PULMONOLOGY

Psychological Trauma, Temporality, and Visual Expression in Post-Conflict Populations: A Clinical Study of Art-Based Narratives in Palestinian Communities

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> Viewed temporally, humorous pleasure would seem to be produced by the disjunction between duration and the instant, where we experience with renewed intensity both the slow passing of time and its sheer evanescence.[1]
>
> Simon Critchley, *On Humour*

In this age of accelerated globalization and intensified international mobility, many of us find ourselves occupying spaces between 'here' and 'there'. For those who are fortunate enough to hold the right passport, these liminal spaces are typically associated with airport transit lounges. For others, born in particular places and to particular parents, these spaces take on a different permanence as 'host' countries, camps and detention facilities. And yet, a familiar social experience cuts across the chasm that separates these spaces, wherein when one happens to come across a stranger who calls the same place home, one of the first things they do is share a joke about where it is that they are from. It is in these often-brief exchanges that we perform a clear litmus test of our identities, indicating to others not only our social openness towards them but also, perhaps more importantly, our possession of shared cultural information and collective identity.

Humour thus serves to rapidly draw a line of connection between people who are otherwise strangers, forging a swift sense of intimacy grounded by a sense of a common understanding of the world. Laughter shared between those compatriots can therefore be understood as akin to sharing a code of cultural distinctiveness. Philosopher Simon Critchley poignantly describes exchanges of this sort, writing that 'we wear our cultural distinctiveness like an insulation layer against the surrounding alien environment. It warms us up when all else is cold and unfamiliar'.[2] Critchley's observation sparks an even deeper and more particular question: what, then, is the capacity for laughter of people such as the Palestinians, who face an experience described with that heaviest of words—exile? Which is also to say, what does humour achieve in the face of generations of dispossession, refugeedom and the experience of collective trauma?

Humour and temporality

Theories of humour have long suggested a connection between the experiences of ambivalence and anxiety alongside that of laughter. Within this framework of humour, laughter is generated through a perceived incongruity, wherein a text is found to be both attractive and repulsive. These concurrent responses build a tension that is argued to be relieved through laughter.[3] This form of ambivalence underwrites the humour of the aptly named work *Laughter* (2014) by Gaza born artist Taysir Batniji.

Contextualized in the gallery space as being a work by a Palestinian artist, *Laughter* (Fig. 2.1) encourages a first impression of being a piece of traditional Palestinian embroidery. Measuring over a metre in length and featuring a deep red coil reminiscent of an arabesque pattern, the work is as equally aesthetically gratifying as it is menacing (i.e. are those in fact red curls or is it a jagged edge?). Surrounded in exhibition by Batniji's other largely lens-based works, the piece seems an anomaly for its adherence to folk representations of Palestinian culture. At least, this would be the typical response for non-Arabic-speaking audiences, who are in effect initially locked out of the laughter in the work.

FIG. 2.1 NEAR HERE

2.1 Taysir Batniji, *Laughter*, 2014, embroidery on fabric, 135 × 33 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Taysir Batniji and Sfeir Semler Gallery

For an Arabic reader, the coil of embroidery would immediately be recognisable as repetition of the Arabic letter 'ه' (pronounced 'ha'), thus, when translated, creating a text that reads 'hahahahaha'. Synonymous with virtual responses of laughter on social media and instant message services, this record of laughter signifies contemporary, transnational, mobile and immediate forms of cultural production and expression. In so doing the work brings together two demotic forms of cultural output typically left out of the high art circuit: craft/folk traditions and everyday forms of online humour. Drawing a line between those who can and those who cannot literally 'read' the work, laughter in response to the piece comes in accordance to familiarity with the codes and signifiers it plays with; that is to say, both Arabic language and Palestinian craft traditions.

Significantly, *Laughter* operates not only through linguistic ambivalence but also ambivalence centred on issues of temporality. Offering a gentle mimicry of Palestinian craft and perhaps even parodying the reverie toward Palestinian folk traditions, *Laughter* signifies a collision between temporalities, with 'timelessness' on the one hand (folk traditions), and contemporaneity on the other (viral instant forms of communication). This is of particular importance given the fact that historically, scholarship on Palestinian cultural production was dominated by emphasis upon folk traditions (particularly food and crafts like embroidery), the result being that they hold a lion's share of substantial published research produced over previous decades. Though my intention here is in no way to denigrate the importance of these traditions and their scholarly analysis, I am wary of the political problems that may spring from such an emphasis. Namely, the notion that Palestinian culture is ancient and/or static, and the ways in which emphasis on folk traditions may suggest an attempt to return to an irretrievable past.

Literally layering the transnational, mobile and contemporary over forms perceived as fixed, traditional and folkloric, *Laughter* finds its power in its ability to capture a sense of what is arguably a unique Palestinian experience of 'in-between' time. To unpack this, it is necessary to understand that issues of temporality rest at the heart of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Both in theoretical and in practical political terms, time is as equally at the core of Palestinian resistance as it is of Israeli domination. In the most obvious sense, this is clear in the ways both Israelis and Palestinians harness claims of indigeneity and a 'timeless' connection to the landscape of the Holy Land as a means of verifying their right to the land. For Palestinians, with the experience of ongoing exile and the continued denial of the right of return, time is understood as forming around the temporal chasm of the Nakba. Within this gap, life exists on borrowed time between a homeland that was and one that is in the making; an experience that sociologist Rosemary Sayigh described as depriving Palestinians of the ability to 'live' time.[4]

This unique temporal relationship is described poignantly by political scientist Amal Jamal, who points out that prominent Palestinian thinkers (namely Mourid Barghouti, Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish) have each stated that 'permanent temporariness' is a state that characterizes Palestinian life. Striking to the heart of this, the national poet of Palestine Mahmoud Darwish asked 'are you what you were, or what you are now?'[5] Here, Darwish critiques a Palestinian cultural emphasis on life 'before' the occupation of historical Palestine. This process of fixation on a life 'before' is, of course, not unique to Palestinians. As a people subject to colonial violence, Palestinians have arguably been engaged with what Franz Fanon described as a 'special battlefield', wherein the search for a national past before colonization is a process of personal and collective rehabilitation that looks towards a period

before the misery of the present as a means of rising against 'self-contempt, subjection and abjuration'.[6]

Whilst Fanon's statement may ring true across diverse colonial experiences, it perhaps holds a particular valence for a people whose land was not only occupied but whose existence has been systematically denied: a situation that was politically and materially the case for Palestinians. This is evident, for example, not only in well-known Zionist catch-cries such as 'a land without people, for a people without land' or comments by Israeli political heroes such as Golda Meir, who famously claimed that Palestinians 'did not exist', but in ongoing illegal settlements and systematic attempts at erasure of Palestinian presence in the landscape through programmes of the Jewish National Fund.[7] Against the weight of this, Palestinians have been put into a position where they have had to continually literally and symbolically 'prove' not only their connection to the land but also, in fact, their very existence.

Edward Said taps directly into the incessant anxiety produced by such a burden by explaining that for Palestinians there seems to be a belief that 'the moment you stop telling the story, the whole thing will just disappear'.[8] The denial of Palestinian history and culture (and the proliferation of stereotypes) is also amplified by a fragmented understanding of the history of the Israel/Palestine conflict. This fragmented understanding of history is described arrestingly by author Ghadi Karmi, who explains that the conflict is typically presented as a series of news sound bites that do not allow a listener to hear the story from the beginning; that is to say, from the Nakba.[9]

In the case of art history, this return to the beginning forms the impetus behind serious historical re-evaluations of Palestinian art published over the last decade. Prior to the seminal work of artist and art historian Kamal Boullata, discourse frequently accepted the view that Palestinian art only emerged following Al-Nakba.[10] The inherent problem with this stance is twofold, and extends beyond mere historical inaccuracy. Firstly, it suggests that forms of cultural modernity did not exist amongst the Arab population of historical Palestine, re-enforcing a view that only with Zionist influence did Palestinians embrace modernity. Secondly, this claim overlooks forms of Palestinian nationalism evident in art before 1948, thus strengthening propagandistic claims that Palestinian national identity emerged only after the foundation of Israel.[11]

That having been said, and although cultural production, modernist aesthetics and nationalist discourse is clearly evident in art prior to 1948, the humour of contemporary Palestinian art centres on iconography established in the wake of the occupation of historical Palestine. Only with an understanding of how the iconography of Palestinian art was established, and the ways in which it reflects changes in Palestinian collective identity, is an art audience provided with the possibility of accessing the humour that characterizes much of contemporary Palestinian art. In other words, only with an understanding of Palestinian history are audiences capable of breaking through the line of humour that demarcates 'insiders' from 'outsiders'.

Iconographies of 'Palestinianness' and 'Palestinianism'

Recent chronologies of Palestinian art typically rest upon key historical moments over the last century. These moments, which I have elsewhere described as 'critical junctions', each spurred a significant shift in Palestinian identity and, in turn, cultural output.[12] These junctions are the Balfour Declaration, the Nakba, the Battle of Karamah, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Oslo Accords. Of these five junctions, it is those of Al Nakba and Al Karamah that are most acutely responsible for ushering in new forms of Palestinian collective identity and nationalist iconography. To illustrate the significance of the junctions, we might consider how depictions of Palestinians, some of the most misrepresented people on earth, are typically divided into two dichotomous groups: suffering refugees and violent militants. Despite the obvious deficiencies of these stereotypes, the Palestinian agency integral to these characterizations and the role of art in their proliferation is rather surprising.

The first of these characterizations—that of refugee—came, not surprisingly, as a result of the Nakba. Responsible for the exile of 80 per cent of the Arab population of historical Palestine (approximately one million people), the Nakba meant that the experience of refugeedom became the defining experience of Palestinians across social orders. Those who managed to stay in the newly-formed Israel became subject to a continuing legislative campaign of discrimination that provided a constitutional base for the depopulation of Palestinian land.[13] Palestinians displaced outside Israel to neighbouring 'host' nations (approximately 800,000) found themselves facing legislative forms of discrimination whilst at the same time their host governments fought for who would politically 'represent' the Palestinians. Void of political self-representation, treated as foreigners and referred to too commonly as the 'refugee problem', Palestinians were faced with what historian Rashid Khalidi describes as an 'existential test' of whether they would remain together as a united people. Ironically, as Israel transposed a new form of Jewish national identity over the Holy Land engaging in systematic 'memoricide', the Nakba re-ordered Palestinian social relations to such an extent that it created, as Khalidi notes, a tabula rasa for the re-establishment of Palestinian identity.[14]

This tabula rasa necessitated a visual expression of collective Palestinian identity: a task picked up primarily by artists working and living in exile in Beirut. For numerous economic, political and cultural reasons elucidated upon with great care by Kamal Boullata, art production in the city flourished, meaning that for a time (until the Lebanese civil war) Beirut became a 'surrogate' political cultural Palestinian capital.[15] Cultural production in this period established an iconography of 'Palestinianness' centred on a nostalgic view of both land and life in historical Palestine and representation of the traumatic experience of exile. Consisting primarily of popular folk metaphors (peasantry, olive trees, citrus fruit, woman as embodiment of the landscape), this iconography operated as a counter memory to the Israeli national project. On the one hand, although this iconography bolstered a sense of *sumud* (steadfastness in the face of adversity) by suggesting a unifying unbreakable bond to the land of Palestine, it also re-enforced a collective identity hinged on the most dehumanizing experience of Palestinian history, that of refugeedom.

For the generation that followed those who experienced the Nakba, there was a political and psychological urgency to establishing an identity and ideological framework that transcended both the trauma and humiliation of occupation. For the generation of the revolution (the *jeel al-thawra*), this meant harnessing a transition from 'Palestinianness' to 'Palestinianism'.[16] Although it remains difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the revolution historically, it is generally understood as taking place between 1965 and 1968, springing from the thirst for political self-representation within the pan-Arab movement, resistance to Israeli occupation and a revolt against social and economic oppression enforced by 'host' nations. In art historical terms, however, it is the battle of Al-Karamah that signals a transition into revolutionary aesthetics.

On the spectrum of battles and operations that make up the history of the Israel/Palestine conflict, the March 1968 battle of Al-Karamah (formally named by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) as 'Operation Inferno') caused relatively few casualties and is often entirely overlooked in historical accounts of the conflict. Taking place after the defeat of the June/Six Day War, the battle happened along the Jordan River, where Fatah had established guerrilla bases for the infiltration of the West Bank. The significance of the battle rests in the fact that Fatah's *fedayeen* engaged Israeli forces despite knowing that to do so would mean certain suicide.[17] Notwithstanding the fact that Palestinians (and the Jordanians who fought alongside them) were completely outnumbered by personnel and Israeli weaponry at Karamah, it was in fact the Israelis who were forced to withdraw after suffering more casualties than they had anticipated. Heralded as a victory throughout the Arab world, stories of the *fedayeen*'s heroism spread quickly and radically shifted the Palestinian role 'from

potential politicization into political action', ushering in a period of Palestinian political agency anchored in militancy. [18]

The success of Karamah was to build a new national identity that recovered the mythology and narrative of resistance, inclusive of the Arab revolts of 1936–39. Consequently, Palestinians began to see themselves as people who have always struggled against occupation and oppression and, as a result, Palestinians of all social orders began to take part in national politics and resistance.[19] Almost immediately after Karamah the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) began a systematic deployment of art and film as a means of advancing revolutionary identity and ideology. With an emphasis on the reproduction of images as political posters, works by artists (notably Ismail Shammout and Sliman Mansour) became fixtures in Palestinian homes and workplaces around the world. Establishing an iconography fixed on revolutionary motifs, including the figure of the freedom fighter, the *keffiyeh*, and the Palestinian flag, this *jeel-al-thawra* established iconography of 'Palestinianism' that is today still clearly visible in demotic forms of cultural production such as political posters, street art and graffiti.

Where the critical junctions of the Nakba and Al-Karamah can be understood as responsible for creating the visual lexicon of collective identity, it is the final junction – that of Oslo, the official start of the so-called peace process – that sees a marked influx of humour in cultural output. This turning point can in one sense be understood as signalling a total abandonment of 'Palestinianism'. Elsewhere in this volume Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh effectively demonstrates how the loss of 'Palestinianism' reflects what he describes as a 'Palestinian Orientalism', where the post-1967 political agenda of striving toward a secular democratic state in all of Palestine was replaced in favour of a Palestinian National Authority programme. Hinging on the abandonment of all other previous resolutions, far from establishing an end to the conflict, the Declaration of Principles (commonly referred to as the Oslo Accords) placed Palestinians in what is arguably the worst period in their history. A set of agreements rather than binding resolutions, the Accords (first in 1993 and later in 1995) failed to address Israeli settlements, Palestinian land confiscation and the right of return. Further still, responsible for the division of Palestinian land into areas A, B and C, the Oslo Accords in effect laid the groundwork for the Bantustanism that currently prevails in the Territories.[20] Put simply, the 'temporary' measures agreed upon as a means of establishing a Palestinian state have gone from the original agreement of a few years to the better part of three decades.

Humour in-between time

It is for these reasons that Oslo is often referred to as a tragic joke. For our purposes here it is useful to think through this comparison a little more deeply. To do so, we should consider what humorologists commonly describe as incongruity theory. The incongruity theory of humour suggests that laughter comes as a result of a defiance of our expectations. Take for example the structure of jokes most are familiar with, where a long meandering story is told, leading to what we call a punch line. The punch line marks the moment where our expectations are fractured, and as a result we laugh. It would seem that Oslo was a punch line for Palestine, the end of a long narrative of resistance, national construction and political turmoil; the moment the world expected would bring about peace in the region. Instead, Oslo delivered to the Palestinians a cruel punch line, one that denied expectations and hopes, reshaping identity and leaving Palestinians to live in a perpetual waiting period.

Given the clear failure of Oslo, we might ask ourselves what good actually came from the Declaration of Principles? In the domain of art, in practical terms Oslo heralded a new era of foreign investment in Palestine (albeit problematically tied to non-governmental organization (NGO) influence), allowing for increased cultural funding, and international projects, education opportunities and art events.[21] Perhaps far more significantly, though, Oslo marked a moment when the world, however problematically, viewed footage of Arafat

and Rabin shaking hands as a concrete validation of a Palestinian claim over the land and, by proxy, a resounding acceptance of Palestinians as a distinct cultural and national group. This has in effect provided the space for cultural practitioners to problematize nationalist discourse and critically engage with both the politics and aesthetics of 'Palestinianness' and 'Palestinianism'.

This space for critical engagement has been amplified by a steady decline in nationalist politics. In the years since the Accords, the power of the Palestinian Authority has become increasingly appreciated internationally as anaemic, being deliberately placed in the hopeless position of essentially managing its own civilians in the service of Israel's occupation. There are clear signs (for example, Palestine's non-member observer status at the United Nations and admission as full member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) that we are teetering on the edge of shifting the status quo generated by the Declaration of Principles. Patience has indeed worn thin, for around the world Oslo is being understood as providing the canon fodder for the Israeli political strategy of staging Palestine as both 'temporarily occupied' and the eternal 'Jewish homeland', creating a situation where Palestinians are 'governed as though temporary human beings'.[22] Put differently, therefore, Oslo is now clearly understood as creating—in both geographical and temporal terms—a 'temporary' Palestine that in effect systematically denies Palestinians their futurity.

The issue of denied future is evident across the broad spectrum of contemporary Palestinian art. As is made clear by Ihab Saloul's contribution to this volume (specifically in his discussion of post-memory and the 'catastrophized subject'), ongoing Nakba-ization means that in spite of the diversity of Palestinian geographical and generational lived experience, exile remains a defining feature of Palestinian identity. Thus, although the lived impact varies depending on place of residence and passport/ID, the denial of futurity ultimately cuts across all Palestinian life, whether in the Occupied Territories, Israel, Europe or elsewhere. In art practice, this denial of futurity is a feature particularly prominent in the work of London-based artist Larissa Sansour, whose multidisciplinary practice operates in a blurry space between utopian and dystopian views of Palestine's future. Notable for the engagement of humour noir as a means of providing an evaluation of Palestinian collective identity and the ongoing pertinence of nationalist signifiers, Sansour's work frequently engages a trope that envisions Palestine as a space of permanent and ongoing occupation. This is clear in the artist's 2009 work, *Space Exodus*.

Exhibiting Sansour's characteristic conflation of popular culture references and the aesthetics of science fiction cinema, the five minute video work takes the audience on a journey through space with the artist as she becomes the first Palestinian to land on the moon. The work begins with Sansour attempting to make contact with her base in Jerusalem whilst saying, 'Jerusalem, we have a problem', followed closely by 'no, we are on track'. No sooner does the astronaut explain this and lose contact with 'home' than she finally arrives on the moon. Featuring her landing on the surface of the moon against the recognizable score of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (altered with arabesque chords), with a suit of upturned toes and emblazoned with both the Palestinian flag and traditional (*fellahi*) embroidery, this moment generates both an expression of political empowerment, and humour through an incongruity between putting together a reference to icons of Western pop culture (namely the score of *A Space Odyssey*) alongside signifiers of Palestinian culture (*fellahi* embroidery and the Palestinian flag). However, feelings of levity are quickly rendered ambiguous the moment the astronaut plants the Palestinian flag on the moon and proclaims that 'that is one small step for Palestinians, one giant leap for mankind'.

It is in the moment of this proclamation that the image of flag planting on the moon—a symbol of political empowerment—becomes transformed into a reality of despair and political disillusionment. Here Sansour conveys the notion that 'victory' for Palestine and for humankind more broadly entails a complete divorce not only from the Holy Land but also

from Planet Earth itself. The work thus calls attention to the ongoing denial of the right to return, continuing land confiscation and the collective impact of exile. However, it does so whilst also drawing on the personal history and current situation facing Sansour who, although born in Jerusalem, is at the time of writing prevented from visiting and is thus left with only memories of the city.[23]

This is but one example of how Sansour, who often features in her own works, collapses personal and collective understandings and experiences of Palestine in her practice. Another way that the artist achieves this is by deliberately calling upon the iconography of a gynomorphic landscape, where the land of Palestine is transformed into a nurturing woman. Where in the past this gynomorphic motif (in the work artists of artists like Ismail Shammout and Sliman Mansour, for example) clearly linked the body of woman/Palestine to the land itself, Sansour provides a dystopian and geographically dislocated body. This is clear in the video and photographic work *Nation Estate* (2012). Again featuring the artist (and with cameos from her siblings), the work relegates Palestine to a giant skyscraper that holds most Palestinian cities and political and religious landmarks.

Presenting a future where Palestinian dispossession and land confiscation continues, *Nation Estate* (Fig. 2.2) presents a vision where 'Palestine' is relegated to being a giant skyscraper. Surrounded by the 'real' Jerusalem and placed on the Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount, the skyscraper resembles part airport, part government building and part virtual theme park. Drawing attention simultaneously to stalled peace negotiations and acceleration of Israeli military control, as well as making a comparison between housing estates and Palestinian refugee camps where the density of living necessitates that generation after generation build on top of each other (upwards rather than outwards), *Nation Estate* in effect accelerates the modes and processes of contemporary occupation. With cities and landmarks each taking a separate floor, connected by an elevator that operates as a conduit between spaces in 'Palestine', the work also provides a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the NGO-ization and neoliberal transformations in Palestine post-Oslo.[24]

FIG. 2.2 NEAR HERE

2.1 Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate—Olive Tree*, 2012, C-print, 75 × 150 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Larissa Sansour

Sansour explains that the employment of science fiction for her is an ideal tool 'in the face of such acceleration [of occupation] and direct confrontation with an abject reality'.[25] Despite its terrifying view of the future, the 'acceleration' of the occupation represented in the work generates equal parts despair and humour. To understand how it achieves this, it is useful to return to Critchley's analysis of humour and temporality, provided at the beginning of this chapter. He explains that humour is produced by 'the disjunction between duration and the instant, where we experience with renewed intensity both the slow passing of time and its sheer evanescence'.[26]

The work thus produces a kind of humour that operates as a temporal 'snap', collapsing the space between the past, present and future. This snap is most evident in the appearance and appropriation of the now highly politicized and heavily reproduced 1936 *Visit Palestine* poster by artist Franz Kraus. The original poster, published by the Tourist Development Association of Palestine, depicts an idealized Jerusalem replete with urban dwellings, lush greenery and the most recognizable of Jerusalem landmarks – the Dome of the Rock. Part of what is known as the 'recruit Zion' genre, the poster was produced as a means of encouraging the migration and support of Jews prior to the foundation of Israel. In the previous decades, however, the poster has been heavily reproduced by Palestinians and is frequently found in homes and Palestinian workplaces around the world. The reason for this is that the poster makes clear the historical development of Israeli nationalist mythologies of

Jerusalem as an eternal Jewish capital. On an obvious level it does this by featuring the Dome of the Rock (sacred for Muslims), and by proxy Jerusalem, as belonging to Palestine rather than to Israel. However, considered further, this has the effect of complicating both ethnic and nationalist claims over historical Palestine, making clear the ways in which the region accommodated diverse cultural groups including Arabs, Jews, Ottomans and new immigrants from Europe.

In Sansour's rendition of the poster, the Dome of the Rock has been replaced with the nation estate skyscraper and the words 'visit Palestine' removed in favour of the darkly humorous 'Nation Estate: Living the High Life'. Where Sansour's poster encourages us to visit Palestine (or what is left of it in the future), artist, designer and filmmaker Amer Shomali's appropriation of Kraus' poster invites the viewer to visit Palestine in the present. It does this through the inclusion of the Wall. Stretching for more than 700 km and isolating Palestinian cities, towns and villages, the Wall is described (depending on one's political position) by a plethora of names, including the Separation Barrier/Security Fence/Apartheid Wall. Allegedly built by Israel to provide security against the threat of terrorism, the Wall has become synonymous with the occupation for the ways it prevents Palestinian movement and for its instrumentalization as a tool for annexation of Palestinian land inside the occupied West Bank. Appropriating the poster to include the Wall, Shomali's *Post-Visit Palestine* (2009) thus makes clear not only the incongruity of nostalgic associations to Palestine for those in exile but also the impossibility of reaching 'Palestine' (as represented by Jerusalem) for those in the Occupied Territories.

Shomali and Sansour both employ humour as a means of asking a politically existential question: namely, if the geography of Palestine disappears and its landmarks become inaccessible, then where or what is Palestine? This approach is also mirrored in the work *No News From Palestine* (2007) by Ramallah-based artist Khaled Hourani. Essentially consisting of a series of unwritten postcards, all without stamps and each labelled 'Post Card Palestine', *No News from Palestine* functions by locating its emphasis on the fact that the fame of the Occupied Territories comes as a result of their frequent appearance as a topic of news coverage around the world. However, rather than narrate news of political unrest or Palestinian resistance or victimhood brought about as a result of Israeli brutality, the postcards of *No News from Palestine* appear to report no news whatsoever. Instead, they merely list the location of each postcard's accompanying photograph and the date.

Not only do the postcards lack depictions of scenes of political unrest but they also fail to feature any of the notable places or landmarks typically associated with Palestine. Most of the photographs within the postcard series are from Ramallah, yet they do not feature the city's well-known landmarks of Al-Manara Square, Arafat's Tomb, the Palestinian Authority (PA) headquarters or Arafat Square. Instead we find a pastry display from a bakery, an assortment of glassware from a restaurant, people going about their everyday business and parked taxis. In one sense, then, *No News from Palestine* might be argued to actually represent 'news' from Palestine; however, this news is that of the banal and everyday. Stripping Palestine of sensationalism, glorification and nostalgia, *No News from Palestine* operates with a humour that 'defamiliarizes the familiar'.[27]

One of the greatest potentials of humour is said to be its ability to ask us to take stock of our assumptions by turning them on their head. This is because humour is capable of making surreal and strange the facts, situations and behaviours we take for granted as normal. *No News from Palestine*, however, takes the humour of defamiliarization to a second stage of progression. It does this by asking us to appreciate the fact that the representation of the 'real' Palestine is already one that is defamiliarized. Harnessing a deliberate political opacity, *No News from Palestine* highlights the multiple dimensions of impossibility for 'accessing' Palestine, whether for those living in exile, Palestinians in the West Bank, or for those around the world whose perceptions of Palestine are clouded by religious and political imaginings of the Holy Land. Where the impossibility of reaching Palestine is represented metaphorically

in the works of Sansour, Shomali and Hourani, this is a task taken up quite literally in the work *Sexy Semite* by Emily Jacir.

Laughter as return to 'ethnos'

Between 2000 and 2002 a peculiar set of personal advertisements appeared in the *Village Voice* newspaper. They all seemed to have been placed by Palestinians seeking romantic liaisons with Jewish readers. Often appearing alongside each other, these advertisements ran a similar line, with each seeking a Jewish reader willing to possibly marry a Palestinian and thereby facilitate a return to the homeland using the Israeli Law of Return. After two years, these advertisements were picked up by the media as being suspicious, and with the failure of the *Village Voice* to make contact with the individuals who placed the personals, some media outlets went so far as to speculate that they were part of a Palestinian terrorist plot.[28]

Far from terrorist activity, the advertisements were in fact a relational artwork named *Sexy Semite* by Emily Jacir. The artist created the work by commissioning 60 Palestinian participants to place these advertisements with two simple guidelines: firstly that each advertisement should reference the Palestinian right to return, and secondly that they should use the word 'semite', thereby undermining the association of the term as pertaining only to Jews. One advertisement, for example, reads: 'Palestinian Semite in search of Jewish soul mate. Do you love milk & honey? I'm ready to start a big family in Israel. Still have house keys. Waiting for you.'

Appearing as they did initially as innocent adverts, the texts take on a different character when installed in exhibition or when featured in international art publications. In these contexts they are stripped of their ambiguity and revealed as a distilled tongue-in-cheek commentary on the continued denial of the right of return. Contextualized by the gallery space, each advertisement appears as though a parody of genuine newspaper personals. It does this by drawing from acronyms characteristic of personals, including LTR (long term relationship) or SKG (seeking), and clichéd personality descriptors such as enjoying walks on the beach, enjoying sunsets, etc. These clichés are also set alongside stereotypes of Palestine and Israel in each advert, including suggestions that applicants enjoy olives, falafel, the land of milk and honey and the like. More than that, however, the adverts were also loaded with references more particular to Palestinian nationalist signifiers. These included references to citrus fruit, the mention of house keys and a description of the city of Acre with the Palestinian name of Akka rather than the Israeli Akko.

The inclusion of these national signifiers in the work makes the initial advertisements in the *Village Voice* instantly recognizable to particular readers as a humorous act of multifaceted political subversion. This includes the subversion of the intended purposes of these personals advertisements, and extends to an undermining of Israeli political claims of ownership and historical connection to the land and denial of the Palestinian right to return. Interestingly, the humour of these advertisements might also be appreciated not only by those sympathetic to the Palestinian 'cause' or those familiar with Palestinian history and nationalist signifiers but also the very groups 'targeted' by these advertisements. Which is to say that where a 'general' readership may remain oblivious to the political impetus and national signifiers harnessed in the advertisements, recognition comes from both Palestinians (and their supporters) and those who are in effect the 'butt of the joke'; Israelis, Zionists, and Jewish readers unsympathetic to Palestinian claims over the land and their right of return.

The difference in this instance is an appreciation of content as humorous or dangerous and offensive. For Palestinians (and to a certain extent for those who stand in solidarity with them), laughter precedes the context of the gallery because these banal objects are immediately understood as cultural signifiers and therefore do not require framing devices or contextualization. The immediacy of understanding of the humour within each artwork reinforces Simon Critchley's assertion that 'having a common sense of humour is like sharing a secret code'.[29] Put differently, although we might appreciate that having a sense of humour

is a universal human trait, humour is undoubtedly context specific and, importantly, it serves as a form of cultural insider knowledge.[30]

Understanding this, *Sexy Semite* is marked by a humour that reinforces a sense of collective identity and is, as Critchley argues, an indication of laughter's ability to return individuals to a circumscribed 'ethos' and 'ethnos'. Using the term 'ethos' as it is understood in the Ancient Greek sense, Critchley elaborates on the connection between laughter and ethos by exploring how humour validates not only a shared understanding of custom and place but also disposition and character. With this in mind, humour is said to be the vehicle that connects us strongly to a particular place and leads us to predicate characteristics of that place while attributing certain customs and dispositions to its inhabitants. Humour therefore takes us back to the place where we are from, whether that is our neighbourhood or the nation.[31] In other words, laughter returns us to our ethnos.

Mirroring this, in an interview with Salman Rushdie in 1986 Edward Said elaborates on the idea that there are certain codes by which Palestinians recognize each other.[32] To illustrate his point he discusses the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 where, as a form of psychological warfare, the Israeli military broadcast their interrogations with Palestinian 'terrorists'. The particular point of interest for Said was the fact that recordings of these interrogations were circulated amongst Palestinians in Lebanon as a form of entertainment. The humour of these recordings is illustrated by Said, who reads out a transcript wherein a prisoner performs, or rather over-performs, his Palestinian identity for his Israeli interrogator. This exchange is reflective of a humorous strategy of 'over-identification' evident also in *Sexy Semite*, where humorous so earnestly mimics normative forms of discourse that it becomes difficult to discern whether it is political ridicule or support.[33]

I would like us here to elaborate upon the concern flagged at the beginning of this chapter: namely the notion that humour creates a sense of belonging to a group whilst validating possession of shared cultural information. This is a sentiment examined in one of the most seminal historical texts ever produced on the subject of humour—*Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*—in which Henri Bergson observed that 'our laughter is always the laughter of the group'.[34] Bergson then goes on to suggest that the experience of shared laughter can travel through a wide circle of people, yet the circle of laughter remains nonetheless a closed one. The 'circle' of humour to which Bergson alludes is one that is contingent on a shared understanding of the world and, consequently, a shared appreciation of humour. When looking at humorous contemporary art from sites of occupation and crisis, Bergson's observations raise an important question: namely—who makes up the group that is laughing?

Humour and the burden of proof

If we are to concede that laughter is dependent on a shared experience of the world, it is also therefore contingent on a sense of identification, and in many instances a sense of collective identity. Knowing this, the humour within art practice can then be said to draw out two circles of laughter; the larger of these is that of international art audiences and the smaller is made up of members of the cultural group. Within this smaller circle, laughter is transformed into a test that probes the boundaries of identity (keeping insiders in and outsiders out), whilst re-enforcing a shared sense of history and connection to place.

The ability of humour to demarcate a sense of insider-/outsiderness is of particular pertinence for artists from sites of conflict. This is because these artists are often under pressure to narrate trauma as a means of authenticating experience and performing cultural capital for the voyeuristic gaze of the art market. They are thus subject to what philosopher Jacques Rancière described as a distribution of genre. For Rancière, the world is divided between those who can and those cannot afford the luxury of playing with images, and in such a world, Palestinians 'can only offer the bodies of their victims to the gaze of news cameras or to the compassionate gaze at their suffering'.[35] Humour is one of the few forms

capable of fracturing the distribution of genre outlined by Rancière. This is because through its ability to draw out circles of insider-/outsiderness, humour provides artists with a strategy that obfuscates any attempts at didactic narration whilst subverting a potentially voyeuristic gaze at the suffering of others.

As Palestinian art continues to have strong presence in the international art circuit, and histories of Palestinian art emerge at a hitherto unprecedented rate, a critical evaluation of the politics of narration are now clearly urgent. This is perhaps most obvious in the scandal surrounding Israeli art historian Gannit Ankori's monograph *Palestinian Art* (2006), which was heavily criticised by Kamal Boullata as an act of plagiarism and cultural appropriation by the 'occupier'.[36] The Ankori scandal reveals that the (re)telling of art history must involve a self-critical analysis of who has the permission to narrate. As a Greek-Australian involved in this field of research, I am acutely aware of these politics. Importantly, however, it is humour that has been vital in this regard, continuing operating as a litmus test of my understanding encouraging me to dig further (politically, historically, culturally) in order to 'get the joke', whilst also making clear that there are some spaces I can never enter and there are things I will never know—and that perhaps this is as it should be.

There is a basic politics of humour that, although slippery, draws a line of differentiation between laughing *at* and laughing *with* others in the face of suffering. Today the political stakes are incredibly high and it is anyone's game. We need to place our ideological frameworks, our understandings of our collective identities and the ways in which we facilitate cultural exchange under constant scrutiny. We need to embrace laughter for this. It would appear that Aristotle was right when he asserted that humour is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humour, and that any subject that does not bear raillery should be considered suspicious.[37] This is a sentiment that holds particularly true for artists who carve a critical space for thinking through urgent and politically fraught existential questions. In the case of Palestine, humour is vital in the struggle for liberation, self-determination and the reconciliation of collective trauma, for as artist Amer Shomali explains, 'a nation who cannot make fun of its wounds cannot heal them'.[38]

Notes to Ch. 2

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