

*Reflections*  
**Carnal Valleys,  
or Walking in  
Jerusalem in the  
1990s**

Rochelle Davis

In the 1990s, I walked all around Jerusalem. Tomes have been written about religious sentiments aroused by walking the streets of this Holy City. The very stones radiate sanctity, history, and faith. People spend vast resources to get here, to feel its power and walk the streets of Jerusalem. I had no such desire or experiences because I walked in the city not as one of these tourists of faith, but as a foreigner living here in order to conduct research and work. I walked among the sacred places, the purveyors of faith and practicing worshippers every day, but was more immersed in the life of the contemporary city; the city whose Palestinian inhabitants struggle to maintain some grip on. I was prepared for all of these elements of living in Jerusalem, the holy reverence and the steadfast resistance, and I learned a great deal from living these experiences. I was not prepared however, for the base mundaneness that I bumped into while walking in the city.

I walked at least part of the way to work every morning. I would make my way by shared taxi from where I lived in 'Izzariya, on the east side of the Mount of Olives, into the city. The Israelis had recently put up checkpoints, and I lived on what they decided would be the West Bank side of the checkpoint. It was, in comparison to the checkpoints of today, a fairly primitive stand of cement blocks with well-armed soldiers stopping cars that lined up politely along the road. We'd all hold up our identity cards, and I my American passport; they'd look us over, and on most days we'd go through. When it looked like the Israelis were being particularly challenging, or turning people away, the taxi drivers would know to take us over Tal'at al-Shayah to the Mount of Olives, through al-Tur and down via Sawaneh into the city. But our normal

route took us from ‘Izzariya up to Ra’s Qubsa and around the curve of the Mount of Olives where all the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim holy places would come into view. Breathing in this vision of the city’s majesty was a good start to the morning and end of the day. I would get out at Bab al-Sahira (al-Zahra), retrieve office mail from the post office at the corner of Jericho Road and then walk up Salah al-Din Street to the Muna family’s Educational Bookshop where I would buy the day’s newspapers, and continue walking through the city to Shaykh Jarrah, passing the American Colony hotel, the petrol station, and the neighborhood’s historic mosque (referred to rather inauspiciously on a British Mandate map as *Jami‘ Shaykh al-Harah*). I’d continue down the road past Wadi al-Joz, where on occasion, religious Jewish men would hurry by on their way to visit the tomb of Shim’on HaTzediq (Simon the Just). The whole walk was usually punctuated by army jeeps speeding among Palestinian cars honking those heart-stopping grunt horns whose sound does not yet have an English word. I would repeat this journey in reverse on the way home.

It was on these long treks to and from work that I experienced the more mundane, perhaps I should say carnal and base, elements in the act of walking in Jerusalem. And while this experience is not unique to me, I would posit that most male foreigners will not have suffered it. Amidst the bustle of cars, the rush of people shopping, children with ginormous bookbags squirreling in and out of the pedestrian traffic, I walked through the city and heard a twenty-something man with a mustache and muscles turn his head and say: “Can I fuck you?” My surprise was not so much at the question or the language, or even the request itself, but at the crudeness of the request. And that the request was so incongruous with both the holiness that pervades all narratives of the city, and Palestinians’ earnest resistance to Israeli encroachments on their constantly policed lives. With all of these other goings-on, it seemed there was little space for such carnal activities to occur.

Let me be clear: this is not about me. I am no stunning embodiment of womanhood oozing sexy fuckableness. I made it my goal to walk with purpose and to dress like a nun. I knew it was about power of men over women, of Palestinians over foreigners, but I also struggled to understand the method. The man swaggered by me and thrust his request in my face, which he did with the vulgarity of a porn film or a Tel Aviv nightclub pickup scene. There was nothing of the Arab, urbane, charm of the people I knew from work, or the careful, polite and respectful interactions I had with the shopkeepers and share-taxi drivers of East Jerusalem. My point is not just that Jerusalem makes people expect the virtue of the holy and the principles of the steadfast. Palestinians have always lived their lives in this environment, always out of sight of those who think only of faith and politics – to which any search of nineteenth- and twentieth-century pilgrimage narratives or political tracts will attest. My point is also that the question illustrates the unique confluence of what the city has become – divided in half in 1948, the eastern half occupied and sidelined by Israel since 1967, and in recent years the host of a huge number of secular tourists. That some Palestinian men in the city seek to get some pleasure or power from what the situation has imposed upon them should not be discounted or even discouraged. But I

was astounded because it was something so local and unique to the city.

It was outside the city that I came to realize the local specificity of these crude requests. My house was just outside Jerusalem in the Shayyah neighborhood of 'Izzariya, an area as crowded as Salah al-Din street in East Jerusalem. With the advent of the checkpoints, Shayyah had become the beyond-the-checkpoint transit taxi station – an area filled with non-residents, strangers, Bajjalīs heading south to Bethlehem or north to Ramallah, Jericho residents heading east, and people from al-Bireh, Ramallah, Nablus, or Jenin heading to those places. Men were everywhere. I would get out of the shared taxi, tour the shops to buy fruit, vegetables, pasta and such, and then walk up the hill to my house. Every day here, just outside the city, I would encounter many men passing through, none of whom I had ever seen before and who had never seen me. Never once did they talk to me, or utter anything rude about me. Sure they looked at me – I was probably one of the very few foreigners living in the area who ventured to walk around. But these men were respectful and reasonable. I felt that this was my home, and that I belonged here. While Jerusalem which was so close, so absolutely incredible, so symbolic, so laden with meaning – was also an unpleasant place to walk in, requiring my weary hyper-vigilance. I practiced parries in preparation for these crude, linguistic thrusts.

At one corner in a busy east Jerusalem street, a pre-teen made eye contact with me and furtively offered up “I fuck-fuck you?” I wondered if he knew what he meant, and if he could even do what he proposed. Then I wondered if I even knew what he meant . . . self-doubt made me ask my Palestinian friends about the new word and what it might mean. Was it twice as much? Was it just a little bit? Perhaps just a little bit more to sweeten it all, as the Lebanese’s lovely *bon jour-ayn* also offers. We commiserated about what has happened to the city, and I began to learn to walk among the fuck-fuck men.

Those living in the city of course have the right to live as they want, not as everyone else thinks they should. But the city has been changing dramatically over the course of the last twenty years. With most trade and economic ties cut from the rest of the West Bank, East Jerusalemite men now find work in West Jerusalem in Israeli restaurants, bars, and streets. They see different mores and means of seduction and also undoubtedly participate in sexual conquests – as both conquerors and conquered – not only finding sexual fulfillment but also being part of an orgiastic tournament on the political stage. Increased global wealth and travel has made more secular tourism possible. Thus, the city has become not only a site for young and old to visit and experience, but has also turned the tourists themselves into sites for residents to tour with and among, including their bodies, when available.

These situations of power asymmetries – Israelis, foreigners, Palestinians, men, women – and sex are difficult to unravel. Glenn Bowman captured much of this dynamic of power and desire in his work “Fucking Tourists: Sexual Relations and Tourism in Jerusalem’s Old City.”<sup>1</sup> Bowman described the Palestinian tourist merchants in the Old City within these power plays: “their passivity in the face of the vacillating demands of groups of foreigners endowed with economic and social

superiority was counterbalanced, in the particular setting of the Jerusalem *suq*, by their development of an aggressive sexuality focused on the females of the tourist populations.”<sup>2</sup> While I thought of my presence on the streets of East Jerusalem as fundamentally un-tourist-like – I was there to work for Palestinians in a Palestinian owned and funded research institution – as a foreigner, I still fit visually into the cast roles.

But those who fit me into this role of female tourist were confronted by my assertion of not fitting that role. Again, walking on a Jerusalem street, I was approached by a man who growled his desire to bed me. I stopped to tell him عيب؟ عليك! شو هل حكي؟, “Shame on you! What kind of talk is that?” His eyes grew wide as he sheepishly stuttered out, [متأسف ما عرفتش انك عربية] “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were an Arab.”] I took his response as a victory of sorts, for my Arabic at least, even if I still looked every bit the tourist. I imagined my response to him should have been, [متأسفة ما عرفتش انك حيوان] “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were such a rude bastard.” But I also took comfort in the fact that perhaps Palestinian women were spared this crude approach. Or at least spared the crude English.

Some days I couldn’t face it and chose ways to avoid the fuck-fuck men (and boys), so I took the back way, through the curvy residential alleys behind Salah al-Din street. I remember one particular day when I lamented more than ever what had become of the city. I was enjoying the silence, walking along the narrow streets between the rows of stone houses. A man was painting the wooden eaves under the tile roof of a house, singing as he painted. I half-listened to the traditional tune as I walked and I heard myself mentioned in the sung verse that he was making up as he worked, [البنيت البيضاء الماشية . . .] [the white girl walking down the street . . .] This was the cultural moment I imagined – Arab men being Arab men seducing women through poetry and sweet words. And I understand that the fuck-fuck men have learned to enter into a different cultural moment – that of the foreigners and the Israelis that they interact with daily where men pursue women more directly . . . I realized that it was my stereotyping or expectations that had caused my shock (above and beyond the crudeness of it all). I wanted them to be what I imagined them to be, like the singing painter – charming, urbane, and suave. Instead, they have become an underclass and an undereducated minority who work in the kitchens, gardens, and streets of the rulers. They could reverse some of these power inequalities with foreign women who came into the Palestinians’ space in East Jerusalem (unlike Israeli women who didn’t). And yet, foreign women still retained the power to leave, to go wherever their money and passports can take them.

But I also knew the city had a different history. In the course of living there, I conducted a research project on Jerusalem before 1948, focusing specifically on the Arab, Muslim, and Christian social and economic life in the city.<sup>3</sup> I collected oral histories from residents of the city and read books and articles on the subject. I knew the names of the families inside and outside the wall. I heard stories of going to the cinema (none existed in East Jerusalem in the 1990s), discovered that Jerusalem had twenty-four bookshops owned by Palestinians in the 1940s (in the 1990s there

were no more than five or six in East Jerusalem), that people listened to Palestine Broadcasting Service (no Palestinian radio exists today in Jerusalem), that Katie Antonius had a literary salon, that Khalil al-Sakakini and others were members of a literary club, and that there were Palestinian boxing and football teams organized around railway and police workers groups, among others. Jerusalem before 1948 was not only a site of middle- and upper-class modernity, but it had flourished by creating new alliances, economic investments, and activities that pulled people of all classes into public spheres they had not known before. This is not to say that the city was pure and virtuous; rather the opposite was true. Wasif al-Jawhariya's memoirs, *Life of a Vagabond Oud Player*, "tell a tale of a Late Ottoman and early Mandate Jerusalem with a thriving nightlife and a considerable degree of intercommunal interaction and cultural hybridity."<sup>4</sup> There was sex, drugs, music – well-detailed in al-Jawhariya – but without the late-twentieth century's sexual liberation, the free-wheeling, well-heeled, and adventure seeking foreign tourists, or the Israeli occupation's subjugation of Palestinians. Jerusalem's modern history that I was coming to know never gave any indication of what East Jerusalem was going to become at the end of the twentieth century – isolated, under siege, and lacking in everything from educational opportunities to garbage collection. The carnal valleys that made walking in the city as a foreign female rather daunting seems to have also given way to another city in the twenty-first century. In recent years men and women have become decidedly more religious, in speech and outward appearance as well as behavior, and there were fewer foreigners walking the streets of East Jerusalem.

*Rochelle Davis teaches anthropology at Georgetown University. Her book, Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced, was published in 2011 by Stanford University Press.*

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 *Critique of Anthropology* 9 (1989): 77-93.
- 2 Bowman, 77.
- 3 [http://www.badil.org/phocadownload/Badil\\_docs/publications/Jerusalem1948-CHAP2.PDF](http://www.badil.org/phocadownload/Badil_docs/publications/Jerusalem1948-CHAP2.PDF)
- 4 Salim Tamari, "Wasif Jawhariyyeh, Popular Music, and Early Modernity in Jerusalem," in *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 29.