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All the beautiful things: trauma, aesthetics and the politics of Palestinian childhood

Abstract: This paper examines the ways in which Palestinian children variously perform and transform the discourse of trauma and the aesthetic of suffering that have come to dominate representations of Palestinian childhood and the Palestinian struggle in general. I argue that everyday beauty in the lives of Palestinian refugee children, as found in mundane spaces and enacted through interpersonal relationships, constitutes an aesthetic disruption to the dominant representation of trauma as put forward by international humanitarian aid organizations and development agencies. Far from being restricted to the immediacy of everyday spaces and interactions, however, everyday beauty is located within wider national and religious geographic imaginaries, and likewise forms the basis of critiques of social and political injustice, and demands for a more just and equitable future. I argue that children enact an everyday Islamic ethic of beauty as part of a wider political demand for life itself.

Key words: Children's political geographies; Palestine; aesthetics; beauty; Islam; trauma

Introduction

In their introduction to the 2003 *Space and Polity* special issue on political geographies of children and youth, Philo and Smith contend that "It would be impossible to acquire a well-rounded, analytically rigorous and critically minded understanding of, say, […] the struggle for a Palestinian state solely through the eyes of children and young people" (2003). In response, Skelton (2009) asks whether "in the past the same might have been said about women's perspectives and interpretations of world politics?" Indeed, when over 50% of the population in occupied Palestine is under age 18, when over 700 Palestinian children are imprisoned in Israel each month (B'Tselem 2009; DCI-Palestine 2009), and when over 1,400 Palestinian minors have been killed since the start of the Intifada in 2000, including 430 killed and 1,872 injured during the 2008 assault on Gaza (B'Tselem 2008; IRIN 2009; OCHA 2009), one has to wonder whether a well-rounded, analytically rigorous and critically minded understanding of the Palestinian struggle can be achieved solely through the eyes of adults, or more precisely, adult male political leaders.

With the lives and bodies of children as well as images of childhood itself (Burwell 2004) so deeply implicated in Palestinian politics, research and political analysis on the everyday lives of Palestinian children is surprisingly lacking. While there is a body of scholarship on the psychological effects of violence on children in Palestine (Punamaki, Qouta et al. 2001; Thabet, Abed et al. 2002; Khamis 2008; Barber 2009), and on the cultural, socio-economic, and biological reproduction of families within a Palestinian nationalist context (Kanaaneh 2002; Rosenfeld 2002; Rosenfeld 2004), such research portrays children as passive victims or receptors of societal norms, as opposed to social agents in their own right (see as an exception Habashi 2008; Habashi 2009; Habashi 2011). Aside from questions of how the political situation in

Palestine affects children, this paper asks how we might understand the present political moment through the lives of children, and how children play a role in building alternative political futures. Specifically, this paper seeks to understand how children both perform and transform the aesthetics of suffering as constructed through humanitarian aid and development discourse.

Humanitarian aid has been a feature of life for Palestinian refugees since their forced displacement in 1948 and the subsequent creation of the state of Israel (Feldman 2009). International donor assisted development has also come to play a central role in the on-going Palestinian state-building process since the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993 in response to the Palestinian *intifada,* or popular uprising, of the late 1980s (Hammami 2000; Johnson and Kuttab 2002; Hanafi and Tabar 2003; Hanafi and Tabar 2004; Hanafi and Tabar 2005; Shawa 2005; Jad 2007). Far from satisfying Palestinian aspirations for peace and sovereignty, however, the Oslo Peace Process and the concomitant Palestinian state building effort has resulted in the further fracturing of Palestinian land, expansion of Israeli settlements, and increased militarization of the territories. These factors resulted in the eruption of much more violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians during a second Palestinian intifada starting in October 2000, which intensified further with the free reign granted to Israel by the US as part of the global War on Terror.

The spectacular violence of the Second Intifada spurred an international humanitarian response. The language of trauma provided the main justification for this response both because Palestinian doctors were already well prepared to deal with the physical effects of violence but were less well-equipped to deal with the psychological aftermath, and because the emphasis that trauma treatment places on recounting personal experiences serves the dual purpose of providing relief to beleaguered Palestinians while also providing testimony to the violence they endure (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Though the intense fighting of the Second Intifada has largely

subsided, the language of trauma continues to provide justification for humanitarian interventions and development projects funded by international donors as part of the rebuilding process. Projects involving children are especially popular among donors both because children are considered safe, politically-neutral targets for intervention (Challand 2005), and because children are seen as the foundation of the future Palestinian state. As citizens in the making and symbols of innocent victimhood, children become both prime targets and exemplars of humanitarian aid and development.

The language of trauma has created space in the global public sphere where Palestinians' stories can be heard and where the violent effects of on-going occupation can be highlighted even during times of "relative calm". However, trauma discourse delimits as much as enables Palestinian political manoeuvrability (Allen 2009; Feldman 2009). An overreliance on the language of trauma risks infantilizing Palestinians, limiting their political subjectivity to that of child-like victims (see Peteet 1994; Thompson 2009). While Allen (Allen 2009) points out that images of suffering have been used in an attempt to portray the humanity of Palestinians to a global audience, Feldman (2009) argues that humanitarian aid *limits* humanity by "reducing people to their victim status [...] requiring them to appear as exemplary victims and not political actors in order to receive recognition of their suffering." Moreover, trauma discourse summons a range of disempowering practices that aim to alleviate individual injury without addressing the structural violence of occupation. Finally, while stories of suffering and abuse speak real truths about people's lives under occupation, a focus on injury alone presents an impoverished view of life in Palestine (Harker 2006; Harker 2009). As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) remind us, Palestinians' stories of the past and demands for the future are not "fixed in the landscape of

trauma" (p. 211). This paper asks how children may be forging paths out of the heavily-trodden terrain of trauma, creating new political subjectivities and assemblages in the process.[1]

This politics of trauma underscores the significance of aesthetics in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Borrowing from Rancière's political theory, this paper understands aesthetics not as the philosophy of art or beauty, but as "a relation between what people do, what they see, what they hear and what they know" - what Rancière calls "a distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2010). For Rancière, it is in the disruption of the dominant distribution of the sensible where politics occurs (Rancière 2010). While this view of aesthetics is not specifically concerned with questions of beauty as such, this paper examines the role of beauty in disrupting the discourse of trauma that dominates humanitarian aid projects targeting Palestinian children and how beauty can create space for other political subjectivities to emerge. In so doing, this research takes aesthetics beyond its traditional focus on visual arts and representation, and toward the role of aesthetics in reproducing everyday life (see Mandoki 2007; Saito 2007; Rautio 2009).

Having situated the political geographies of Palestinian children, this paper continues with an examination of the treatment of beauty within the geographic and social science literature. Here, a case is made for a re-evaluation of the political potential of beauty as an affective, aesthetic disruption to dominant political ethics. Following this theoretical discussion, I go on to consider the implications this political conception of aesthetics and ethics has for research in children's geography. Then, I turn from methods to my fieldwork with Palestinian

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[1] Ahmed and Stacey (2001) and Thompson (2009) argue that the politics of trauma risks creating communities immobilized by the inertia of injury and mired in a sentimentalist politics of mourning. However, Till (2012) and Pratt (2012), in contrast, see the transformative potential for trauma as an emotional resource that can mobilize communities to commemorate past injustice, critique present social ills, and bring together counter-publics of care. As Pratt (2012, p. xxx) puts it, "Emotions are resources around which communities can organize, to make claims in a public domain. Experiences of trauma and loss need not shrivel from political engagement; rather, they can provide deep – enduringly painful - reservoirs for political mobilizing." Thus, the question here is not whether trauma is or is not politically useful or empowering, but rather, what kinds of political subjectivities are mobilized by the particular aesthetics of trauma used in humanitarian discourse vis-à-vis Palestine.

community organizations for an examination of the use of trauma discourse in projects targeting Palestinian children. Finally, this paper culminates in an exploration of the everyday lives of Palestinian children living in a West Bank refugee camp, and how everyday beauty serves as a touchstone for religiously inspired political imaginaries and desires.

Locating geographies of beauty

Geographers have been reluctant to treat the subject of beauty with anything but distant scepticism. This reluctance is a result of the forceful critiques put forward by post-structural, feminist, and post-colonial theorists of the masculinist, European gaze (Said 1979; Rose 1993). Apart from humanistic treatments of beauty as everyday aesthetic experience (Tuan 1989) what little geographical research there is on beauty tends to view the subject within the context of neo-colonial scopic-regimes (Fluri 2009). Similarly, the attention that beauty receives in other social sciences largely focuses on the beauty industry's role in naturalizing white, Western standards of beauty (Adrian 2003; Hobson 2005).

However, feminist and cultural theorists have begun to question whether beauty is necessarily predicated on female subjugation, or whether beauty might be considered something positive, such as a social value promoting justice and equality (Scarry 1999), or a hopeful impulse toward the future (Felski 2006; Rautio 2009; Coleman and Figuero 2010). Indeed, one wonders whether this suspicion of beauty itself stems from a misogynistic attitude toward sensual forms of knowledge (Steiner 2002). Despite the endeavour within feminist geography to valorise marginalized forms of knowledge (Anderson and Smith 2001; Davidson and Milligan 2004; Wood and Smith 2004; Bondi 2005; Tolia-Kelley 2006), and despite recent debates about the function of affect in politics (Lawson 2007; Barnett 2008; Popke 2009; Ruddick 2010; Smith,

Timbrell et al. 2010; Wright 2010; Roe 2011), the role that beauty might play in creating new political assemblages and subjectivities remains under-theorized.

In thinking about affective political communities, Thompson suggests that the "affect of beauty" provides an attractive alternative to the "aesthetics of injury" (Thompson 2009). While pain, he argues, "reduces the person to the boundary of her or his body", beauty, in contrast, opens the body to an "intimate politics of sharing," as the sensual generosity of beauty provokes an "affective impulse toward engagement with others" (Thompson 2009). This urge to share beauty with others serves as a modest, "universal claim to some form of good" (p. 154). The purpose of such claims is not to define beauty in fixed terms, as such definitions will always be inadequate, but rather to involve others in asking "what beauty might be" (Thompson 2009). Since beauty inspires an engagement with others in defining what is good, which in many contexts will involve a "comparison with circumstances that are experienced as unjust", beauty is not a distraction from injustice but "can be part of its critique" (Thompson 2009). For this reason, beauty takes on added significance in situations of violence. More than a mere coping mechanism, beauty contrasts with and draws attention to injustice, pointing toward other more hopeful futures. In this view, beauty and trauma are intimately intertwined but have divergent trajectories: trauma draws pain out of the body, whereas beauty draws the body out of pain.

Though Thompson contrasts the aesthetics of injury with the affect of beauty, this contradistinction can be understood in Rancière's terms as the difference between ethics and aesthetics. While aesthetics is often associated with the philosophy of art and beauty, Rancière sees aesthetics not as "a matter of art and taste" but "first of all, a matter of time and space" (Rancière 2005). Aesthetics, then, refers to the spatial-temporal distribution of the senses - what can be done, seen, thought, and said, where, when and by whom (Rancière 2010). Rancière does

not claim that politics is or should be grounded in sensation, or that sensation is necessarily political. Rather, he argues that what is political about aesthetics is that it involves a particular, contestable distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2009), and that it is through a disruption of the dominant distribution of perception that politics occurs (Rancière 2010).

Specifically, Rancière contrasts ethics, the distribution of perceptions and capacities according to one's position in society, with aesthetics, internal disruptions within the ethical order (Rancière 2010). Rancière locates an example of "aesthetic subversion of the ethical order" (ibid) in an essay published by a French workers' newspaper from 1848. The essay is written in the perspective of a joiner working on a luxurious estate: "Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room so long as he has not finished laying the floor" (Rancière 2009). Recalling Kant's notion of beauty as being neither an object of knowledge nor of desire (Rancière 2009), Rancière argues that the worker does not desire the floor as much as he ignores that it is not his. Contra the critique of beauty as ideological mystification (see Bourdieu 1984), Rancière contends that this ignorance is "by no means the illusion that conceals the reality of possession", rather "it is the *means for building a new sensible world*, which is a world of equality within the world of possession and inequality." (Rancière 2009 emphasis added; Rancière 2010). As Rancière explains, again evoking Kant, "The joiner acts as if he possessed the perspective. This as if is no illusion. It is a redistribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2009). This is what Rancière calls the "aesthetic performance of the as if", a "political dissensus" created through the disruption of one imaginary world by another (Rancière 2009). While the ethical ordering of society operates according to one "as if", aesthetics ruptures this ethical order by constructing a different "as if" in its place (ibid).

Aesthetics, then, is political because it is the expression of a political ideal: "the idea of a future and the idea of another place" (Robson 2005). However, rather than the non-place of utopia, Rancière understands aesthetic imaginaries as emerging between "a discursive space and a territorial space; the identification of a perceptual space that one discovers while walking with the *topos* of the community"(Rancière 2004 quoted in Robson 2005, p.80).[2] In other words, utopias emerge between the physical space that is perceived through the senses and the discursive space that orders our way of seeing and doing. It is this aesthetic rupture that allows new forms of seeing and doing.

Ethics and aesthetics in research with children

The notion of ethics as the distribution of what can be seen and heard and aesthetics as the disruption of the dominant distribution of the senses not only presents a challenge to conceptions of the political, but also challenges social science research itself, in particular research with children. Much research with children, especially in the field of psychology and education, is concerned with determining what is considered to be normal childhood development and categorizing children accordingly (Burman 2008; Maclure, Holmes et al. 2010 p.554). Even qualitative methodologies critical of the "patriarchal assurance of positivism," as Maclure (2006) puts it, nevertheless tend toward ethical closure and yearn for some form "generalisation, abstraction and mastery," or at the very least, "settled accounts" (p.225). An aesthetical methodology, however, would be open to unsettling disruptions. Rather than ignoring, editing out or smoothing over the ragged edges of research, an aesthetic methodology would recognize

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[2] To draw a comparison to Lefebvre's spatial triad, we might consider this perceptual space to be akin to Lefebvre's representational (or lived) space, that is, the space which is "lived through its associated images and symbols", a "dominated – and hence passively experienced" space, and yet the "space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39) Here we can imagine Rancière's aesthetics as providing the means for such imaginational re-appropriation, a disruption of everyday spatial practice, and a contestation to the dominant discursive (conceptual, to use Lefebvre's term) construction of ethical space.

the political potential of things out of place. In part, this is what Horton and Kraftl (2006 p. 274) argue for when they urge researchers to resist the impulse to "quickly analyse, distil, generalise and categorise" the world, thereby draining everyday life of its political potential, and assimilating possibility into predictability.

Nevertheless, the slow method approach of Horton and Kraftl (2006), and of non-representational approaches in children's geography more generally (Harker 2005), has come under attack for being unduly restricted to the realm of personal experience, and failing to take into account wider social and political contexts (Ansell 2009 p. 196; Mitchell and Elwood 2012). Part of the blame for the myopic focus on the micro-geographies of children's experiences, Ansell (2009) contends, is the persistent use of child-centred methodologies, including visual methods. Originally touted as a corrective to the disempowering, positivism of structuralist approaches which blur differences in children's experiences, the turn to child-centred methods encounters the opposite problem: research is limited to the level of individual child perception and is thus unable to adequately account for the ways in which political and social forces work to shape children' lives. Instead, Ansell (2009, p. 200) argues for an embodied methodology that mediates this divide by emphasizing connections between physical embodiment and conceptual faculties:

> Embodied encounters, then, are not simply perceptual, but always involve emotional, cognitive and imaginative engagement; they are always relational. Other than, perhaps, in the youngest infants, perception cannot take place without interpretation, and interpretation involves bringing into play memories, images and feelings acquired elsewhere. Thus affective experiences of place are neither individualized nor unmediated.

Indeed, while embodied affect may be pre-linguistic, it is not pre-discursive (see for example Sullivan 2001). Although affect exceeds the boundaries of language, it is (re)produced bodies and spaces which are always already gendered, raced, aged, and otherwise situated within the

social field. However, while Ansell calls for methods that take into consideration the elsewhere of broader-scale social processes that shape children's lives, we can take this critique further by imagining how embodied, affective experiences might also, in Rancière's language, serve as aesthetic disruptions that prise apart territorial and discursive space, and open up a perceptual elsewhere where different places and futures can be imagined.

An example of this sort of disruptive, aesthetic methodology is provided by Maclure et al (2006). In defiance of the "mundane realism" that continues to undergird visual methodologies in children's research, Maclure et al (2006) borrow from Deleuze's (1986) work on cinema to argue that visual methods can instead be used to explore "depth, complexity and the layering of history, memory and possibility in images and to connect the 'closed set' of entities bounded by the frame to the continuously changing 'out-of-field'" (p. 545-6). This "out-of-field" refers not only to the social processes not captured in the frame, but also "a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time," the more radical Elsewhere of possibility (Deleuze, 1986, p. 17 cited in Maclure et al 2006, p. 546). In this sense, the problem is not with visual methods as such, but the way they are used to serve strictly ethical, rather than aesthetic ends – that is, the way that visual methods are used to represent the closed space of childhood, rather than as disruptions to such closure.

The research conducted for this paper is in keeping with Ansell's (2009, p. 205) recommendation that in addition to researching directly with children we also need to conduct research "with those who are actively involved in constructing the policies and discourses that affect children." Thus, in addition to participatory research conducted with children in Balata refugee camp near the northern West Bank city of Nablus, I also conducted participant observation with youth-oriented NGOs in Nablus, assisting in writing proposals and reports for

projects targeting children. By being actively involved in the design of programs and projects directly affecting the lives of Palestinian refugee children I was able to get a sense of the productive capacity, limitations and flexibility of childhood discourses in a humanitarian and development context. In addition, I conducted focus-group interviews with parents, teachers, psychologists, and social workers in homes, schools, and youth centres in Nablus and Balata Camp. Through combining participatory research with children, participant observation with NGOs, schools and community centres, and interviews with teachers, parents and other adults, this research sought to bridge the "analytical gap" of researching the institutional discursive practices of childhood and the everyday, embodied experiences of children (Kallio 2007).

Regarding the child-centred methods used in this research, over the course of two years I conducted participant observation with Palestinian refugee children aged 10-13 in the schools and community centres of Balata Refugee Camp.[3] In addition, I formed research groups with children through local community centres – two groups of boys, two groups of girls, and two mixed groups of boys and girls. The research groups fluctuated in size but averaged about 6 children each, for a total of around 36 participants. In these groups, we conducted a variety of qualitative, visual research activities including guided tours of the camp, photo-diaries, participatory video projects (which the children themselves suggested), mental mapping, drawing and focus-group interviews.

As noted above, such child-centred, visual methodologies have become standard research methods used in research with childhood and youth (Young and Barrett 2001; Rudkin and Davis

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[3] The children who participated in this study are the descendants of the original refugees who fled historic Palestine in 1948. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the organization responsible for the wellbeing of Palestinian refugees, defines a Palestinian refugee as anyone whose normal place of residence in 1948 was Palestine and left their homes as a result of the fighting, or a descendant from the male line of any original refugee. As officially registered refugees with UNRWA, and as children growing up in Balata Refugee Camp, these children are refugees both in legal status and as part of their cultural identity.

2007; Loebach and Gilliland 2010). However, following Ansell (2009), my intention was not to use these research methods in isolation, but rather to triangulate them with adult-centred research examining the production of childhood discourses. Still, while attempting to balance adult-centred and child-centred methods, I nevertheless initially regarded the child-centred methods used in this research with the same "mundane realism" that Maclure et al (2006) critique. Specifically I saw photo diaries, photo tours, and mental maps as glimpses into the *real* everyday lives of children, where children embody the discourses of childhood. I failed to take into account how these visual methods are themselves central to the construction of Palestinian childhood discourse. As Allen (Allen 2009) argues, in a confluence of three intertwined elements, affect, visuality, and human rights, visual representations of suffering, in particular children's suffering, are central to the formation of Palestinians' rights-bearing political subjectivity. In this sense, the visual methodologies used in this research did not so much capture the ways in which Palestinian refugee children perform the discourses of childhood, as much as provide the very means by which such discourses were performed, but also, as we will see further below, disrupted, contested and transformed.

Aesthetics of Palestinian childhood suffering

During my field work, I was invited to the office of one of the community centres where I had conducted participatory research helping to design and implement children's arts projects alongside other youth volunteers and staff. I was invited on the occasion of a visit from a delegation of officials from a European consulate coming to see the results of an art therapy project they had funded, and to discuss the possibility of further funding for future projects. When the delegates arrived the centre's director was eager to show them a video that had been taken of one of the art therapy sessions conducted as part of the project. In the video soft music

plays as the psycho-social support counsellor leads the participating girls through a visualization exercise. The camera pans around the room and focuses on a girl as she buries her face in her hands. At first it appears as though the girl is hiding her face in embarrassment, or perhaps uncontrollable laughter. Then it becomes clear that she is sobbing. The other girls soon follow suit.

It is unclear who the girls in the video are, why they were chosen to participate in the project, and why exactly they are crying. But this is not important. In fact, this ambiguity is essential for such projects to work. At its most basic, this scene is an allegory for the relationship between foreign donors and humanitarian organizations in Palestine. Suffering, in the form of children's tears, is displayed as both the justification for and outcome of humanitarian intervention. Trauma and suffering serve as currency in the affective economy that regulates relations between humanitarian organizations and donors. However, the question of what causes the suffering is left unasked and unanswered, and only personal catharsis and healing is emphasized.

While the language of trauma is useful in drawing attention to the often hidden, psychological scars of war, paradoxically, this focus on the human suffering and individual healing can obscure the very context of occupation that such stories attempt to bring to light, serving instead to conceal and de-politicize the context of violence (Argenti-Pellin 2003; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Indeed, in many cases, rather than being used to draw attention to the violence of occupation, the language of trauma is used to sanitize any perceived political content of work with children and youth, providing instead a sterilized medical discourse that reassures foreign donors.

In projects and programs seeking to address trauma in children and youth, the issue of the violence of occupation is rarely named as such. For example, in a funding proposal to a European donor by a community organization in Balata camp, the organization's mission is described, in part, as aiming to alleviate "the psychological pressure that children continue to suffer in Balata camp as a result of past and on-going violence." The reference to past and on-going violence is no doubt a veiled reference to the intense Israeli military incursions into Balata camp during the Second Intifada (see Weizman 2007). However, among the specific issues the organization seeks to address in their proposed project is "The proliferation of violence and child abuse which affects the psychological state of the kids", which suggests a focus on violence internal to Palestinian society, as opposed to the violence of occupation (although in many interviews with Palestinian parents and social workers, domestic violence and the violence of occupation is often described as being closely interconnected.)

What is most interesting about the language of trauma, however, is not just that it creates a space of useful ambivalence for international donors and Palestinian organizations to enter into (demonstrating the political agency of Palestinian community organizations), and not that these projects do not explicitly seek to confront the occupation head on (how could they?). Rather, what is interesting here about the use of trauma is that it a) makes children and youth visible and politically significant only to the extent that they have been exposed to suffering and violence and b) that the appropriate response to this violence is individual reflection and personal development. As one project proposal for a computer education project described the goals of the programme: "to provide psychological relief and a productive means of self-expression to children and youth who have suffered trauma and other effects of violence and conflict," and give children the tools to "transcend personal barriers, such as trauma and lack of self-

confidence, through self-exploration and personal development." Here, the violence of

occupation is reduced to a set of personal psychological symptoms and individual developmental

hurdles to be overcome through self-expression and improved self-esteem. What is mobilized

here is a particular understanding of political subjectivity based upon individual expression and

personal empowerment, de-emphasizing the violence of occupation, or the collective identity of

nationality or religion. Significantly for a cultural context where national and religious identity is

so important, no proposal or report I reviewed made reference to Arab, Palestinian, or Islamic

cultural identity, except for one youth art project celebrating the religious diversity of Nablus (a

city that prides itself on harmonious relations between the Muslim majority and the significant

minority Christian and Samaritan populations), and a young women's economic empowerment

project that cited "cultural expressions of religion" as a barrier to development. As we will see in

the following section cultural expressions of religion are central to children's political identities

and articulations.

How life in the camp is beautiful

In my research with girls and boys (age 10-13) from Balata Refugee Camp, children

frequently used the word beauty[4] in our discussions. At first, I ignored beauty as an irrelevant

filler-word, used by children when they were unsure of what to say to a prying researcher trying

to extract meaning from their photos and drawings. Over time, however, I became aware of other

ways that children mobilized the language of beauty, specifically as a way of expressing

religious and national imaginaries, describing and making judgments about everyday people,

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[4]Children use the formal Arabic word for beauty, *jameel*, in discussing the family, religion, and historic Palestine, while *Hilo/Hilwa*, literally meaning sweet but implying nice or pretty, is used more casually in talking about people, places and situations. The word *betjanin* is used emphatically to describe something as amazing or gorgeous. Coming from the root *j-n-n* meaning hidden, as in *jinni* (embryo)*, jinn* (genie), *jennah* (paradise), and *majnoon* (mad), *betjanin* literally means to hide reason, that is, to make crazy – a term expressing the notion of beauty as affect.

places and behaviours, critiquing social and political injustice, expressing hope for the future, and as aesthetic rupture to the dominant perceptual order of trauma and suffering.

One particular focus group served as a turning point, highlighting the way I had ignored beauty as a distraction from the *real* politics of suffering that academics, activists and humanitarian workers are prone to seek out. The research session began with a discussion about life in the camp. Predictably, our conversation had turned to overcrowding and lack of places to play. One of the girls, Yara, at 10-years-old the youngest member of our group, arrived late to the discussion. "What are we talking about?" she asked, "problems in the camp?" I told her that we were not specifically discussing problems, but life in Balata in general. I asked her what aspect of life in Balata she wanted to discuss and she answered: "How it's beautiful. How life in the camp is beautiful [*jameela*]."

When asked to elaborate Yara was hesitant at first: "I don't know, it just is," she said. She paused again, and then answered: "I mean how close people are. How we take care of each other." The other girls and boys nodded in agreement. Jenna, one of the older girls in the group agreed: "That's true. The respect and cooperation between people in the camp is something unique, something nice [*Hilo*]. People are close here, you feel warm." Moments ago the children had been discussing physical proximity as one of the main difficulties of life in the camp. The discussion was framed within a particular ethical understanding of refugee childhood predicated on that which is lacking – space, privacy, rights. Yara, however, in her aesthetic rendering, had transformed the physical and social proximity in the camp from its main problem into its defining beauty, and had transformed the overcrowding of the camp from a story of everyday suffering into a narrative of everyday care and beauty.

This disruption of the ethics of suffering by the aesthetic of beauty was played out in a different, all-girls research group as well. In this case however, beauty was not evoked as characterizing the relations between people in the camp (which this group criticized for being especially *not* beautiful), but in describing the care that goes into maintaining a beautiful home. For her photo-diary, Iman, who aspires to be an interior decorator, took a series of pictures of the interior spaces of her home. While her focus on the space of the home is in part a reflection of the spatial restrictions imposed upon adolescent girls in the camp[5], Iman's photos evoke wider spatial-temporal, even sacred, geographic imaginaries. As Iman explains, "I wanted to send a message with these images that this is a home, I live here, I've lived in this home my whole life, and it is beautiful." The photos feature images of neatly arranged furniture and perfectly plastered and painted walls adorned with various religious and Palestinian decorative accoutrements including a Qur'an, decorative prayer beads and Palestinian embroidery. The other girls responded positively to the photos: "I like this picture because it is clear from the beautiful decorations that they have been building a home for long time," one girl remarked. Another girl commented: "I love the picture of the Holy Quran in the home. That's something beautiful, because we love the Qur'an." In speaking about her photos, Iman commented that the decorations are beautiful because they show how her mother "cares for us in this home, and how hard she works to maintain the home." Again, this theme resonated with the other girls in the group. As one of the girls commented:

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[5] During early adolescence, girls and boys in the Middle East often experience a transformation in their spatial mobility. Boys become less welcome in female-dominated domestic spaces, whereas girls, previously able to play in the streets around the house, find their unaccompanied mobility restricted to private spaces of the family home and school (see Gregg 2005). Many parents suggest that while this restriction to girls' mobility is something found in the cities and villages of Palestine, it is more pronounced in Balata due to the already restricted amount of space and lack of privacy. Girls often describe feeling imprisoned by these restrictions, whereas boys often complain of having nowhere else to go but the streets. However both boys and girls use a variety of tactics in using their spaces to their advantage, as I will discuss in a forthcoming paper.

> I like these pictures because it shows how her mother raises her well and takes care of her family. That reminds me of the sacrifices our mothers make for us, and how we want to please them, and please God by helping them. Also how mothers raise their children in Palestine, in difficult circumstances, so we must be strong and protect Palestine.

Following from this comment, I asked the girls how Palestinian mothers raise their children, and one girl responded: "They raise them in the Islamic religion, which means they give instructions about how to treat other people in a good way." Another girl added: "Palestinian mothers must be extra careful with their children, especially here in Balata, because of the occupation."

This spatial-temporal up-scaling of the girls' interpretation of the beautiful home suggests that the space of the home, and relations between and within families, are enrolled within wider national and religious geographical imaginaries. However, the use of Palestinian embroidery and Islamic decorative arts in the home are more than just symbolic performances of Palestinian identity; such images and practices simultaneously produce the home and nation while also serving as reminders that one is not at home – neither in one's actual home, one's homeland, nor one's eternal home in the hereafter - evoking a spatial-temporal imaginary that stretches beyond the physical territory of the present state of occupation and exile. Likewise, rather than expressing a purely ethical or normative understanding of how a home should look or how a mother should behave, by bringing to light the aesthetic value of the work that goes into building and maintaining a beautiful home the girls express a kind of political solidarity with this domestic physical and symbolic labour.

Moreover, beyond just keeping up with the neighbours, maintaining a beautifully decorated home in a refugee camp, a meticulous practice often associated with landed Palestinian urbanites, serves as a disruption of the aesthetic divide between city and camp, and an aesthetic subversion of the broader ethical order in which refugees must remain in their place as humans in

waiting.[6] Building and decorating a home is not a passive surrender of the right of return nor is it a simple act of coping or making do. The difficult, patient work of maintaining a home and raising a family under occupation is an act of steadfastness (*samud*). It is the "aesthetic performance of the as if" at the heart of refugee subjectivity – a refusal to give up their status as refugees, while at the same time refusing to be homeless, voiceless and invisible.

If decorating the home is a way of disrupting one distribution of the sensible, and creating another visibility of beauty, cleanliness and control inside the refugee camp, it is the external world of *fawda* or chaos in the camp that threatens to disrupt such a carefully maintained space. In another session with the same group of girls, a discussion about the home turned into a discussion not of beauty and care but anxiety and fear. During the discussion, Leila remarked, "there's no place in the camp where we can feel safe, not even the home," to which Raghad added, "*especially* not the home." Raghad went on to explain why: "The arguing. Sometimes my dad doesn't have work. Other times he goes away for a long time to work inside [Israel]. My brothers don't work, and sometimes they're in jail, so there's a lot of stress and fighting in the house." Iman agreed adding "and sometimes the soldiers come to the house to take our brothers." Here, the direct and indirect violence of occupation invades the house preventing any feeling of safety or security. However, this anxiety caused by the threat of the violent external world invading the space of the home manifests itself in other ways, too. As Leena explained:

> In our house, we all sleep in one room, and I sleep near the door. We keep the sleeping mats upstairs in the dark, so when it's time to sleep I run upstairs to get

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[6] Maintaining an elegantly decorated and impeccably cleaned home is a labour-intensive and time-consuming aspect of many women's lives in Nablus, with the relative tidiness of the homes of friends, family and neighbours being a common theme of everyday conversation. To urban-dwelling Palestinians, the refugee camps appear to be a place of perpetual chaos and messiness, such that maintaining a tidy home seems like an impossibly futile feat. However, as Abourahme (2011) puts it, "the turn to beautification and improvement of houses in many camps displays an awareness of the importance of interiority and nearness, as means of mediating both the uneasy senses of belonging and 'home' as well as the continuing existential threat; this is borne out in Shu'fat camp where the most ornate and decorated houses are also those that stand closest to 'the wall' (Bulle, 2009: 29)."

the mats, and then I run back down again because I'm scared. Then I can't sleep because I hear noises outside. Like, last night someone was kicking a can down the street and it sounded like it was in the house. I got scared, I couldn't sleep all night!

Here, the sounds of the street invade the space of the home, creating fear and anxiety. Other girls agreed, adding that they are scared of burglars and kidnappers.[7] Raghad, however, has her own way of coping with such fear. As she says: "Sometimes when I'm scared, I sneak out of the house and go to the cemetery, even at night. It's nice there [*Hilo*], and my grandmother and grandfather are there, so it gives me comfort." In a counterintuitive role-reversal, the beautiful space of the cemetery provides the care and comfort that the home cannot.

Against the violent and messy outside world, it is the desire of this group of girls to externalize the domestic aesthetic of care and beauty into the public spaces of the camp: a reconfiguration of ethical space − the displacement of one as if with another. In discussing a picture of flowers that Raghad had taken for her photo-diary, the girls discussed the benefits of beauty in public places, and their desire to see beautiful places and behaviours fostered in the camp. As Raghad explains: "I took a picture of flowers because it's pretty [*Hilwa*], not just how they look, but everything […] I mean, they have a sweet smell [*Hilo*]. Also people can benefit from flowers because they make you feel good, and they attract birds and butterflies too." The other girls agreed and listed other benefits of flowers: "Some people even make some drinks from flowers, or perfumes, or give them as gifts. If I had a garden I would do that." The girls then discussed the possibility of growing gardens throughout the camp, not just in the nearby park or the cemetery, but along the streets, in front of shops and homes, and in schools. Leila,

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[7] In an interview with the mothers of this group, they expressed fear not just that thieves and kidnappers would invade their homes, but that the very bodies of their children would be violated by collaborators working with Israeli organ harvesters (see Scheper-Hughes 2000 and Weir 2009 on Israel and the global organ trade). However, this bodily anxiety was rejected in another interview with a group of mothers who said that not only is kidnapping unheard of in Balata, but when children get lost in the camp the neighbours will help find the child, or return the child home.

however, had her doubts: "I wish we could have gardens in Balata, but we can't, they would all get crushed and destroyed." Amina concurred, "yeah, the boys would destroy them or eat them!" But Raghad had a different suggestion: "We could build a special place for flowers, maybe just in our school at first, then we could encourage others to grow them, and show them how to plant them." Leila agreed that this could work, but not without an appeal to Islam:

> We would need to encourage people to take care of the space. For example, I'm always careful about keeping the space in front of my house clean. And if I see some glass in the street I'll kick it away with my foot, to clear the path, because that's Islam. Also, if I see someone throw garbage on the ground I will speak to them, and tell them "cleanliness is Islam, and dirtiness is from the devil," and I will be polite to them.

Here Leila echoes the *hadith*, or saying of the Prophet Mohammad, that removing a stone or thorn from the road is an act of charity. Raghad agreed and suggested that if the girls were polite, and remind their neighbours that "God is beautiful and loves beauty" (*inna Allah jameel wa yuHibuun al-Jamal*) people would surely agree with them and change their behaviours accordingly, thus redistributing an aesthetics of beauty and care from its place in the home, toward its proper Islamic ethical position infusing all aspects of public and private life.[8]

In this discussion, the girls appeal to an everyday, Islamic ethic of beauty against the moral and aesthetic chaos of the camp. However, more than just serving as an aesthetic judgment about the everyday spaces and behaviours in the camp, this Islamic ethic of beauty informs broader notions of social justice. In a mixed group of girls and boys, one of the girls, Sajood, drew a mental map of her world as situated within a larger moral universe:

Figure 1: Sajood's map of good and evil.

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[8] This notion of an Islamic aesthetic of public cleanliness runs counter to Winegar's (2011) class-based interpretation of the trash clean-ups in Cairo following the Egyptian revolution as being an expression of middle-class values of cleanliness.

> This is a map of good and evil. The ugly colours are evil. And the beautiful colours are good. The ugly colours represent corruption, the people who are strong and wealthy and have power so they violate the rights of the weak and poor. It's like the Israelis [*yahud*] do to us, but also other countries, even the Arabs.

Ibrahim, one of the boys in the group, agreed, adding: "That's like my big brother does to me!"

In describing the beautiful colours, Sajood explains: "These colours are the good people, the weak and poor who are deprived of everything in this world [*ad-dunya* – the material world]."

When asked if this geography of good and evil corresponds to any physical place, she answered:

> There are ugly things and nice things everywhere in the world. In the camp, the ugly places are like the coffee shops where guys spend all day just sitting and smoking. It's something very ugly [*saya* – bad/ugly] to waste your life and health like that. It's *haram [*sinful*]*. On Resurrection Day, God will ask them to account for how they spent their time in this life, and what they did.

As for the beautiful places, Sajood added: "Any place where people take care of each other without asking anything in return. Like, here in this centre where they take care of kids and disabled people, and when people help their neighbours, that's something nice [*Hilo*]." Here Sajood constructs a counter-topography of everyday beauty, goodness and care against the injustices of the world.

In the same mixed research group Nisreen also used the language of beauty in critiquing the injustice of occupation. However, her mental map incorporates a temporal dimension, stitching together her everyday material world with collective memories of historic Palestine, and hopes for a life of security and freedom in another time and place. As Nisreen explains:

> This picture shows the life with security. This is the camp. Not the real camp, of course, but how I wish it to be. Here's our house. Actually, this is my real house. It has three levels, my grandfather's home on the ground floor, my uncle's home in the middle, and our home on top. So it's our real house, but it's like how it would be if it weren't in the camp. The houses are right next to each other and you can't see anything. But, here you can see all the beautiful things [*Hilwa*]. Like, there's a river between the houses, because that would be nice, right? And these are our fields, like we have outside the camp, and like they used to have before the *nakba*, only here the

fields are right outside your door, and I could look at them every day from my window. Here you can breathe, there is freedom.

Figure 2: The life with security – Nisreen's mental map of the camp. It depicts her family home next to her neighbour's house with a stream running between them. Fields and olive orchards surround the areas, and the girls happily go to school as cars go by freely and safely.

Here, idyllic scenes of beauty such as fields and rivers (often used in the Qur'an to describe paradise[9]) evoke memories of historic Palestine while critiquing the current conditions of the camp. However, Nisreen's map is not a map of the camp as such, nor a map of historic Palestine. Rather, it is a map charting the space that emerges between the material surroundings of the camp and broader spatial-temporal religious and national symbolic imaginaries. More than just romantic memories of an idealized past, or remedies for making life more tolerable, the language of beauty is used to express a political demand for life itself, a life of beauty and security.

Where the First Intifada was marked by disruption of normal life by strikes and curfews, the massive violence experienced during the Second Intifada has led toward a turn toward life-affirming forms of struggle, and the demand for life itself as a political demand enacted in mundane spaces and actions (Allen 2008; Kelly 2008). As Allen (2008) explains, "Although Israel overwhelmingly controls the material production of space through their monopoly on the force and technology involved in the creation of physical settings, Palestinians' adaptation to and rejection of their effects are in many ways beyond the control of those who dominate and destroy buildings, olive groves, and roads" (p. 475). It is through everyday spatial performances that refugees reassert control over space through their "capacity to stop noticing [the occupation], or at least stop noticing all the time" (Allen 2008, p. 476). What Allen (2008) describes is an

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[9] For example, in Surat al-Hijr (The Rocky Tract) 15:45-46 the Qur'an says: "Indeed, the righteous will be within gardens and springs, [having been told] 'Enter it in peace, safe [and secure]'", and similarly Surat ad-Dukhan (The Smoke) 44:51-52 says "Indeed the righteous will be in a secure place; with gardens and springs."

aesthetic shift in the distribution of knowledge and ignorance. Neither resistance nor surrender, such aesthetic subversions serve as ruptures in daily life, providing the means for "reworking" the prevailing aesthetic order into a new sensible world; creating "counter topographies" through the "unexpected connections" that emerge between overlapping layers of material and discursive sediment (Katz 2004; Rancière 2009). Rather than being a distraction to the injustice around them, everyday beauty draws attention to these injustices while calling for new ways of doing and seeing that are more beautiful, just and good.

For more beautiful geographies, more beautiful politics

In this paper I have argued that, in their everyday spatial practices and imaginings, Palestinian refugee children perform an aesthetics of beauty that disrupts the ethics of trauma. In so doing, children take political subjectivity based on suffering into new, beautiful directions. For children in Balata camp, beauty is performed through everyday acts of care between neighbours and within the home. However, these everyday spaces and practices are not confined to the micro-geographies of immediate experience, but rather are mediated through wider religious and national imaginings. Far from being simple symbolic performances of national and religious identity, it is the space between these wider imaginings and the everyday material word that the possibility of new political subjectivities and assemblages emerges. Children are well-versed in the rights-based language of trauma. But, through the language of beauty they demand something more: life itself. They make this demand through an everyday, Islamic ethic of beauty - not an overt political Islamism, but rather a religiously inspired faith that everyday acts of beauty and goodness is part of confronting inequality and creating a more just world.[10]

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[10] This finding both confirms and extends Habashi's (2011) findings about the increasing importance of an Islamic religious identity to Palestinian children's political agency. Habashi (2011) finds that Palestinian children articulate

In focusing on the role of beauty in imagining, enacting, and articulating political ideals and desires, this paper makes room for aesthetics and beauty in our conception of the political. While beauty has lately been regarded with distant scepticism this research suggests a second look. Of course, there is danger that in searching for significance in everyday beauty, and by couching it terms of politics and religion, we are once against attempting to capture the excessive, affective potential of beauty, translating it into a stagnant truth. Indeed, even as I write this paper about beauty, I am reminded of the many other sublime, funny, awkward, and boring moments that punctuated my research with children, and which evade easy signification with terms like politics and resistance.[11] However, as Maclure (2010) reminds us, we can proceed "in the face of this limitation" by pursuing aesthetic methodologies which seek to "release a more open array of responses that are less burdened with the weight of prior assumptions, our own included." Perhaps geographers can lessen this burden through research that engages more openly with aesthetics, perhaps even pursuing more beautiful geographies.

Similarly, this research suggests a need for greater attention to the role of aesthetics in politics more broadly, including the politics of occupation and resistance, humanitarian aid and development, and childhood.[12] The current political impasse in Palestine is marked by the failure of a particular aesthetic distribution of ignorance and sense known as the two-state solution. In this arrangement, a matrix of walls, by-pass roads, underpasses, checkpoints, permits and even noise restrictions on the call to prayer, conceals a Palestinian population whose very presence

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a politics of transnational solidarity, Palestinian nationalism and resistance to global cultural hegemony in largely Islamic religious terms. While this research too found religion to be an important aspect of children's political agency, what is interesting here is how an Islamic religious imaginary infuses the practice of everyday life as well as hopes and desires articulated in terms other than the familiar language of political resistance.

[11] I will be grappling with this issue in a forthcoming paper.

[12] Indeed, raising the political stakes of this discussion on aesthetics is the role of art in portraying the "humanity" of Arabs (simultaneously placing their humanity in doubt), as well as the use of beauty, culture and art as a "civilizing" tool in youth development projects. See Winegar 2008 and 2009.

disturbs a Zionist aesthetic imaginary, while simultaneously maintaining constant visual surveillance of the occupied populace (see Monk 2002; Weizman 2002; Segal 2003; Weizman 2007). The occupation makes itself visible through watch towers, security lights, and walls, while concealing itself in the flashpoint areas of cities and refugee camps, where the task of policing the Palestinians has been outsourced to the Palestinians themselves, as Palestinian police patrol the streets during the day, surrendering sovereignty to Israeli soldiers after dark, in an occupation of the night (Marshall 2011). With this particular distribution of the senses proving untenable, the task now it seems is to imagine new forms of collective identity and political sovereignty that could take us "beyond the national impasse" (Bamyeh 2003). Counter-intuitively, perhaps the supposed obstacles for peace - land, security and religion - could serve as the basis for some kind of shared sovereignty, an accommodating aesthetic imaginary based on a common need for a secure life, a common love for a beautiful land, and even a shared faith in the promise that the land represents.

The recent protests against the Palestinian Authority and increasing living costs currently taking place in cities and refugee camps across the West Bank (including Balata Camp), suggests that the two-state peace process, propped up by international donors, is in serious doubt. And yet, what might take its place is still very much uncertain. Perhaps it is the Palestinian refugee child, dis-embedded spatially and temporally from the official political community of the nation (see Abourahme 2011), but also over-determined discursively and governmentally as symbols of the nation and citizens in the making, who can give us unique insight into emerging political identities, imaginaries and assemblages in Palestine.

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

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