

Rachel's Tomb Narrative Counterspaces in a Military Geography of Oppression

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Abstract

The Rachel's Tomb area and nearby checkpoint 300 in the north of Bethlehem have become an arena of cultural opposition to an Israeli geography of oppression that excludes, fragments, shrinks, and closes off Palestinian space. The article describes how a spatial-narrative politics – articulating counter-narratives through the strategic use of space – has helped to rewrite the Israeli military geography of power and control. Over the last fifteen years both locals and foreigners in the area have inscribed narrative discourses of home, freedom, and welcoming into this geography in rhetorical contrast to the discourse of military power. While opposition to the Wall is important in all these practices, Van Teeffelen considers the Wall as part of a broader military geography rather than standing by itself. Oppositional politics is illustrated by analyses of statements of daily life *sumud* or steadfastness, examples of Palestinian Christian religious practices, the Palestine marathon in Bethlehem, and the iconic graffiti of British artist Banksy. The author reflects upon the potential of a spatial-narrative politics consisting of three stages: affirmation of rootedness, creative opposition, and border-crossing. The arts, religion, sports and political struggle, while fundamentally different human experiences, have in principle a potential to transcend borders toward a more hopeful horizon while connecting local and global narratives.

Keywords

Rachel's Tomb; Bethlehem; *sumud*; Israeli checkpoints; Israeli occupation; Palestinian Christianity; Palestine Marathon; Wall graffiti; narrative politics.

Over the years the Rachel's Tomb area and nearby checkpoint 300 in the north of Bethlehem have become an arena of cultural opposition to an Israeli geography of oppression which excludes, fragments, shrinks, and closes off Palestinian space. I will describe how a spatial-narrative politics – articulating counter-narratives through the strategic use of space – has helped to rewrite the Israeli military geography of power and control. Over the last fifteen years both locals and foreigners in the area have inscribed narrative discourses of home, freedom, and welcoming into this geography in rhetorical contrast to the discourse of military power. I will illustrate oppositional politics by brief analyses of statements of daily life *sumud* or steadfastness; examples of Palestinian Christian religious practices; the Palestine marathon in Bethlehem; and the iconic graffiti of British artist Banksy.¹

While opposition to the Wall is important in all these practices, the article will consider the Wall as part of a broader military geography rather than standing by itself either as a source of oppression or target of opposition. Nor will we exclusively pay attention to graffiti on the Wall as means of opposition² but rather also look for oppositional practices in the neighborhoods in the “shadow” of the Wall. The advantage of this more inclusive approach is that a broader understanding is reached of the many different forms of opposition to oppressive space,³ including their local-international interactivity. Finally, I will reflect upon the potential of a spatial-narrative politics consisting of three stages: affirmation of rootedness; creative opposition, and border-crossing.

Methodology

In preparing for this study I have collected information and insights through unstructured participatory observation – with the emphasis on participatory, as I have lived in the Rachel's Tomb area over twenty years in different roles: those of activist, project researcher, guide, student adviser, and cultural worker connected to the nearby Sumud Story House.⁴ Along with colleagues at the Arab Educational Institute, I was involved in the development of a “wall museum” consisting of hundreds of weather-resistant posters fixed to the Wall telling daily life stories of Palestinian women and youth.⁵

From the viewpoint of a spatial-narrative politics, I found especially my regular walks in this architecturally disfigured area useful – whether observing layers of graffiti that appeared on the Wall, for instance, or showing visitors wall-crossing perspectives from roofs in ‘Ayda refugee camp to the west of the tomb. Walking in the area, visiting people's homes, passing the checkpoint with my Palestinian partner and children – all have been instrumental in learning how local Palestinians have been forced to adapt their daily life to an often impossible economic, social, and traffic situation.

Rachel's Tomb

It looks now a distant past that the Rachel's Tomb area⁶ was the welcoming gate

to Bethlehem. Since 1967, the area's central thoroughfare, the Hebron Road, was minutes away from Jerusalem by car. Located along this road, Rachel's Tomb was a humble structure not much visited by pilgrims from the three monotheistic religions before Gush Emunim marked it as an important Jewish pilgrimage site in the 1990s.⁷ Inside the city visitors encountered the well-known V crossing where the left road wound to the Church of Nativity and the straight road followed Road 60 to Hebron. Through the main Hebron Road, the Rachel's Tomb area took part in the identity of Bethlehem as a pilgrimage place with a symbolic message of peace.

In the decades after 1967 the area was not so much the zone of exclusion it would become but rather an area of connection notwithstanding the oppressive impact of occupation. The Hebron Road, with its stately houses, included a commercial area much visited by Israeli Jews and Palestinians alike given the short distance to Jerusalem and the relatively inexpensive shop and restaurant prices, along with a distinctly relaxed atmosphere. Refugee families from nearby 'Ayda camp remember how they visited the areas around Rachel's Tomb for picnic trips.

In the course of the Oslo years in the 1990s and during the second Intifada from 2000 onwards, two protective military walls – first a relatively small wall, then the present eight- to nine-meter high separation Wall – were built around the tomb, which had been de facto annexed to Israel in 2002 after an effective religious-Zionist settler lobby. The complex was linked by walls and roads to the main military checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, itself relocated a few hundred meters to the south to become the physical border of urban Bethlehem. The checkpoint was changed into a large-scale terminal in 2006.⁸

With the Hebron Road fragmented and the checkpoint relocated to another much narrower entry road, the area around Rachel's Tomb lost its center. During the second intifada the majority of shops along the main road had to close down. Many locals kept avoiding the area in the years after the end of the second intifada in 2005–2006, more so because the Israeli army remained physically present (streets along the Wall and stretches of the Hebron Road are area C), and kept searching homes or taking youths for interrogation or into prison. The tourist buses left the area as quickly as the army at the checkpoint and the traffic situation allowed them, with tourists gazing from behind the bus windows at the high walls, not realizing about their impact upon local residents.

With the military fortress around Rachel's Tomb as the center of the Israeli army's military presence in Bethlehem, it was not a surprise that this became a magnet for demonstrations of public anger, especially when youths from the nearby refugee camps 'Azza and 'Ayda clashed with soldiers. During politically volatile times hundreds of youths of the camps spent months or years in military prison. The wide Hebron Road near the Jacir Palace (previously Intercontinental) Hotel was regularly a "street of discontent"⁹ and featured days of stone throwing and running street battles with Israeli soldiers, sometimes cloaked in civilian wear to catch demonstrators, as happened during protests against the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in 2014.

Dehumanization by Spatial Means

During the second intifada in the period 2000–2004, Rachel’s Tomb developed into the dystopian architectural structure it has since remained. It is characterized by an elaborate system of exclusion, control, and surveillance, through cameras, watchtowers, and walls connected to the nearby checkpoint. The holy place itself is accessible for Jewish and international pilgrims only, and completely inaccessible for local Christians or Muslims. A large walled-in parking lot for visiting buses and military vehicles splits the north Bethlehem neighborhoods from ‘Ayda refugee camp. Along with the Israeli Jerusalem settlements to the north of Bethlehem – Gilo and the newer Har Homa – checkpoint 300 separates Bethlehem from Arab East Jerusalem including Bayt Safafa. The military geography is a key element in the fragmentation of the West Bank as a whole into a northern and southern part along with the walled imprisonment of Bethlehem and the adjacent towns of Bayt Jala and Bayt Sahur.¹⁰

The oppressive geography around Rachel’s Tomb is also of major influence on the micro level, on the shrinking and closure of spaces within the northern urbanity of Bethlehem. Both overcrowdedness and desolate lifelessness are typical of the area. Some quarters have lost their basic urban functions, while as a result of the walling, certain quarters between ‘Ayda camp and Rachel’s Tomb have become dead – an example of the killing of social space, or spacio-cide.¹¹

The related concept of infrastructural violence¹² is applicable here too. There is a fundamental lack of traffic arrangements and services in the area, such as suitable parking lots and access to main roads. Various streets and neighborhoods are periodically overcrowded by traffic due to a series of disruptive factors: a dysfunctional network of narrow roads; cars and tourist buses queuing in front of the checkpoint; the use of even narrower bypass roads by traffic coming from both directions, and especially the use of streets as parking areas at busy times of the day or year such as during Ramadan (all familiar phenomena nearby large checkpoints in the West Bank). A recent demand by the Bethlehem mayor to the Israeli army to allow inhabitants to make use of alternative underused parking areas along the Wall has been refused, unsurprisingly.¹³

The status of several sections as ‘area C’ makes it practically impossible to start new projects and efficiently arrange services like solid waste collection. Moreover, during the year 2020, local rumors spread that the Wall route in the area would be changed to connect Rachel’s Tomb directly to Jerusalem, with concomitant changes in the status of families who would then live “inside” the Wall, that is, in Jerusalem. The overall uncertainty has obviously diminished individual and institutional willingness to undertake new initiatives for services or project development in the area.

Meanwhile, international visitors coming from the highways in Jerusalem can walk through the checkpoint and along bypass roads to watch the unlikely wall configurations and wall route arbitrarily determined by appeal decisions at the Israeli Supreme Court. Well-known and prototypical is the Anastas family house surrounded by the Wall on three sides and with several dimensions of oppressive space: surveillance (by cameras

and from nearby watchtowers); shrinking and closed off space (the home is just a few meters from the Wall); fragmentation (separation from neighborhoods to the west of Rachel's Tomb), and exclusion (from Rachel's Tomb and Jerusalem).

Emergence of Creative Protest

Though some areas of Rachel's Tomb have clearly become marginalized, and strings of shops and workplaces or small industries have been closed-off as a result of the wall-building, the Rachel's Tomb area as a whole is not dilapidated. There are still many (upper) middle class houses inhabited by families who collected some wealth due to work in the broader tourism sector. Actually some of the area's marginalization has been overcome by the recent arrival of new souvenir shops and restaurants opening up near the Wall.

Streets of creative protest have emerged. The spatial violence in the area attracted cultural opposition in the form of graffiti and popular arts. For many years local public opinion was by and large against the "beautification" of the Wall. In that early period after the wall-building, roughly 2004–2007, the making of wall graffiti was enough reason for the Israeli military to take especially – but not only – Palestinians for interrogation or to prison. Over time an increase in graffiti works created a fait accompli for both the Israeli army and local Palestinians who had held political reservations about wall art. The arrival of foreigners brought its own dynamic, especially after the establishment of the Walled-Off or Banksy Hotel in 2017. It attracted small restaurants and "Banksy" souvenir shops, before the corona epidemic in spring 2020 put a temporary stop to the incoming of visitors. While it would not be correct to speak of Rachel's Tomb as a homogeneous neighborhood, the clashes and the cultural opposition lent an unintended shared identity for the people and places in the area.

Although still a proportionally smaller number of tourists in Bethlehem¹⁴ visit the Rachel's Tomb area, it concerns a strategically interesting variety of groups from the viewpoint of cultural opposition. The cultural activists as well as their audience involve locals and internationals, religious and secular, well-to-do visitors and backpackers. They are attracted by the Walled-Off Hotel and surrounding initiatives in an otherwise dead area unexpectedly on the way of becoming a second visitor center of Bethlehem.

To a certain extent a visitor infrastructure has been developed with networks that lower the threshold for visitors to come, involving taxi drivers, guides, vendors, and shopkeepers. Local NGOs bring and organize groups and provide meeting places, while the Walled-Off Hotel and other businesses, souvenir shops, and guesthouses provide opportunities for hospitality, reflection, and storytelling.

Spatial Narrative Politics

In the following I will analyze some relevant practices usually not brought together for purposes of comparison but important from the viewpoint of cultural opposition

in relation to space: the Palestinian civilian presence beside the Wall as a cultural statement of *sumud*; symbolic religious activities applied to the Bethlehem context of imprisonment; the annual Palestine marathon in Bethlehem; and Banksy's graffiti projects.

The cultural oppositional practices include meetings and activities nearby the Wall, performances along the Wall and inscriptions on the Wall. Actors and motivations are involved with very divergent types of investments and orientations: the local commercial hospitality and souvenir industry; the local and international tourist trade and pilgrimage services which bring and guide visitors with different needs and interests, the local NGOs with a combination of social and political orientations, and creative, mostly international artists often working outside any structure.

The cultural practices themselves are typically situated in a dialectic between keeping roots in a shrinking and fragmented space, on the one hand, and the symbolic restoration of widening human space and possibility on the other.

The oppositional spaces refer to a spatial-narrative politics characterized by:

- a civilian “*sumud*” presence adapting to but showing unacceptance, and symbolically disrupting the military geography of oppression;
- the largely non-strategized re-use of space to make narrative counterclaims of autonomy, opposition, and wall-crossing, opening up symbolic alternatives of freedom vis- à-vis military power;
- using the proximity of the Wall to create rhetorical, often playful, contrasts between civilian life and zones of exclusion;
- as part of this rhetorical contrast against exclusion, making the oppositional spaces typically inclusive, inviting or welcoming as in a new home, developing sustainable new geographies of visitor solidarities; and
- in sustaining and developing such bonds, connecting local narratives to broader narratives of freedom and solidarity, reaching out to wider audiences.

The cases are oppositional practices that give a new narrative dynamic to an area which by itself has become to a great extent robbed of urban life and meaning.¹⁵ Interestingly, the various initiatives to some extent counter the impact of the Wall. Thus, the incoming flow of international visitors to some extent denies the military geography as a tool of incarceration; the hospitality industry shows that there are ways to challenge the economic impact of the Wall, while cultural workers show that the dead area in the shadow of the Wall does not necessarily need to be culturally lifeless.

Sumud as a Cultural Statement

Existence *is* resistance is a larger story recognizable all over the world. Everywhere people are forced to fight and survive the impact of political injustice, inequality, conflict, and war. *Sumud*¹⁶ is actually a spatial-narrative mode of affirming a civilian presence that cannot be easily removed, even by force. Examples of common, often heroic *sumud* are families and individuals going on with life on their ancestral land despite being affected by settlements, Wall, checkpoints, or bulldozers. Rooted in the

land and environment, they do not give up and are prepared to rebuild their houses after destruction. Doing so, they oppose the exclusion effects of the geography of oppression, and in the end reject the dehumanization intended as a result of being stripped of living space and dignity.

Classical *sumud* is perhaps the less obvious form of spatial cultural opposition. By continuing their daily life – a protest simply through a living presence – families which reside in the shadow of the Wall deliver a statement of *sumud*. This includes improvised checkpoint economies close to the Wall and checkpoints such as street vendors selling wares to people passing the checkpoint, and restaurants or businesses which already existed before the Wall was built and were not in a position to leave, so adapted themselves to the new environment. An example is Claire Anastas' shop that turned from selling home utensils and decorations to holy land souvenirs with a "Wall" element.

Sumud can involve a purposefully relaxed statement of homely civil life in contrast to the controlling, excluding, closing, shrinking, and distancing mechanisms of the military structures' projection of power. For instance, the welcoming statement at the NGO Wi'am's entrance invites passersby to share a coffee in the tradition of "make hummus not walls." Entering the courtyard of the NGO brings visitors to a play garden which articulates the art of friendly presence in contrast to the controlling military watchtower nearby. At the *Sumud Story House* visitors are invited to have a conversation about daily life near the Wall. The House includes a tent-like space for storytelling which epitomizes the old Arab tradition of integrating space, meeting, hospitality, and storytelling. Initially set up as a meeting place for women in the neighborhood who were immobilized and despondent due to the inhospitable environment created by Wall and checkpoint, it nowadays profiles itself as a women's and family place for healing, socializing, and development activities. It also creates oppositional counterspaces near the Wall through arts, including a women's choir performing near – and against – the Wall. Like in the case of restaurants opening up besides the Wall, hospitality – whether mainly aimed at profit-making or in the service of a broader range of social and political purposes – inevitably becomes a cultural statement in rhetorical contrast to a Wall representing extreme exclusion.

Statements of cultural identity and heritage are also made in 'Ayda camp, not just in contrast to the Wall but in general opposition to a closed up, ugly, and dehumanizing environment – an opposition called "beautiful resistance" by the NGO Rowwad.¹⁷ The people and NGOs in 'Ayda camp actually continue to make a larger human statement against the vanishing of the Palestinian refugees' history even though the camp dwellers live in a radically shrunken and incarcerated environment. Cultural resistance is present in the display of national symbols of identity (like the Palestinian flag, map, or image of al-Aqsa), struggle (names of prisoners and martyrs mentioned on walls and houses in the camp), and history (village names and symbols, including the symbol of the key metonymically standing for the former home). The Noor Women's Empowerment Group invites foreigners to share meals and help to prepare them so as to learn Palestinian cooking; the income is used to educate disabled children.

Complementary to these statements of a “living” sumud as rooted presence are the cultural statements that directly oppose the wall.¹⁸ The Wall around Rachel’s Tomb has been covered with graffiti over the years, some remained untouched, some buried under layers of paint. Cultural oppositional statements are usually displayed or performed on or near the Wall which can alternately be a stage, background to photos and films, a place for graffiti, or a film screen itself (when painted white).

Some graffiti involves a discourse different than that of oppression, steadfastness, struggle, and resilience; some is rather non-political and visually expresses human freedom and the need for connecting: the graffiti of symbolically crossing the Wall – or walking over, flying over, looking through the Wall. Besides such visual popular arts practices, it involves the aural “crossing” of walls as well, such as the interactive singing or music making across roofs.¹⁹ Cultural opposition thus takes shape in various combinations of genres: forging links between stories of Palestinian rootedness and imprisoned civilian life; protesting about the injustice of walls and checkpoints; and liberating visions of wall-crossing.²⁰

In the case of Rachel’s Tomb the tactics are certainly not consistently oppositional and actually quite divergent, ranging the whole gamut from physical clashes to commercial business. Many businesses would wish to keep a measure of ambivalence as to whether they are engaged in opposition at all; as they normally do not regard their business as part of a collective social movement.

If we look at a common denominator, the counterspaces in Bethlehem’s case are at present primarily intended to raise awareness among the many largely unaware visitors and pilgrims. The spaces informally teach visitors about the social and political situation. They involve meeting places like social centers, guest houses, or restaurants and local souvenir shops where visitors sometimes listen to the shopkeepers’ stories, join a locally-made meal, or engage in practicing alternative arts. We’ll go through some of these practices here and follow-up with the main spatial-narrative elements that come into play.

Religion, Liberation Theology, and Justice Pilgrimage

While the large majority of its urban conglomeration is inhabited by Muslims, Bethlehem is still considered a “Christian” city in the way it is promoted in the international tourist and pilgrimage industry. The established tourism and pilgrimage industry faces the challenge of how to meet and negotiate the expectation patterns of pilgrims in order to raise attention to the imprisoned reality on the ground, such as in the Rachel’s Tomb area. Cultural-religious initiatives in Bethlehem typically have to balance a range of orientations: the theological discussion of how to relate Jesus’ birth narrative to the present day situation; the interest to meditate and pray inherent to a pilgrimage; the local economic interests of hospitality and souvenir sales to visitors; and the call for a creative or artistic kind of protest or opposition that would fit traditional or alternative forms of pilgrimage.

On the level of applied theology, there is the challenge to integrate the present-day Palestinian situation of injustice into new understandings of biblical stories about the birth of Jesus. Old-new stories are created, disrupting the Christmas story as a cozy, non-political family affair. Examples of connecting theological and present-day stories of oppression include the annual theological conference at the Bethlehem Bible College titled “Christ at the Checkpoint,” combining the local and global narrative. Once, back in the second intifada in the beginning of the 2000s, Roman Catholic Patriarch Michel Sabbah made the call to transform checkpoints into prayer places. The blending of stories may challenge those involved to go for a deeper, justice-oriented interpretation of the Bible inspired by a Christian liberation theology that evokes utopian, liberating, and border-crossing vistas of a new Jerusalem or alternatively adopts the call of the warning prophecies in the Old Testament critically reflecting on situations of oppression.

A common humanity through border crossing is present in joint spiritual meetings set against the geography of oppression. In alternative justice programs for visitors, including pilgrims and local believers, the counterspaces near the Wall and checkpoint are sometimes used to evoke biblical passages for spiritual reflection and healing, along with expressions of solidarity with the *samadin*. Think about the intensity in holding prayers, silent circles, and rituals reflecting upon the wounded places impacted by the wall. On a visit to Bethlehem in 2014, Pope Francis broke protocol to step out of the popemobile, touch the Wall and pray on the spot in order to dramatically make a point about the inhumanity of the Wall. Liturgies near the Wall have been organized since a long time, sometimes in the context of the World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel annually convened in September by the World Council of Churches, or as a statement of opposition during the building of the Wall, as in the years 2012–16 in the area near the monastery of Cremisan to the west of Bayt Jala. Visiting groups may join the weekly procession along the Bethlehem Wall organized by teams of Ecumenical Accompaniers, and watch a well-designed and -crafted icon of a tearful Mary on a wall section near the checkpoint, called “Our Lady Who Brings Down Walls.”

The improvised creation of spiritual counterspaces opens up possibilities for a symbolic restoration of human connection and possibility in opposition to the dehumanizing message of closed-up, shrunken, and fragmented space as a result of the Wall’s impact. On the practical level it allows for bonding across borders through hospitality and meetings between locals and visitors. The intensity of encounters such as at homes or NGOs along the Wall or in ‘Ayda refugee camp where inhumanity can be felt on a daily base, make meetings between locals and foreigners all the more meaningful. The theologian Mary Grey, who recently wrote a series of spiritual travel guides to the Holy Land and its peoples, speaks about “epiphanies of connectedness”²¹ possibly emerging during such encounters.

On the economic side, when Palestinian guides of visiting pilgrim groups pass the Rachel’s Tomb area to give visitors a taste of imprisoned life, there can be a remarkable mixture of commerce, creativity, and theology such as when visitors buy that well-known souvenir: an olive wooden nativity set with Wall and watchtower next to baby Jesus.

An applied liberation theology should inspire the formation of religiously inspired creative practices of counter-praying or designing counter-rituals. Calls for creative solidarity practices have been launched by religious working groups, and there have been here and there impulses in this direction. Near Rachel's Tomb visitors could once watch the public choreography of people walking in the shape of a "living star" beside and in opposition to the Wall; Palestinians showing visitors the holy family in a reconstructed nativity grotto in front of a military watchtower²²; or in situ performances by the aforementioned Bethlehem Sumud Choir for a CD called "the Birth of Jesus between the Walls."²³ Critical-playful cartoons and Christmas picture postcards show the Holy Family and the donkey interrogated and searched at the checkpoint.

Perhaps there is need for the development of an overall concept of counter-pilgrimage. Thus, Dutch theologian and sociologist Gied ten Berge pleads for the development of an annual inter-religious Rachel's Day on the "Bethlehem side" of the Wall at Rachel's Tomb, with pilgrims convening under the coverage of a tent.²⁴ Counterspaces for prayer would fit in; one local guest house opposite the Wall recently opened a room for inter-religious prayer. Importantly, an inter-religious quality to religious events near the Wall would make it possible to include local and international Muslim believers.²⁵ While learning about the pain, visitors may then also learn about Muslim-Christian living together within a diverse Palestinian historical identity, rather than hearing about stories of opposing "civilizations" often used in Israel to justify the Wall.

Marathon

A more secular form of "pilgrimage" is the annual Palestine Marathon in Bethlehem.²⁶ The space along the Wall is re-used to communicate new versions of the three oppositional cultural stories mentioned: the deliberate statement of sumud, the opposition to the Wall, and the crossing of walls symbolically reunifying Palestinians and peoples of the world. By simply participating in the marathon – participation is more important than the time clocked – many visitors express an embodied solidarity with local Palestinians who may cheer the participants if they do not themselves participate in the game. Sports too is a statement of homely civil life as reflected in the concept of sumud.

The opposition to the Wall is here present in the rhetorical contrast evoked by the mobility of people running or walking against the background of the immovable high wall and watchtowers at Rachel's Tomb – a suitable setting for photo and film, also for promotion purposes (for examples, see the website). Marathon-related pamphlets or stenciled graffiti on the Wall call for the right to movement in more than one sense. People's freedom symbolized by running stands in contrast to imprisonment by the Wall, as if the running aims at liberation from the clusters of the Wall and its fragmenting and shrinking impact (besides issuing a health warning). The opposition to the imposed geography of power and exclusion is also articulated in the annual

protest against the Israeli government's routine decision not to allow participation of athletes from Gaza.

The inclusive message of connectedness and peace across the nations fits the marathon as an Olympic sports game open to participants from all over the world (9,500 participants in the 2019 marathon). The colors of the Palestinian flag on the T-shirts and hats of scouts and others during the opening of the marathon suggest Palestine in the uncommon role of hosting other nations. Hospitality events before and after reinforce an atmosphere of peace and unity among participants. Where visitors stay at homes they have an opportunity to absorb the stories of household members.

In both the cases of liberation theology and the physically liberating marathon, Bethlehem as a symbolic capital of peace and hospitality is mobilized against the oppressive structures of fortified military borderscapes. This is achieved through the rhetorical force of spatial contrast and connecting between the homely local space and the transnational space of solidarity.

Banksy

Like the previous cases, Banksy's arts brand should be set in a broader ecology and not seen as standing by itself. It stands for a range of intersectional oppositional narratives: perhaps mostly the anti-militarist movement for Palestinian rights connected to anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. The Walled-Off Hotel established by Banksy in 2017 next to the Wall (famously advertised as having the "worst view in the world") leads visitors into a British tea room environment with plenty of sculptures and images playfully subverting the legacy of British colonialism and imperialism, among other things symbolized by the sitting figure of former British foreign secretary Balfour, from the Balfour Declaration, positioned at the opening of an exhibit about Palestinian reality and history of occupation and colonization.

The hotel-café has become a convenient starting and end point for explorers of the area. Near it is a place to buy paint for those interested to make statements on the Wall in front. Not all of Banksy's visuals are painted on the separation/apartheid Wall itself, but their meaning is clearly related to the presence of the larger Wall and the military system supporting it. Several small shops nearby sell Banksy's graffiti on posters and other souvenirs, and others copying Banksy or, like the also anonymous "Cakes Stencils" artist, bring their own graffiti themes of children living and playing in an absurd and violent world.²⁷

Banksy's art narrates the longing for imagined spaces of vulnerable freedom out of imprisonment. The girl in front of the Wall hanging onto balloons is the most familiar one, along with the harnessed bullet-proof dove with the olive branch in the beak, and the child climbing an endlessly long ladder to reach the top of the Wall. Banksy's arts point to some key oppositional narrative strategies which also come back in the previously mentioned practices: playing with an oppressive reality, and generalizing or abstracting the homely and the everyday.

Playfulness

Banksy's children are not stereotypical in their victimhood. With all their innocence, the children and youths pictured are typically *pro-active* in their playfulness, starting a pillow fight, using balloons to fly away, climbing a ladder, checking a soldier, or, as in the famous graffiti of the intifada youth, throwing a bouquet of flowers instead of stones.

Much of the graffiti at Rachel's Tomb shows playing children who symbolize innocence in an oppressive environment. Playfulness can relate to the narrative content of playing children but also to narrative form, when images play with physical or spatial laws or with social and political mores, as when political control is undermined by the destabilizing, flattening, or reversing of hierarchies so typical for nonviolent resistance stories and tactics. Examples of the last category include a child checking a soldier (graffiti copied from Banksy is to be seen in 'Ayda camp), the pillow fight (criticized for its implied symmetry of soldiers and Palestinian civilians), and the soldier checking a donkey.

In religious symbolisms too we see a play with conventional expectations. The combination of a military watchtower next to baby Jesus may elicit a laugh due to the disruption of the Christmas logic, though it is more than balanced by the gravity of both the theological message and the oppressive reality. Similarly, Banksy attempted a nativity that was opened at the Walled Off Hotel at Christmas 2019: the light of the guiding star entered through a hole in a simulacrum of the separation Wall splintered by a bullet. The dimension of playfulness is also present in the marathon's game-like nature, which transpires both in the run and in the festive and relaxed atmosphere around the event.

Playfulness is a universal element of aesthetic resistance to hegemonic structures. Play and humor fit the temporality and ephemerality, or the non-institutionalized nature, of much of international graffiti arts. An expression of the homely, children's playfulness opposes power, discipline, and dehumanization. The genre represents a light antidote to the heavy technological functionality of control, fragmentation and exclusion.²⁸ Like carnival it attracts and brings people together, crossing social borders and humanizing the political, especially in view of the grotesque absurdity and oppressive nature of the Wall. In popular culture, humor and play open up utopian liberating possibilities while also calling for negotiation, ambiguity, and openness between interpretative options – a resistance against interpretative closure.

Geography of Home

The playfulness of Banksy and other graffiti artists is intertwined with the *homely*. Oppositional paintings on the Wall show both the oppression and the resilience of homely daily life such as when children are shown to play under absurd circumstances. The contrast between human civil life and the wall geography is thus rhetorically intensified. This playfulness typically makes use of the dialectic between the homely-

familiar and the defamiliarization effect that happens when the home turns out to be not homely at all.

Home as a concrete project can become a base of resistance when its existence is under threat, as in the dramatic examples of sumud when particular houses such as those near the Wall and settlements are defended against the bulldozers. The grassroots Palestinian story of sumud, as it comes forward in, for instance, ‘Ayda refugee camp, is largely home-centered. However, in the context of the oppositional and border-crossing cultures as we see it in the Rachel’s Tomb area, the presentation of home and the homely is not a concrete but an abstract statement based on a generalized image of home as the microgeography familiar to people all over the world. In the graffiti the homely stands for a holistic sense of belonging and rootedness, an abstract sense of home vis-à-vis exclusion and fragmentation. The graffiti makes typical use of general, non-cultural portrayals of playing children or homely scenes understandable to all.

Many of the narratives of cultural opposition in Palestine evoke the multiple meanings and metaphors of home as a geography of rootedness, intimacy, and living together – which can never be assumed to be natural. Think of the meanings evoked by Palestinian experiences of destruction and rebuilding of homes, searching for the lost home, articulating homelessness as an existential condition, and, when the former do not apply to the fortunate, “living” the normal home as an opportunity to meet visiting others. Celebrating the intimate and hospitable home and homely such as during the time of feasts and occasions is a statement that opposes imprisonment. Again the home here is not so much a concrete, specific home but part of the generalized home and homeland in the Palestinian national narrative or in the universal narrative of home.

The narratives and tropes of such a general home can involve a reinvention of the home as a platform of border-crossing solidarity, a hospitable open house, like the “Tent of Nations”²⁹ where the inhabitants and guests gather in caves or stay in tents due to the impossibility to build a house on one’s own land though registered since Ottoman times. Or the earth itself becomes a common home without borders.

The message of many NGOs and shops in present-day Bethlehem is home-based too as ‘home’ is inextricably linked to Bethlehem as the traditional birth place of Jesus. The home and homely can be used as a viewpoint for describing oppression out of a vision of liberation. After all, the image of homely life is a strong symbol of peace.

Yet the home always risks to become a frozen, cliché concept, part of a conventional nativist, romanticizing arts. This risk is less present when the symbol of homely hospitality is illustrated through a range of civil human actions – whether doing arts and sports, praying, laughing, learning, investigating, or exchanging food and stories. This makes the dimension of playfulness and aesthetics all the more relevant. To prevent a stagnating cultural stillness or repetition, cross-fertilizing platforms can help a dialogue of creative solidarity between foreigners and locals. An example of such dialogue happens when Banksy’s metaphors are deservedly scrutinized (such as the pillow-fight).³⁰

Meeting Place: Enabling Interaction for Locals and Foreigners

Both the generalized symbol of the home and the principle of making reality playful render the oppositional discourses humanizing, recognizable, and negotiable for a broader audience of visitors. The foreigners' presence is important for generating a range of values – economics, of course, in an area dependent on tourism but also the generative value of border-crossing dialogues and an assessment of creative oppositional tactics. It should not be forgotten that foreign visitors benefit from the proximity of Bethlehem to Jerusalem as a pilgrimage and tourism center; the contrast with Gaza, where foreigners are barely allowed to come, is great. Besides occasions such as religious feast days, the marathon is a moment for gathering during spring while festival-like activities, such as the one organized by the NGO Holy Land Trust in summer 2019 near the Walled-Off Hotel, further help to raise publicity to the area. The local NGOs and commercial initiatives in the Rachel's Tomb area invite and attract foreigners representing a mixture of different groups including clergy, devoted pilgrims, journalists, academics, international solidarity activists, and NGO professionals.

Importantly, their presence makes the threshold higher for the Israeli army to intervene.³¹ Given the familiarity of Bethlehem as a pilgrimage place, the wide range of visiting internationals, including many who Israel does not want to alienate, provides some protection to locals.³²

Joint initiatives involve Palestinians and internationals as co-creators, participants, and audiences. Hospitable meeting places can be spaces of emerging possibilities; the Rachel's Tomb area does not lack meeting places for developing a productive sense of joint cultural agency across borders. Different forms of foreigners' involvement are important for creating a productive cultural climate. Think of playful or spiritual co-creation in the fields of arts, pilgrimage, sports, informative or reflective meetings, and volunteering. These all engender a variety of cultural conversations, some focused, some fleeting but still leaving an impression.

Local-international exchanges and projects should prevent both a parachuting of culture or master stories from the outside and the local paralysis of copy-pasting within an isolated culture from the inside. Both prevent dynamic narrative power. In their positioning vis-à-vis geographies of oppression, exchange platforms or public spaces should provide a structure for interaction between local and broader narratives, opening up a resonating generative space which creates new dialogues and understandings and new metaphorical universes essential for artistic or cultural production. Narrative power is always dialogic and creative and brings different sources of value into interactivity.

Conclusion

The overwhelming power projected by military fortifications like the Wall and checkpoint at Rachel's Tomb carry the message that Palestinians should better lose their spirit and hope, and disconnect themselves from larger ideologies or narratives

which thematize struggle, sacrifice, freedom and solidarity. Nonetheless, such dehumanization never succeeds fully or even partially – residents and travelers alike tend to develop immunity and resilience and re-invent their own tactics of survival.

Narrativizing space is in itself a way of dealing with the frustrations of being closed up, and is a healing therapy by itself. However, this strategy is also relevant in a context of opposition because the geography of control and exclusion with its extreme measures provokes a deep sense of absurdity and inhumanity undercutting the assumptions of naturalness and inevitability. The more the military fortress and its operations dehumanize, the more they invite a cultural challenge through alternative stories of liberation.

The narratives of suffering-struggle-crossing boundaries resist the disciplining logic of the geography of oppression along with its logic of separation, imprisonment, and exclusion. Its rhetoric is both spatial and temporal: the roots of history deep in the earth, a challenging of the geography of oppression in the present, and the crossing of walls pointing toward an egalitarian and unbroken, healing future.

The home, a central starting point for a humanizing narrative identification, can represent those three stages, as it does in many Palestinian political narratives: the home as representing the affirmation, discovery or return to roots; the home as a base of opposition when defended; and the home representing a crossing of borders as in the case of an open hospitable house or tent.

The disciplining logic of the geography of oppression is effectively undercut by the humanizing effect of playfulness and humor which experiments with the laws of oppression by applying alternative physical or social “laws.” A playful vision of a different space-world beyond or without walls coalesces with a temporal vision of a liberated future. This is the journey from dystopia to utopia,³³ a new world overcoming the broken world and bringing people together. A quote of Arundhati Roy that was once on the Wall at Rachel’s Tomb evokes awareness of a utopian space-time coming near: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

The combination of rootedness, opposition to obstacles and their crossing or overcoming are the ingredients of a familiar story grammar: actors in a rooted setting facing obstacles and conflict, fighting foes and finding friends, transcending obstacles and looking for a common horizon. But more importantly, the basic master story to which the narratives used in Rachel’s Tomb area together refer is one typical of indigenous peoples and their struggles of decolonization: standing fast in the home and protecting it while crossing borders in universalizing the struggle. A local narrative comes together with the larger human narrative of attempting to preserve a dignified human life on ancestral lands against oppressive forces that do not want them there.

The spatial-narrative politics thus connects local indigenous stories of oppression and protest to broader stories of liberation, equality, and freedom. These last stories challenge racism, discrimination, and apartheid as they appear in the form of exclusion, fragmentation, and shrinking space. A transcending narrative architecture comes to dynamically oppose a static physical architecture.

These potentials for a local-global dynamic, a story movement rather than a story articulation, can be socially grounded in the micro-interaction between locals and foreigners. There transcending vistas come up in the spirituality of religious encounters, the disruption brought about by playful or unsettling arts, and the joint joyful exercise of sports. Resonance and epiphany in human interaction can lead to a basic openness, a need to be affected and an answering to a human or religious call. When one experiences resonance and a sense of epiphany in interaction, the temporal and spatial horizon widens. There is a co-presence of the past and future and an opening up of the suffocating closed-up space into a space of possibility.

Arts, religion, sports and political struggle are fundamentally different human experiences and practices. However, all have in very different ways a tendency and potential of transcending borders toward a utopian, more hopeful horizon while connecting local and global narratives.

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Endnotes

- 1 Many thanks to Gied ten Berge, Riet Bons, Alexandra Rijke, Yara van Teeffelen, and an anonymous reviewer for helping to develop the argument or giving detailed comments on a draft.
- 2 For an analysis of graffiti on the Wall, see Ashley Toenjes, "This Wall Speaks: Graffiti and Transnational Networks in Palestine," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 61 (2015): 55.
- 3 In this article "space" and "place" will be used interchangeably though we are well aware of their different uses in much of the academic geography literature. See Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004/2015).
- 4 I am thankful to the Wall Information Center at the Sumud Story House (part of the Arab Educational Institute) that allowed and encouraged the research of this article as part of the work. My association with one local NGO in the Rachel's Tomb area implies a greater familiarity with its activities rather than those of other organizations operative with whom I have been over the years in regular contact.
- 5 See Rania Murra and Toine Van Teeffelen, "The 'Wall Museum': Palestinian Stories on the Wall in Bethlehem," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 55 (2013): 93–96, and Thomas Suarez, *Writings on the Wall: Palestinian Oral Histories* (Northampton MA: Olive Branch Press, 2019).
- 6 I am aware that the descriptive "Rachel's Tomb area" is a problematic name, especially as residents do not even have access to the tomb. In the past the area had some kind of common identity due to the proximity of the central Hebron Road which connected the different residential quarters and refugee camp around, also through its street network. As the area has been dismembered through the Wall around the tomb, its present identity can be at most *negatively* defined by its very impossibility to function as a meaningful and cohesive neighborhood or community. Perhaps a "counter-name" would therefore be more suitable, as part of a counter-mapping project.
- 7 I will not go into the history of Rachel's Tomb here, the various claims relating to the Tomb, or its status as a pilgrimage site. For an overview and analysis of previous studies on Rachel's Tomb, see Glenn Bowman, "Sharing and Exclusion: The Case of Rachel's Tomb," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 58 (2014): 30. Gied ten Berge provides a recent overview account from a theological pilgrimage perspective: Gied ten Berge, *Pelgrimeren met een Missie: Het Palestijnse 'Kom en Zie' Initiatief in Cultuurwetenschappelijk en Historisch-theologisch Perspektief* [The Palestinian 'Come and See' Initiative in Cultural Studies

- and Historical-Theological Perspective] (Amsterdam: Irlis NSRL 23, 2020), soon available in an English edition.
- 8 For a comprehensive analysis of the “Rachel’s Tomb checkpoint” or “checkpoint 300” as a place of highly controlled osmosis, see Alexandra Rijke, *The Land of the Checkpoints: Study of the Daily Geographies of Checkpoints in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (Wageningen: Wageningen University, 2019). Her dissertation has an extensive overview of recent academic literature on subjects related to geography and in/exclusion.
 - 9 See Ased Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Redwood CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
 - 10 Just before the end of U.S. president Donald Trump’s term, the Jerusalem municipality sent out tenders for houses that will belong to a new settlement, Givat Hamatos, just north of Bethlehem along the Hebron Road, connecting the two other settlements Gilo and Har Homa and further isolating Bayt Safafa from Arab East Jerusalem.
 - 11 Sari Hanafi, “Explaining spacio-cide in the Palestinian territory: Colonization, separation, and state of exception,” *Current Sociology* 61 (2013): 190–205.
 - 12 See Dennis Rodgers and Bruce O’Neill, “Infrastructural Violence: Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Ethnography* 13: 4 (2012): 401–412.
 - 13 Information from a meeting with the mayor Anton Salman, October 2019, in the presence of a visitor group.
 - 14 During seasonal peak periods Bethlehem hosts some 5,000 visitors per day, as estimated by the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism.
 - 15 We prefer not to speak of “resistance” since many actors in the area would agree on an expression such as “cultural opposition.” Meanwhile, the geography of resistance – see especially Steve Pile and Michael Keith, eds., *Geographies of Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1997/2013) – covers now a broad field of literature, including studies of the defense of places against encroachment; the use of places for mobilizing and collecting opposition, as for instance at Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Arab Spring; the incubation of oppositional or resistance arts in marginalized urban spaces; and cultural opposition near and against borders, as in borderscape studies. As defined by Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory’s Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), the borderscape concept would be relevant to the geography of oppression and opposition at Rachel’s Tomb area. In their wording, borderscape is a space that is “represented, perceived and lived-in” as a “fluid field of a multitude of political negotiations, claims, and counterclaims”; “a zone of varied and differentiated encounters”; and “a way of thinking through, about, and of alternatives to dominant landscapes of power.” More general theories about the dynamics between spatial oppression and resistance that inspired this article include Henri Lefebvre, for instance, *The Production of Space* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992); David Harvey, especially *Social Justice and the City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1973); and Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). As summarized by Fran Tonkiss, Lefebvre’s concern has been for “spatial projects produced through the political imagination and practice of social movements as an alternative to the spaces created by the dominant system” in Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005). A similar line is followed in Soja’s work about spatial justice.
 - 16 See Alexandra Rijke and Toine van Teeffelen, “To Exist Is To Resist: Sumud, Heroism and the Everyday,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 59 (2014): 86.
 - 17 For the concept of beautiful resistance, see the Rowwad website, online at www.alrowwad.org/en/?page_id=705 (accessed 14 January 2021).
 - 18 We do not label forms of cultural opposition against the Wall as examples of sumud so as not to stretch the concept too far.
 - 19 In 2007, Dutch composer Merlijn Twaalfhoven organized with locals a music performance at Rachel’s Tomb, “Carried by the Wind,” from rooftops and balconies. See online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HBVA1qOBKc (accessed 14 January 2021). In subsequent years the Arab Educational Institute organized roof-to-roof music crossing the walls around Rachel’s Tomb.
 - 20 This three-part division reminds one of a similar distinction in Steve Pile and Michael Keith, eds., *Geographies of Resistance* (London: Routledge 1997/2013), though here the examples, mainly from studies of black and gay/queer movements and post-colonial

theory, are very different: resistance can be an act of transgression (crossing borders in the sense of crossing place-related conventional norms), opposition (such as constructing barricades), or everyday endurance (sit-ins). These are all forms of resistance in direct challenge to other humans including the police. In the Rachel's Tomb case, the opposition is typically symbolic and directed against an architecture of oppression (not taking into account individual challenges at the checkpoint crossing itself). It may be worthwhile to investigate whether the tripartite distinction has a larger validity and applicability.

- 21 See Mary Grey in her trilogy about seasonal peace pilgrimages to the Holy Land, especially Mary Grey, *The Resurrection of Peace* (London: SPCK, 2012). The recent sociological approach of Helmut Rosa might call such epiphanies strong examples of "resonance." See Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley, 2019).
- 22 Performed in the years 2008 and 2009 during the World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel.
- 23 "The Birth of Jesus Jesus between the Walls," 2011, see online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ck1P84g51A&t=18s (accessed 14 January 2021).
- 24 Personal communication.
- 25 It is quite common to watch Islamic individual and group prayers at checkpoint 300 (and other checkpoints). They can be often regarded as space claiming amidst a military architecture; a silent protest against the army's space claims which are characterized by oppression and violence. Though not an organized protest, such individual or group prayers involve a conscious choice by believers, and others would not think of participation (personal communication, Alexandra Rijke).
- 26 See online at www.palestinemarathon.org/ (accessed 14 January 2021).
- 27 See the interview with Cakes Stencils, online at inspiringcity.com/2019/03/22/an-interview-with-cakes-stencils-the-artist-creating-a-playground-on-the-west-bank-barrier/ (accessing 14 January 2021).
- 28 Light and humorous approaches in nonviolent methods of resistance can be easily detected in the well-known and still relevant list of Gene Sharp, *The Methods of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973). See also Majken Jul Sorensen, "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression," *Peace and Change* 33, no. 2 (2008): 167–90.
- 29 See the website of Tent of Nations, online at www.tentofnations.org/about/about-us/ (accessed 14 January 2021). This project is a prototypical instance of staying sumud, opposing confiscation, and trespassing borders by inviting and hosting international groups, in line with the project's name.
- 30 Here is not the place to provide an extensive analysis of Banksy's work in Palestine, including criticisms and debates. More broadly, criticism has been informally expressed over the years about some graffiti art's tendency to become commercial, depoliticized, and "parachuted in." My overall take on this discussion, as will come out more clearly later in this article, is to plead for a dialogue between different stakeholders across the fields of commerce, art, and tourism, in order to take into account the different orientations and connect them with the need to incorporate a political advocacy or public struggle dimension – while staying aware that there will always be a basic tension between the different orientations.
- 31 With respect to the wall museum, I was informed that one night in 2016 the Israeli army checked the texts of some hundred wall posters. One soldier was reading the texts in English, another translated into Hebrew, and a third made a recording. The monotonous reading kept residents awake. Afterwards the army did not take measures against the posters. However, it happened that in two cases the mock street sign "Apartheid Rd," part of a countermapping initiative, was the target of soldiers who tried to remove the thin-metal street signs from the wall. A recent case (2018) of a more serious countermeasure was the expulsion of two Italian artists after finishing a huge wall portrait of Ahed Tamimi, the youngster who slapped an Israeli soldier in the village in Nabi Salih in the West Bank.
- 32 For instance, a representative of a guesthouse in area C told me informally that the presence of religious pilgrims tended to diminish the number of "visits" by the Israeli army.
- 33 For a utopia/dystopia analysis of Rachel's Tomb from the viewpoint of critical theory, see Rami Isaac and Vincent Platenkamp, "Concrete U(dys)topia in Bethlehem: A City of Two Tales," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 14, 2 (2016): 1–17.