resists effacement. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's conception of the right to the city as a right to symbolic appropriation, I have suggested that street artists appropriate the walls of the refugee camps to claim not only the rights they are entitled to according to international law, of which the right of return is central, but also to claim their rights to the city. In the first chapter I argued that Palestinians are not only enclosed in refugee camps but also imprisoned by restrictions which prevent them from both returning to their homeland and settling permanently in Lebanon. Walls thus become symbols of both their spatial enclosure and the impasses of statelessness and dispossession. By painting walls and claiming public space, artists symbolically appropriate the streets, express defiance and demand justice and the acknowledgment of their rights.

While some artists expressed the idea that murals could transform the grey walls of the camps and turn symbols of oppression into objects of beauty, like Jihad Moussa, a young artist from Burj al-Barajneh who claimed that street art brought “hope” and “shiny bright things” to camp

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<sup>99</sup> El-Ghadban and Strohm (2013) argue that although discourses on art and resistance can shed light on cultural practices and creative strategies used to demand the recognition of Palestinian rights and identity, they ignore other roles attributed to cultural production and cannot be limited to a single model.

<sup>100</sup> See Sabry and Ftouni (2017, p. 102) on how there is no single narrative of resistance.

residents<sup>101</sup>, others refused the idea that camp walls needed to be “beautified”. Tania Naboulsi, an artist from Beddawi, argued that camps are “beautiful as they are”.<sup>102</sup> Her understanding of refugee camps as spaces of affection and beauty, discussed in the first chapter, challenges representations that reduce camps to places of poverty and suffering. By defending a notion of beauty that defies discourses of victimhood, Naboulsi rejects the idea that street art is merely used to improve the camps’ appearance, thus challenging the idea that camp walls need to be beautified. Instead, Naboulsi, who painted murals in several Palestinian refugee camps across Lebanon, emphasised how murals are her way of engaging with the Palestinian struggle and underlined that she “only paint(s) for Palestine”.

The debate on beautifying walls also relates to discussions of street art on the separation wall in the occupied West Bank. The fact that the separation wall became a canvas for artistic expression has been subject of many debates. Charles Tripp (2013, p. 277), for instance, problematizes how a wall that for Palestinians is “real, material and oppressive” can become a “symbolic space for a stream of passing visitors”. Tripp (2013, p. 279) recounts an episode experienced by the British graffiti artist Banksy, when an elderly Palestinian man who saw him paint the wall told him to “go home” because Palestinians hated the wall and didn’t want it to look beautiful. The same opinion was expressed by Abdul Rahman Katanani, a Palestinian artist from Sabra and Shatila: “if I want to destroy the wall I don’t want to paint it”, he told me.<sup>103</sup> Katanani compared the separation wall to the walls being built around Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon such as Ain al-Hilweh, underlining that, although built in different contexts and with different proportions and significance, they were both built with the purpose of enclosing Palestinians.

An accomplished artist who has exhibited his work in art galleries around the world, Katanani speaks strongly against the discourses of victimisation and passivity promoted by NGOs and emphasises how art can be “one of the strongest weapons for Palestinians to affirm their rights”. He uses barbed wire and corrugated metal in his work because he believes materials that come from the refugee camps represent its inhabitants and their experiences as refugees. With the materials collected from the camps, Katanani makes sculptures of children and olive trees. In a 2012 exhibition entitled ‘No Address’, children made of corrugated metal played in a miniature refugee camp built out of barbed wire, rusted metal and used tires.<sup>104</sup> Katanani told me the rusting metal can be interpreted as a symbol of waiting to return to the homes left behind, and the barbed wire representative of the borders and restrictions imposed on Palestinian refugees. His work portrays hardship, but also the resilience of Palestinians. The delicate shapes of his

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<sup>101</sup> Interview in Shatila, 8 July 2017.

<sup>102</sup> Personal correspondence, September 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Interview in Beirut, 30 July 2017.

<sup>104</sup> ‘No Address’ was exhibited in 2012 at the Institut Français in Beirut.

barbed wire sculptures capture the contradictory aspects of the refugees' experience: despair and hope, confinement and creativity, suffering and resilience. Like the walls built to enclose Palestinians, the corrugated metal and barbed wire represent the oppression and restrictions imposed on them, and the act of turning them into art a form of defiance and cultural resistance.

Several Palestinian artisans also use materials from the refugee camps to make crafts with Palestinian national symbols. They use wood and other disposed materials to carve maps and the lost landscapes of Palestine, keys as symbols of the right of return and the popular character Handala.<sup>105</sup> The transformation of the resources available in the refugee camps relates to Michel de Certeau's conception of "bricolage" as a form of resistance. De Certeau (1984) examines how marginalised groups appropriate resources and claim space in their everyday practices in a way that subtly defies hegemony. By focusing on the subversions of everyday life, de Certeau (1984, p. xviii) examines how "users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules". Bricolage is described by de Certeau as the art of "making do", a resourceful way of using what is available and adapting it to one's needs which is considered subversive because it undermines the meanings imposed by dominant institutions. The ability to build something new and imagine new uses for worn or disposed objects is reflected in the actions of resourceful and talented Palestinians who turn barbed wire and rusted metal into art.<sup>106</sup>

By appropriating walls, barbed wire and rusted metal, Palestinians make art out of the very elements of their exclusion and oppression. The barbed wire found in Palestinian refugee camps is shaped by Katanani and transformed into works of art exhibited in art galleries around the world. The artist subverts the meaning of barbed wire by transforming the harsh material used to segregate and restrict Palestinians into a delicate sculpture exhibited to highlight the predicament of Palestinian refugees. Similarly, street artists who transform the walls of refugee camps subvert the elements of their confinement to make national claims, to defy dominant narratives and to resist effacement. Henri Lefebvre's theorisation of the right to the city as a right to appropriate space and to be able to represent and characterize it is particularly relevant. A central element in Lefebvre's work is the concept of the city as an "oeuvre", a collective art project that should engage all the city's inhabitants in the processes of shaping urban space. He discusses the necessity of art, which he considers "restitutes the meaning of the oeuvre, giving it multiple facets of appropriated time and space" (1996, p. 157). Art thus plays an important role in transforming urban space, and while Lefebvre considers music an appropriation of time, painting and sculpture are seen as appropriations of space.

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<sup>105</sup> Omar, who owned a small shop in Burj al-Barajneh where he sold his crafts, showed me a wood-carved Handala behind bars that he made in honour of the Palestinian prisoners who had been on hunger strike in Israeli prisons a few months earlier.

<sup>106</sup> This also relates to Bayat's (2013) discussion of the ability to circumvent constraints and utilizing existing materials discussed in the first chapter.

The idea that the city should be creatively produced in a process of collective participation echoes in the works of Palestinian street artists, as the walls of the camps are constantly painted, defaced or erased by the community. The two central elements in Lefebvre's theorisation of the right to the city, appropriation and participation, are present in the streets of Palestinian refugee camps, as street artists symbolically appropriate the walls and camp residents participate in the struggles over what should be on the wall of the camp. Street art has a striking potential for participation, since it enables the inclusion of a variety of actors and a multiplicity of voices from the margins. The need for creative activity emphasised by Lefebvre is illustrated by the fact that despite severe restrictions, camp residents are able to circumvent constraints by making use of existing materials, by painting the walls that enclose them or making art out of barbed wire and corrugated metal.

Lefebvre's conception of the city as a collective work of art helps us understand the use of disposed materials from the urban margins. Likewise, with street art the walls of the city are turned into works of art. By appropriating walls and materials from the refugee camps, artists actively participate in the production and transformation of the urban space surrounding them. The city thus becomes the "perpetual oeuvre of its inhabitants", as walls are constantly re-painted and re-written, and materials from the urban margins transformed into art<sup>107</sup>.

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<sup>107</sup> Katanani, on the other hand, created his own city out of disposed materials from the refugee camps. The city is a work of art, and the work of art a city.



Katanani, A. 2012 *Zinc, barbed wire and freedom*. Beirut: Agial Gallery

## Conclusion

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“People inside the camp are facing very difficult situations but I give them hope and shiny bright things to look at”, told me Jihad Moussa, a self-taught artist and university student from Burj al-Barajneh. Moussa took commissions from UNRWA to paint murals on UN facilities in Palestinian refugee camps, but also painted religious motifs, trees and animals, and Handala, a character that represent the plight of Palestinian refugees. As we have seen, his ability to paint a variety of themes, either commissioned by humanitarian organisations like UNRWA and camp residents, or financed by Moussa himself, illustrates the various forms of making street art in Palestinian refugee camps. Concerned with improving the camps’ appearance, but also with raising awareness of Palestinian rights by painting national symbols like Handala, Moussa’s work encapsulates the multiplicity of claims and concerns expressed on the walls of refugee camps.

Other artists, like the youth associated with an NGO in Burj al-Barajneh, took more political stances and emphasised street art’s role of fighting for Palestinian rights and against the erasure of Palestinian refugees. A group of young activists defaced UNRWA walls as a way of protesting against the depoliticisation of Palestinian refugees and to demand the acknowledgement of the Palestinian condition as a political one. Defying discourses that reduce Palestinians to humanitarian subjects, the young activists’ actions show how street art can become a way of symbolically appropriating space and demand justice. This thesis examined the meaning of graffiti and murals in Palestinian refugee camps, and argued that street art is an attempt to affirm a distinct Palestinian community with a shared memory and history, and a way of giving voice to the silenced narratives of Palestinian refugees.

In my analysis of street art in refugee camps, I drew on Henri Lefebvre’s conception of the “right to the city” as a right to appropriation and participation in urban space. I also drew on Lefebvre’s notion of the city as “oeuvre”, a continuous collective work of art, to understand how Palestinian artists transform their urban space. By looking at how Palestinian artists make use of materials from the urban margins, this study focused on the appropriation of symbols of oppression like walls and barbed wire and their transformation into works of art. Michel de Certeau (1984) and Asef Bayat (2013) helped me explain how the resources available in refugee camps in the urban margins are utilised by camp residents in ways that subvert their original meaning and that put forward forms of defiance.

Underlying my discussion was the notion of Palestinian cultural resistance as theorised by Edward Said (1993; 2003) and Kamal Boullata (2003). I situated Palestinian cultural production in the context of ideological resistance to the occupation of historical Palestine and the



dispossession of Palestinian refugees, and related it to movements of decolonising cultural resistance. I argued that street art is an attempt to disrupt dominant discourses and give visibility to narratives that are marginalised or suppressed. However, this study also problematized Palestinian cultural resistance. By reflecting on the dangers of romanticising resistance and highlighting the complex and intersecting working of power, I have tried to keep in mind that the affirmation of reified national identities can also become a coercive form of power. Informed by Diana Allan's (2013) critique of Palestinian nationalist discourses and Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) "romance of resistance", I assessed the notion of Palestinian identity as a reified concept passed on from generation to generation and examined how the tensions between the right of return and civil rights in Lebanon are reflected in street art.

While on the one hand this study attempted to refrain from reducing everything to politics and to look critically at nationalist discourses, on the other hand my aim was to highlight Palestinian resourcefulness and creativity in a way that rejected representations of refugees as victims or reduced them to humanitarian subjects. Although I was concerned with critically examining nationalist rhetoric, I was also driven by the need to do justice to the claims and demands expressed by the artists I met and to discuss their views on art and cultural resistance. By focusing on the ingenious talents of Palestinian camp residents, I tried to respond to the challenge posed by Khalil, a young Palestinian man who pointed out the issues of positionality and the lack of agency in studies on Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

If Khalil ever reads this study, he might find that its focus on content and the social meaning of art in refugee camps fails the purpose of discussing Palestinian talents. By not engaging sufficiently with the aesthetic value of the works of Palestinian artists, I recognise the shortcomings of my analysis, which is more concerned with the political and social implications of Palestinian art. The actors in my study were not discussed primarily as artists, but mainly as camp residents who use art to make a variety of claims. This thesis was not focused on the aesthetic value and quality of the works examined, but rather on the resourcefulness of artists who, despite living under stifling restrictions and oppressive surroundings, create defiant, inspiring and touching works.

Although I hope I have not failed the people who kindly answered all my questions, helped me with my research and guided me through Burj al-Barajneh, Shatila and Beddawi (but also fed me, opened their homes and were willing to share their time and friendship with me), I am aware that my impressions of refugee camps as a short-term foreign visitor are limited and might be problematic for some. My interpretation of walls as symbols of oppression, in particular, might be opposed by camp residents who see them as elements delimiting spaces of attachment, affection and belonging. However, this study aimed at examining walls and barbed

wire as more than symbols of physical confinement, since it argued they are representative of the impasse of statelessness and the restrictions faced by Palestinian refugees.

Ultimately, this study has been about the ways people living under difficult conditions overcome restrictions through their creative talent and resourcefulness. Like Mahmoud Darwish's poem *The Prison Cell*, quoted in the introduction, it has been about the power of creativity. It focused on the accomplished artist who turns barbed wire from refugee camps into sculptures exhibited around the world, on the unknown artisans who carve maps of Palestine on discarded pieces of wood and the young activists who write defiant messages and bring colour to the walls of refugee camps. This thesis showed how Palestinians appropriate and subvert the elements of their exclusion and oppression by turning them into objects of beauty that transcend limitations and restrictions.



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