Because of my fixation on understanding space and conflict on an embodied scale, I turn to psychogeography and wayfinding as arts-informed methods reflective of both process and product.

# **Compost Rich of Resistance:** Wayfinding in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem

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It is not common to travel to a region searching for what is wrong and askew. But this is precisely how I move through greater Palestine-Israel each time I visit. Explosions and incessant pummeling have forced the sidewalks and retaining walls to heave– Styrofoam slabs serve as an equally hasty and hideous shim. But in this, there is hope. Even where the sidewalk momentarily ends–likely that in just a few months a new road, deeper into the West Bank will be built–it is glaring that these foundations are laid at an unsustainable pace. In a land where the forest often obscures the trees, noticing the nuances of demolition and decay have proven integral to my understanding of body-in-place, body-amongst-conflict. In this piece, I describe the embodied experience of encountering the cracks and fissures in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and how in these visible, yet nuanced, interstices there is radical potential

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I have been traveling to Palestine/Israel for the last five years. First drawn to the region to (better) understand identitarian politics and religious stakes in territory, my embodied experiences of inclusion/exclusion have been in south Tel Aviv. My data collection processes include digital photography, watercolor, sketching, and stream-of-consciousness narrative writing methods. This writing moves between poetic writing, academic research, and travel journalism. This piece is reflective of my encounters and observations during the summer of 2017.

It is not a typical kind of tourism—to visit a place actively seeking what's not right. Where the cracks and fissures are deepening, facades are crumbling and cut wires hang from corners like rigor mortis snakes. Wayfinding through ultraorthodox enclaves where simply the sight of any sliver of my skin screams heresy; as residents either quickly avert their eyes or lock them to my bare elbow or knee—a fiery glare in my direction like this flesh could just melt away.

I used to fixate on faces, flailing my camera lens towards any person with a pulse because I was unsure of how to reconcile the differences I saw. It took several trips and the permission of *time* to see myself more clearly in this space. Past the veil of tired stories from a father who'd never even been. Past the lure of milk and honey when you're hungry. A place I now more smoothly call Palestine, despite how many hours I was held up by Ben Gurion airport's guards.

This most recent visit, it was the silent screeches and splits that called loudest, demanding I move even slower in the soupy Mediterranean summer air. The city had been scrubbed since I last saw it; stencils and sketches on walls and lamp posts erased without trace or replacement. As I drifted down Rothschild Boulevard between patches of jacaranda leaf shade and Bauhaus-esque buildings, I recalled how every ten steps or so on the sidewalk I saw spray painted:

THERE'S NO PRIDE IN ISRAELI APARTHEID.
No longer.

A power washer has since paid a visit. It is far less glaring to the untrained eye how to spot where the shackles have tightened, and where to find the tiniest traces of possible colonial collapse. This is a moment where instinct, presumption and military might all come up against each other, amongst layers of plywood and concrete that have splintered or chipped.

Flooded by fragments of news stories, it could be safe to presume settlement construction in the occupied territory has halted. In the years after the Oslo Accords—the Obama Administration, the United Nations, and various human rights organizations—all demanded a freeze. And from a distance we have likely been deluded by the 2005 disengagement, maybe thinking that since then, the rules have been followed. But, it is 2018 and cranes fill the skyline in every direction.

It is all too easy for travelers to explore Tel Aviv, or even Jerusalem, without seeing glaring signs of trauma and insidious imperialism. It should come as no surprise that these sites are strategically planned to obscure any dissenting lines of sight. When it comes to visual mediation, Maimon and Grinbaum (2016) add the following:

> What is generally called the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not always appear in the same way. This is partly because different kinds of spectators are exposed to different images of the conflict, but also because even when these different spectators view the same images, they do not necessarily see them in the same way. (p. 74)

Many of the images resulting from my wayfinding and arts-informed inquiry speak to stories the occupier walked over and through, on occupied land, and with relative ease. Conflict here can be conveyed without blatant bloodshed. But glimmers of resolution (or at the very least, reconciliation) are observable in discontinuity and disintegration.

*Figure 1*. Hasty Restoration

Because of my preoccupation with understanding space and conflict on an embodied scale, I turn to psychogeography and wayfinding as arts-informed methods reflective of both process and product (O'Rourke, 2013; Pink, 2008; Pink, 2015). The body, as socio-politically inscribed, is a central site of meaning making. To experience Tel Aviv's intricate tangle of grey spaces and overlapping boundaries–a city mired in spatial conflict–is to sense and document the aesthetic cues of a partisan urban planning policy whose aim is the maximization of profit through ceaseless dispossession of marginalized communities. The occupation persists far beyond the Separation Wall, refugee camps, or panoptic towers and checkpoints. To read this landscape as text or palimpsest is to sensorially grapple with layers of colonial oppression within daily urban experience. My photo documentation not only captures the visuality of these minutia, but each vignette contains what was heard, felt, and smelled throughout the encounter.

In thinking through these material manifestations of belonging and the ways inclusions/exclusions are maintained, I consider urban sociologist and spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theorization of the production of territory; how space is historically and contextually produced through social practices. Lefebvre interrogates the spatial triad; representational space, representations of space, and spatial practice, or rather, the ways in which life is perceived, conceived, and lived, respectively. He believed that space cannot be abstracted because it is part of everyday life. This affirms my interest in the affective *body-in-space* as a *body-amongst-conflict*: "For Lefebvre, space is a product of everyday life. It is the creative product of the people whose lives are part of it. Bricks and mortar are incidental to the social activities that produce the space" (Shlay & Rosen, 2015, p. 32). The concept of spatial perceptions, or *lived* space, that is directly experienced "by individuals through a complex lens made up of senses, symbols, and culture" (Allegra, 2012, p. 504). Through wayfinding and documenting as artist/geographer/educator and noting the ways in which the architectures of occupation are lived by inhabitants of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, I can better unpack the illusion of transparency shrouding the city–as well as the conceptual dichotomies between *us* and *them*, *here* and *there* that persist in the region.

*Figure 2.* En Route to Raouf and Atina's

Sympathizers to the financial markets might say what I observe along the Tel Aviv-Jaffa line is just part of contemporary urbanization and represents the gentrification of abandoned or worn-out neighborhoods to lure speculative real estate redevelopment and investment. They might claim that the bulldozers are necessary in this global city, the only gay-friendly part of the Middle East. It is also the most cosmopolitan, a world giant in technological innovation, and part of a natural cycle of change.

The scars in the ground persist as scorched earth where generations of farmers and shepherds once thrived. A current professor and mentor of mine knew I was visiting the Ajami neighborhood, well beyond the threshold of Jaffa's "Old City" and certainly no place for a Segway tour stop. "This is where they lived before the Nakba.[1] Their home was on the cliff, across from [the restaurant] Raouf and Atina's. Be sure to eat there, too. The seafood is wonderful. Please take a photo for my mother and father," she asked. She hoped I could visit the plot where her family home once stood. When I arrived, the restaurant had been boarded up and was little more than a skeleton of a wine-and hummus-filled past. On her parents' lot stood a dumpster for the scraps from a nearby construction site. It was another casualty of speculation and of occupation.

The *for sale* sign on the restaurant and the soil underfoot each said something different. Despite the goverment's continual dispossession and demolition, there is a deep ochre that is turned as the backhoe keeps scraping surfaces to remind us of the persistence of Palestinian indigeneity. The stories, the bones from the fishermen's catch, the orange peels from orchards of another era, have all made for a compost rich with resistance. They are all buried deeper than the occupier's machines can dig.

Heading north where the per-square-foot property prices soar, I am reminded that the plants can only grow from stolen water for so many seasons. Even the Astroturf is beginning to die back. Regardless, if nothing is planted, the water still flows around the clock from irrigation lines, probably in hopes that the sidewalk can sprout. One can follow the line as it stretches through scores of seared shrubs and beetle-ridden pines. This heedlessness distinctly separates

*Figure 3.* Ajami Laid Bare, pt. 1

*Figure 4.* Ajami Laid Bare, pt. 2

[1] *Nakba* is Arabic for "catastrophe." Though violence against Palestinians predates this turning point, "The 1948 War that led to the creation of the State of Israel also resulted in the devastation of Palestinian society. (Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007, p. 3).

an Israeli lawn from a Palestinian one. The wastefulness is an overt display of Israel's politics of verticality, pertaining to the depth that water pumps can reach, as explained by Weizman (2007):

> Israeli pumps may reach down to the waters of the common aquifers whilst Palestinian pumps are usually restricted to a considerably shorter reach, only as far down as seasonal wells trapped within shallow rock formations, which, from a hydrological perspective, are detached from the fundamental lower layers of 'ancient waters'. (p. 19)

I traveled towards Jerusalem, via the 405 bus that instigators and agitators say could be blown up on the enemy's whim. Scenes painted with the same broad strokes of erasure like its hip friend on the coast. You need to read this city not for its aura of holiness, its mystery, and lore. No—it's far more fragile than a few centuries of armies' aggression uphold. Limestone layers are peeling back to reveal the haste of concrete pours. A land grab so quick they could not even consider a level, as visible while photographing homes' cracking foundations and eroding front lawns. The 1968 masterplan for Jerusalem professed its "'commitment' to the orientalist aesthetics and urban development principles of 'colonial regionalism', a sensibility characteristic of the period of British rule over Palestine (1917-48), especially in its earlier years" which "on the urban scale, [is] expressed in attempts to dissolve 'old' with new, archaeology with living fabric" (Weizman 2007, p. 27). Politicians and religious leaders alike place tremendous value on the visual impression projected by the stone. With demand for this limestone so high, architectural compromises are made out of desperation to sprawl and uphold this political aesthetic. On new structures across Jerusalem, the stone serves as a mere cladding; Israeli building standards allow layers of sawn stone just 6 cm thick (Weizman, 2007). There are physical and psychical fortifications around every

*Figure 5.* On the Sustenance of National Narratives

*Figure 6.* Tension of Turf

*Figure 7.* Styrofoam Between Cinderblocks

*Figure 8.* Crumbling of the Dastor Stone

corner—visual occupation as far as the eye can see.

In the shadowy corners where my camera creeps, the fault lines of this quick construction are made visible. I engage in a dialogue with the materials using photography to better understand their intentionality, their emplacement, and to better synthesize my perceptions of socially constructed space.

Explosions and incessant pummeling have forced the sidewalks and retaining walls to heave. Styrofoam slabs jammed between cinderblocks and limestone on buildings serve as an equally hasty and hideous shim. But in this, there's hope. Even where the sidewalk momentarily ends, it is likely that in just a few months a new road, deeper into the West Bank will be built. It is glaring that these foundations are laid at an unsustainable pace. This impulsiveness is evidenced in my photographs, where many of these structures, built post-1967[2], remain under construction, in a holding pattern of permanent temporariness. New Israeli settlements are built hurriedly and the land grab can hardly keep up with itself; so long as a bulldozer or pile of concrete bricks rests on a site, it is claimed. Palestinian dispossession ensues, regardless of whether the Israelis' project is seen to completion. Plot after plot is filled with bags of crumbled cement, bare walls with incomplete, frayed wiring. But I insist that these concretizations of coloniality are impermanent.

[2]The Arab-Israeli Six-Day War occurred in June 1967 when the West Bank and Gaza Strip were annexed by Israel without international discussion or rebuke, drastically altering the borders of Palestine. The territory remains under military occupation, "to cage the people living in it in a huge prison and to disregard any international pressure to end its criminal policy" (Pappe, 2017, p. 6).

I offer my images as a form of disruption, because in these embodied experiences where I am at once observing and moving through space as a permeable, sensitive piece of the city, I note the minutia of the occupation that are otherwise increasingly normalized by tourists, the media, urban planners, and inhabitants.

For a split second this past summer, the world watched thousands of bodies in the street bowing in reverence and defiance, with foreheads on the pavement in refusal to enter the Al-Aqsa compound on the occupier's terms. In these cracks are planted seedlings of revolution, growing evermore strategic; we are witness to the rapidity and efficacy of nonviolent direct action.

Photographing these interstices is a way to at once observe the past-present-future of a space that inhabitants and commentators commonly declare is "too complicated to figure out." In a land where the forest often obscures the trees, noticing the nuances of demolition and decay have proven integral to my understanding of *body-in-place, body-amongst-conflict*, as it relates to Lefebvre's (1991) lived space. Bearing witness to the Nakba's residues—the shell of Raouf and Atina's, my cautious steps on the ruins of my professor's family home, keeping tally of all the Sotheby's signs—is an effort to avoid abstraction of another's pain and disrupt the status quo through documentation.

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