



The Writing on the Wall: Language, Healing, and the Wild Man*

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Graffiti covers nearly every inch of Kalandia refugee camp, running along its crumbling walls into the adjoining suburbs of nearby Ramallah and towards the fortified Israeli checkpoint and disused airfield that command its southern entrance. Most is in looping Arabic, but broken phrases in English, Spanish, and Hebrew insistently interpose themselves. On a patch of fresh white paint, an awkward hand has scrawled

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"Kalandia...Camp The White Home, La Pital of Refugees. We are Concrete We are Blood of Gesas Orginal." There are invocations to Latin American revolutionary Simon Bolivar and the Babylonian lawgiver Hammourabi. Nearby, the words "Kalandia Is the Heart of the World but the World is Without Kalandia," framed by the letters "INTERNACional," confront the remains of a gutted minibus.



Conversations in the camp

Questions about Bolivar and the liberation ideology on the wall are forwarded - through winding alleys - to Abu Marmar, a robust but polite man who runs a youth center in the middle of the camp, part of a union of facilities encompassing most of the West Bank and Gaza. "We have an emigrant; he is one of us and used to live here. He traveled abroad to Venezuela and then he returned," he explains circumspectly. "He tries to give examples by giving words - on one hand, the way we use it and, on the other hand, what the meaning is in other parts of the world." A kind of poetry, perhaps? "Yes, he is like this. He tries to find the same ends of words and phrases."

"He seems to write his own philosophy."

Abu Marmar continues. "And once he wrote a kind of article, talking about global, or international solidarity. He is trying to convince us that there is no difference between Arab people and Spanish people - that we are the same. We gave the other nations so much."

Reflecting, he adds: "I always say that this is a form of expression, it's a kind of shout, a voice. He is the only one who writes in English. And in Hebrew also. The others who write, they write to their own people."

"It's not easy to call him, because he disappears sometimes," says Abu Marmar, when asked and adds, as if to explain, "He writes all the time, on any piece of paper. He even writes on the street itself," motioning to the floor. "And he is very fond of cleaning any area. He is busy all the time, cleaning something. Sometimes you think he's trying to show us what he is doing," continues Abu Marmar. A young volunteer named Nasser, who has joined the conversation, interrupts, smiling apologetically. "In my opinion, he is very intelligent, but he seems to be mad," he says and taps his head. "That's your opinion," replies the older man coldly.

"We in the union, we write in English too" he says suddenly. From a bookshelf, he produces a handful of bumper stickers, in red, black, yellow, silver, and copper. They are printed in Arabic, with bold English translation, and read: "YES to International Protection for Palestinian Refugees; Return is an Inalienable and Non-Negotiable Right; Their Independence is Our NAKBA. Return, Jerusalem and Self-determination Our Struggle Will Continue; The Right of Return is Never Outdated; Normalization with the Occupation Contradicts the Right of Return; Return and Restitution are Our only Choice; International Law is the basis

for the Solution; YES to the Implementation of UN Resolution 194."

Kalandia knows its global jurisprudence, yet this is an idiom that is rapidly fading in relevance in the West Bank and Gaza; UNGA 194, whose reiteration over the years has enshrined the rights of Palestinian refugees, is now - along with Kalandia camp - 52 years old. The latest UN Security Council Resolution on the Arab Israeli conflict, passed in March 2002 to wide international acclaim, makes no reference to this document - or, for that matter, to any other outstanding resolutions on the conflict. The languages that echo among the walls of Kalandia are stranded in time, caught between a bitter past and an indifferent present. Maybe one has to be mad to believe in liberation ideology in this place.

Kalandia

As the conversation turns to the camp itself, Abu Marmar unearths a photocopied fact sheet. "It claims the camp was established in 1949," he says, "but UNRWA's charter was not approved until December 8, 1949, and it began providing services in May 1950." Like the rest of Kalandia's residents, he does not like it when the details of history slip. Cramped into an area of approximately 3.5 sq. km., the 10,000 strong community struggles for coherence; over time, the camp has merged with the surrounding satellite villages of Ramallah. On its outskirts, better-off residents have built lime stone villas that blend imperceptibly with the outlying private housing construction that emanate from the nearby city. "Even to the inhabitants, it is difficult to distinguish between the camp borders and the land that was leased by UNRWA at that time," says

Abu Marmar.

As if to anchor it in time, the walls of the youth center are stacked with artifacts documenting Kalandia's history: black and white photographs of tent cities, a hemp grain sack dated 1950 and stamped with the UNRWA insignia, and a complete run of *National Geographic* magazines. The earliest issue dates to December 1968 and contains an article on Jerusalem, occupied by Israel the preceding year. In the article, the American journalist can barely contain his excitement at the new world uncovered by the conquest and narrates a colonial adventurism effortlessly couched in touristy travel prose, in the best tradition of the magazine.

The camp itself is full of permanent tourists, displaced by the roaming colonial spirit. "Most of the refugees come from Lydd, Ramle, and the western sector of Jerusalem. After the 1967 war, the Israeli military also expelled the inhabitants of the villages of 'Imwas, Yalo, and Beit Nouba," says Abu Marmar. He draws three pencil lines converging from the north, west, and south on Kalandia. "The camp joins forty eight villages from these regions and six cities, most of which were destroyed." Abu Marmar comes from a village called Esleen, 22 km. west of Jerusalem, which suffered the same fate. "After demolishing the villages, they established a park on the land - it's called Canada Park."

The uses of language

The residents of the camp struggle to keep up with the changing names and words that history thrusts on them. Today, local school children begin learning English at an early age - a novelty introduced by the Palestinian Authority during the heyday of the Oslo process.

"According to the new policy of the Palestinian curriculum, they should start from first class. English is the second language of Palestine," notes Abu Marmar. In a conversation a few years ago with a journalist, Mohammed Shtayyeh - the director of a Palestinian agency established in 1994 to direct new development projects in the West Bank and Gaza - prided himself on pushing this reform. The purpose was to enable Palestinians to communicate with the world, he said - to prepare them for globalization.

In Kalandia these days, globalization begins and ends at the Israeli checkpoint. Since the outbreak of the Intifada, Israeli closures have crippled the Palestinian economy and mired the camp in grinding poverty. Nearly half of its male residents are unemployed. "Before the Oslo Accords, most of the people in the camp depended on work in the Israeli market. After the Accords, we had a big number of the people working in the Palestinian labor market, but during the Intifada, most firms and companies, especially in the construction field, minimized their work," says Abu Marmar. "We have a policy to help fund some people or to divide the work among them;" a drop in the ocean, he acknowledges.



What English goes around the camp these days accordingly narrates only its bitter horizons. Midway into the conversation, Abu Marmar's ten-year old son drops off a school essay: it's entitled "A Moment from Al Intifada" and describes an excursion with his family. "The car stopped waiting the daily crowded road near Kalandia airport. We saw clashes between the Israeli soldiers and our Palestinian youth. Suddeny, [corrected with small d], we felt and heard a very strong bomb hit our car. There were rubber bullets. We got scared. My sister and my brother cried... We smelled tear gas as well, and we all cried. The end," penned in soaring letters, and checked "V.Good."

On televised call-in shows broadcast regularly during the early months of the Intifada, Palestinian psychologists often suggested that children be provided with such opportunities to express their daily traumas. Daily shootings and night-time bombings have wrecked havoc with them; schools report that students suffer frequent attention lapses and have difficulties concentrating on their work. Many teenage boys are showing symptoms of infantilization, including bed wetting, and sucking their thumbs. Writing and painting - whether on paper or walls - lends a particular significance to this individual suffering and, as is the case with graffiti, endows it with collective meaning

"Sometimes you find a kind of poems, but political poems, everywhere. Or very famous statements or sayings," says Abu Marmar. "For instance, 'An adventurer begins a revolution, and a coward gains the rewards.' It's an international one, not Palestinian. I heard such things in the Soviet Union." He studied in Moscow

from 1982 to 1984 on one of the numerous East Bloc scholarships granted to Palestinian during the Cold War. He learnt cinematography and fluent Russian - a beautiful language, he muses. Sometimes, he takes a camcorder from the center and films the children in the camp, but his only way of supporting himself and his family is to do odd plumbing jobs when opportunity arises. Like Kalandia, Abu Marmar lives suspended in irrelevant languages, increasingly useful only as a reflexive poetic therapy.

Transcripts

The graffiti on the walls occupy a particularly privileged position among the collective exercises in writing undertaken by Kalandia, straddling two uprisings against Israeli occupation and inexorably embedded in the cycles of subversion and resistance that they enact. "It's a kind of expression by people. The activists of the Intifada write it, and there is some writing there from the first Intifada," says Abu Marmar. "They say 'You still live in our hearts, we remember you, we will follow you, follow the way you lived...'. They talk about revenge also, a kind of letter to prisoners in Israeli jails, asking the international community to free them. Also a kind of threat to collaborators with Israel."

Less notably, the graffiti also convey the camp's insecurities vis-à-vis its own national leadership. Kalandia is a stronghold of Yasir Arafat's Fatah faction; yet, like the increasingly unruly grassroots elements of this movement, it remains uneasy about the concessions that their leader might make at their expense. Conciliatory pronouncements assuring the international community of the PA's

willingness to be 'flexible' in the implementation of the right of return provoke alarm and outrage in the camp. Its residents interpret this language, heard frequently around the time of the Camp David negotiations, as a creeping renunciation of their rights. While expressing support to the PLO or Yasir Arafat, the graffiti also demand the implementation of UNGA 194 and express the camp's desire to be heard by the powers that guide the refugees' fate by asking for a general strike or demanding a national committee for the Intifada.

The camp's location mirrors these precarious politics and adds daily fuel to its collective trauma. Kalandia is caught in a no-man's land, nominally under the purview of the Palestinian Authority, but like much else of the West Bank, *de facto* ruled by the Israeli army. The army commands the edge of the camp through a heavily fortified checkpoint, which has become a favorite backdrop for foreign journalists reporting from the Palestinian territories during the Intifada. The proximity to the checkpoint has inflicted a casualty rate on the community that is among the highest of all the camps in the West Bank. "We have a list - a big list," says Abu Marmar. "Most of them lightly injured but some cases very critical." Casualties currently number 726, of which nine are women. Kalandia also lays claim to 12 martyrs. Among them is the middle aged Ali Julali, who, in late summer of last year, drove up to the Israeli Ministry of the Defense in Tel Aviv and opened fire with a machine gun, injuring six soldiers and bystanders before being killed himself. "Because one of his friends were killed," claims Abu Marmar gravely.

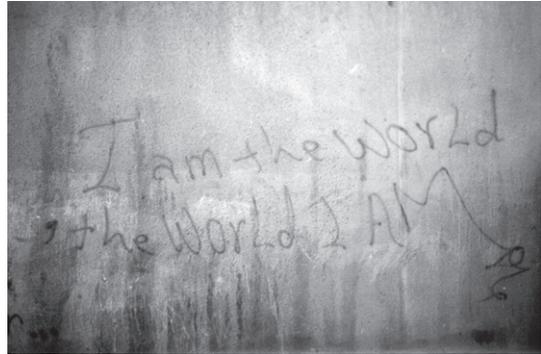
As an act of resistance, the graffiti is

closely implicated with the camp's daily entanglement with violence and retribution, a relationship inscribed during the first Palestinian uprising of 1987. Israeli military rule made the act of writing on walls in those days punishable by crippling fines and imprisonment. Anyone caught with the word "Palestine" scrawled across his or her house walls were liable to up to a year's imprisonment. "In the first Intifada, they arrested so many people here because of this," recalls Abu Marmar. Authorship is still a dangerous concept in Kalandia.

Liberation ideology

It is for this reason that Abu Marmar has been reluctant to name the writer on the wall. When he finally does, it is by acknowledgement of someone unusual. "He is called Abu Nahid," says Abu Marmar. "Nahid is his martyred son. He was 16 years when he was assassinated in the camp. There were clashes, they were throwing stones at the soldiers and they shot him as he was running away. Abu Nahid returned in 1996, one and a half year after they killed his son. He writes all the time, and cleans," he adds again for emphasis.

It takes a few days to find him, but he arrives at the center one balmy fall afternoon, a slightly built man in late middle age, dressed in a white galabiya, with keen, glinting eyes deeply set in a sun-shorn face and weathered hands that are perpetually in motion. "I was in Venezuela, Columbia, Costa Rica for twelve years," he begins, speaking quickly, excitedly mixing English, Spanish, and Arabic. Listening intently, Abu Marmar translates to the best of his ability. "Mostly I studied," Abu Nahid continues,



"neglecting my business. I went for work, but I didn't make money." But he did pick up other things in Latin America.

"Simon Bolivar said peace for the world. But US propaganda always lies under the peace, as if they were laughing at others," he says. "What is important to us is that there is a kind of ignorance about what is going on here. We live 1948 all our lives. We are not the problem for what happened in Palestine..." he continues. "We woke up to these results without anyone asking us. And they accused us of being responsible for this. We were very small and the big powers decided everything, and we reaped the results. It's like the American Indians in the US."

"We don't know how to talk about ourselves, as Arabs and Palestinians. What I hope for myself, I hope for other people - Jewish, American, Arab, all peoples - to understand that God, Truth has the same name. 'We are the world.' Why? Because we have some many things here in Palestine. We have Jews, Christians, Muslims, and we have the truth, and this is the most important thing. The whole world looks at us and does nothing. We are part of the world also, and they have to look at us. We ask the whole world not be in solidarity with us but to be with those who seek justice and truth, and we consider

ourselves to be among them. It is an open letter to the powerful, to the US - that there should be justice."

Abu Nahid asks how to say "justice" in English and pauses to write it down on a Post-It note, delighting in the discovery. The conversation turns to older texts and lost rules. "He is proud that Hammourabi was the first man to make rules, social rules," translates Abu Marmar. Abu Nahid nods. "Hammourabi said that power is not the truth. It means that, just because you are stronger than me, you cannot humiliate me."

Power and the wild man

Kalandia itself does not quite know what to think of Abu Nahid, but it accords him a stature of sorts, as someone who both lives and transcends its daily miseries. "The people here consider him part mad, even though he touches their hearts," says Abu Marmar. "What he does is unusual; he talks with everyone. Recently, he cleaned the entrance of the camp. I respect this. I used to do this work, but not daily like Abu Nahid." Does he work? "From time to time he trades with something, or exchanges something." "*Khurbi*." What does it mean? "Rubbish," attempts Abu Marmar. There is some debate and finally they agree on a translation. "Used material." "Second hand material." Abu Nahid trades in damaged goods.



Don't they care about the garbage? "They care, but I blame them because they have responsibility for themselves," says Abu Marmar. "They would like to shift this to UNRWA. I even wrote them a letter about it. I worked on a project. It took me five months. I wanted to convince people to protect themselves, to protect their community. I found that we had 3000 trees here before, now we have only 800, and we have thrown away 32,800,000 cigarettes." He rattles off a list of numbers, small and large. The list of devastation and debris is endless, tracing in the penultimate a physical transcript of occupation and resistance. "We have burned 600 tires and 10,950 teargas canisters since 1987," counts Abu Marmar.

Over the space of two Intifadas, history has piled wreckage upon wreckage on the camp. Part testimony, part self appointed emissary, Abu Nahid tries as best he can to intervene in the devastation, but events have always had a way of overtaking him, beginning with his murdered son. "I hoped very much to see him at this age," he recalls. "He was 16 at the time. On the 28th of March 1994, I heard that Nahid was injured with his brother. I didn't see them from 1985 to 1994. I tried on that day to go back. I bought a ticket and went to the Israeli consulate, but they didn't let me return. I felt guilty in a way. Seventeen days later, I managed. His brother recovered, but Nahid was martyred."

Perhaps in atonement, he takes strength from his minute interventions. "I feel strong. I am full of power," he says. "Hammourabi also believes that the power you have inside is more important than imposing your power on others." This is his advice to the world: "Try to say what you have in mind. Don't be shy to talk about things. I am not thinking about

myself. I am thinking about how to explain my experience to make it relevant to everything in the world. I write terms, very concentrated phrases, which reflect my ideas, philosophies, and opinions. What we see in daily life, concerning many things, the details, very few people see it. People in general don't concentrate on details. Even we feel our leaders talk in general terms."

Translations

Lost both to the world and their own leadership, Kalandia talks mostly to itself these days, in an endless cycle of forgetting and remembering, writing and rewriting, violence and retribution, in which graffiti becomes an act of collective significance in part because it is, or was, punishable. In effect, the writing on the wall approaches a meaning of authorship that splits modernity and its instrumentalization of the sacred and secular, power and violence. As Michel Foucault reminds us:

"Speeches and books were assigned real authors, other than mythical or important religious figures, only when the author became subject to punishment and to the extent that his discourse was considered transgressive. In our culture and undoubtedly in others as well discourse was not originally a thing, a product, or a possession, but an action situated in a bipolar field of sacred and profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous. It was a gesture charged with risks..."¹

Ironically, by all evidence, God, or whoever reigns in his place these days, has forgotten this corner of the Holy Land. The wind from paradise blows only damaged goods though Kalandia, carrying faint echoes of revolutions that once were and a

language no one understands. Yet here too, a cleaner can become a self-healer, collective confessor, and speaker of lost truths: the angel of broken memory; shaman of small things. If you can read what they have to say.

As the conversation closes, Abu Nahid grows impatient, racing from thought to thought and mixing his Spanish and Arabic mercilessly, thinking that I understand. But what follows begins to make less and less sense. I cannot tell if he is mad, or if it is merely the words that are failing us. He does not slow down, does not let up. He is convinced he speaks a language I should know.

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¹ Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977. pp. 124-127

Selected imagery drawn from Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991., and Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, Fontana, 1992.