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Creative Marginality. Jews, Palestinians and the Alternative Cultural Scene in Tel Aviv-Jaffa

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally viewed as the “back yard” of Israel’s urban landscape, ethnically mixed towns have been predominantly studied in light of the marginality paradigm, which neglects to recognize these spaces as social places, namely as life worlds in and of themselves. Drawing on archival and ethnographic fieldwork in Jaffa, we propose a relational anthropological approach to the problématique of marginality and pluralism in Jewish-Arab cities. These are seen not as unidimensional sites of hyper-segregation but rather as spaces of creative marginality, which paradoxically challenge the nationalist spatial hegemony (both Palestinian and Zionist). Examining the everyday enactment of alterity we show how marginality and exclusion become precisely the driving force behind one of Israel’s most creative back stages.

Keywords: Jaffa. Alternative Culture. Artivism. Creativity. Israel/Palestine.

“Oriental” Jaffa or the Shabbes Goy Revisited

In a series of articles entitled “Jaffa as is: People amongst the ruins” published in the aftermath of the 1948 War in a Hebrew language daily, a section titled “Arab Jaffa ‘Occupied’” describes the pre-1948 consumer practices between the two rival cities:

Twice a year was Jaffa “occupied” by the residents of Tel-Aviv, who would “sail” southbound. This would happen during the holidays. In Passover Jaffa would bustle with Jewish holiday shoppers in search of bread, and in Yom Kippur—with people looking for a hearty meal. Then Jaffa’s cafes would be filled with Jewish customers, who would chew on Kabab and Shishlik in a post-fasting appetite. It was a day of great profit for the Jaffa residents, who would eagerly await this annual Jewish prosperity-day [sic.].

Despite the author’s allocation of the “occupation” of Jewish customers to the pre-1948 past, more then 60 years after the annexation of Jaffa to Tel-Aviv and the exile of the Palestinian population, Jaffa continues to fill the function of Tel-Aviv’s Shabbes Goy. Every Saturday thousands of secular Jews flock in Jaffa to consume its commodified alterity. In public discourse, this pattern of economic interdependence is framed in cultural terms, Jaffa is seen as an Oriental space of gastronomic and lifestyle authenticity—a notion nurtured by Palestinian merchants and rejected by political activists. The orientalized foodscape in Jaffa includes Narguileh cafes, street food vendors, restaurants specializing in Arab and Mediterranean cuisine, pastry shops, gelaterias and most notably bakeries and hummus joints [Hirsch 2011]. However this phenomenon is not limited to economic reciprocity and conspicuous consumption. It has been rather a part of a larger system of interactions, which included “violent
pastimes” [Carter 2004]. In the landscape of our childhood in Jaffa, Palestinian residents were participating in Jewish holidays such as Yom Kippur and Lag Baomer, but mainly in a negative sense of subverting social order and normative temporality. Carnivalesque rituals of destruction included youngsters blocking roads, throwing stones at vehicles passing by, and lighting extended bonfires in public spaces. These rites however were not only “acts of resistance” against the dominant structure of power but also a form of interaction and ludic participation [Simmel 1971]. Rather than instantiating a non-relation between sworn enemies, these behaviors displayed an ambivalent relation vis-à-vis the Jewish majority and the state.

With the advent of neoliberal urbanism and gentrification since the 1980s, this pattern has been gradually politicized and increasingly contested. To be sure, local entrepreneurs and Jewish customers alike continue to view Jaffa as a space of Oriental authenticity mainly in the fields of culinary culture and real estate. Thus the Andromeda Hill gated community invites wealthy Jews and foreign investors to “living the original” in “the New-Old Jaffa” [Monterescu 2009b]. Likewise the Hummus Blog states: “Jaffa, an ancient town with a glorious history, turned into a unique culinary gem. Packed with gourmet restaurants and boutique eateries, yet many flock to Jaffa for one reason: Abu Hassan’s hummus.” Of late, the Oriental commodification of space has been disavowed by Palestinian younger generations. Resisting the “hummus invasion” anti-gentrification activists call to “visit Huldai’s back yard. For Jaffa is more than just Hummus”.

Ethnically mixed towns, such as Jaffa, Raz y, Lydda, Haifa and Acre, occupy an ambivalent place in the Israeli and Palestinian political and cultural imagination. Bi-national borderlands in which Arabs and Jews live together, these cities bring to the fore, on the one hand, the paradox of Palestinian citizens in a fundamentally Jewish state, while simultaneously suggesting, by the very spatial and social realization of “mixed-ness,” the potential imaginary of its solution. Under British colonial rule, cities like Jaffa and Haifa formed strategic sites for the emergence of Palestinian identity [Khalidi 1997] and its modern project of national urbanization, only to become after 1948 the symbolic markers of its tragic failure [Monterescu and Rabinowitz 2007]. Enacting the predicament of forced co-existence in the aftermath of the Nakba, mixed urban spaces are currently sites of national nostalgia, historical claims and violent conflict over lived and symbolic space [Tamari 2003]. While most studies have focused on the radicalizing effect of urban mix, as manifest in unequal power relations between Israelis and Palestinians engendered by exclusionary planning policies, economic dependency, martial law, and population transfer [LeVine 2005; Rabinowitz 1997; Rotbard 2005; Slyomovics 1998; Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003], this article turns analytic attention rather to the cultural production of ambivalent urban identities.

Urban Liminality beyond the Marginality Paradigm

Ethnically mixed towns have been predominantly studied in light of the marginality paradigm—a leitmotif of urban studies from the Chicago School to contemporary analysis of “advanced marginality” [Goldberg 2012; Wacquant 2008; Weisberger 1992]. While this paradigm rightly stresses the political economy of poverty and uneven development, it also neglects to recognize these spaces as social places, namely as life worlds in and of themselves. Instead it reduces them to flat zones of passive victimhood and amorphous resistance or conversely to ghettos of criminal violence. Drawing on archival and ethnographic fieldwork in Jaffa, we propose a relational anthropological approach to the problématique of marginality and pluralism in Jewish-Arab cities. These are seen not as unidimensional sites of hyper-segregation but rather as spaces of creative marginality, which paradoxically challenge the nationalist spatial hegemony (both Palestinian and Zionist). Spaces of agency and resistance range from consumer practices through ludic practices to the increasing visibility of Jewish-Arab mixed couples [Herzog 2007], radical social movements, alternative cultural initiatives, and binational memory activism. Thus just as Jews use the Arab scene to overturn their ethnoreligious norms, Arabs join in counter-cultural and political practices. Examining the everyday enactment of alterity we show how marginality and exclusion become precisely the driving force behind one of Israel’s most creative back stages.

Positing Jaffa as Tel-Aviv’s alter ego, a spatial theorization of ambivalence is crucial to tracing the accommodation of categories of representation to changing historical conditions. In social theory, Bauman [1991] locates the counterpart to the order-seeking project of modernity and the nation-state not in Hobbesian
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by these initiatives, we conclude with a critique of their potential for radical social action.

**Gentrification’s Unintended Consequences**

Historically known as the “Bride of Palestine” (‘arūs fālāṣṭīn), Jaffā was the symbol of political modernity in pre-1948 Palestine [LeVine, 2005]. Faced with Zionist expansion, the Arab metropolis underwent radical demographic changes when the majority of its Palestinian population was forced into exile during the hostilities of 1948. Only 3,500 out of the estimated 75,000 members of the Arab population remained. Jaffā, which had been a regional seaport under late Ottoman and British rule, was transformed overnight into the notorious and dilapidated “Quarter 7”—Tel-Aviv’s “Arab neighborhood.”

More than 60 years after the Nakba, Jaffā is currently an ethnically “mixed town”—a contested site of national nostalgia, gentrification and crime [Monterescu and Rabinowitz 2007; Tamari 2003]. Located minutes away from Tel-Aviv’s metropolitan center yet marked as sui generis cultural and political alterity, it is currently home to approximately 17,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel. For the municipality and the state, Arab Jaffā has long presented a political “problem,” thus resulting in recurrent strategies of containment, surveillance, and control. Bereft of a united leadership and with no stable middle class to speak of, Palestinians in Jaffā ache for affordable housing and political recognition.

The first decade of the 21st century saw several key events in ethnically mixed towns. In tandem with the breakout of the Al-Aqsa Intifāda, the October 2000 events marked an important change in the history of the Palestinian minority in Israel. In mixed towns these outbreaks resulted in no fatal casualties but made visible the widening gaps between Jewish and Arab residents and the brutal intervention of state policing agencies.

The ongoing crisis further escalated when, in 2007, the Israel Land Administration issued 497 evacuation orders to Palestinian families in Jaffa charged with illegal construction. As these families all live in the ‘Ajami neighborhood, a hotspot of Jewish gentrification, the evacuation was identified as yet another attempt to “transfer” the Arab population out of Jaffa. Soon it became the symbol of the struggle over Palestinian presence and a landmark of resistance to...
ethno-gentrification. Consisting of both Jewish and Palestinian activists from Jaffa and beyond, the collective mobilization around this constitutive event provided an effective space for political action and new forms of binational collaboration [Monterescu & Shaindlinger, 2013]. The current predicament is thus marked by two major trends: the increasing marketing and ethno-gentrification of Jaffa and the alliance between Palestinian activists and politically-motivated Jews, many of whom qualify as gentrifiers themselves.

- **Gentrifiers against Gentrification: On Radical Gentrifiers**

In the wake of the October 2000 events, the very marking of Jaffa as a space of violent contestation further attracted various groups that have already expressed interest in Jewish-Arab cooperation through actual residence in the city, including: hippy communes yearning for Mediterranean and multi-cultural exoticism; individual leftists coming for ideological reasons to implement co-existence on the ground; binational youth communes; and Jewish-Arab mixed couples who cannot find their place in Tel-Aviv. Finally, the October 2000 events also attracted political Palestinian-Israeli groups that are directly engaged with conflict-related activism, such as Anarchists Against the Wall, Re’ut-Sadaqa (“Friendship”), Ta’ayush (“Jewish-Arab Partnership”), Tarabut-Hithabrut (“Coming Together”) and the Zochrot (“Remembering”) Association. The crucial role of both Jewish and Arab activists from outside the city is remarkable. While these diverse groups followed different biographical paths and organizational itineraries, they all share a common fascination with the potential of meaning and purpose the contested city has to offer.

While Palestinian activism in Jaffa has been well established—notably with the ongoing activities of the Rabita (the League for the Jaffa Arabs) from the late 1970s and the more recent Danna (Popular Committee for Land and Housing) established in 2007—new Jewish activists have recently become increasingly visible. Left-leaning Jews have become involved in anti-gentrification activism while at the same time being part of the city’s gentrification. In the process they are rebranding Jaffa as an alternative cultural space. Some deliberately chose to “live in the open wound” as one gentrifier put it, mobilizing memory and trauma as an expressive means for political art. For many, however, the political commitment to Jaffa is fused with the emergence of new spaces of consumption.

One of the important outcomes of the October 2000 events was the founding of the Yafa Café—the first bookstore in Jaffa since 1948 to systematically specialize in books in Arabic (without excluding books in Hebrew and English). Led by a Jewish gentrifier and her Palestinian business partner, Yafa Café paved the way for other cultural establishment that blend business, leisure, and politics to reclaim Palestinian cultural space. Cafés and clubs such as the “vegan-friendly” Abu Dhabi-Kaymak Café, the hip cosmopolitan Anna Loulou Bar, and the Palestinian Café Salma point to the unintended outcomes of conflict and profit-oriented gentrification. Recent initiatives further complicate this nexus by channeling cultural and leisurely activities directly into political action.

Reflecting the ongoing radicalization of Jaffa’s cityscape, the opposing processes of urban settlements, anti-gentrification activism, and alternative cultures should not be read as disconnected phenomena; rather, they are part and parcel of the broader re-signification of mixed towns as spaces of political action and creative marginality.

- **The Alternative Scene in Jaffa: Ethnographies of Creative Marginality**

Embedded in the political economy of urban exclusion, creative marginality is the product of the agency of men and women inhabiting the metropolitan edge. On the fringes of the hegemonic settlement project and on the margins of social order, the mixed city bring about alternative notions of urban agency, which comply not with the precepts of ethno-national hegemony but with the pragmatic necessities of communal survival, social exchange and spatial cohabitation. By entertaining life on the edge, the tension between political and urban binaries—such as Jewish vs. Arab, Tel-Aviv vs. Jaffa, East vs. West—is paradoxically socially productive. As Harms notes [2011: 223]

> Binary categories enable people to craft spaces of meaningful social action within which they can carve out opportunities in their lives […] People on the edge are
At the height of Anna Loulou’s success, Mako, a leading Israeli online magazine branded the bar as a “main hangout of the Arab gay scene” and described the decision to open such a place as a “brave, if not scary move.” Addressing possible security concerns of potential customers, the article emphasised the fact that the place has a security guard, thus reproducing Jaffa’s image as a conservative, read homophobic place, which remains inherently alien to modern, liberal Tel-Aviv recently celebrated as the “world’s number one gay tourist destination.” Niv confesses that he never had an underlying political agenda and that the bar’s success, as well as its increasing association with radical culture took him by surprise. The influx of radical gentrifiers, who provided the first clientele, considerably added to the “cool” branding of the place. In the beginning, Niv feared tensions between his interests as an entrepreneur and the political expectations of his radical clients, but as it turned out, living up to the image of a culturally and politically exterritorial place was good for business. By now Anna Loulou has garnered such a reputation that it is not uncommon to meet tourists from Jordan and Egypt, and even sometimes young Palestinians from West Bank cities, who cross into Israel to pay the bar a visit. Thus a Palestinian activist wrote on his Facebook page:

Only in Ana Lulu in 03:00 pm you will find a conference between Palestinians, Arabs from Egypt and Jordan and Arab-Jews (Jews who define themselves as Arab-Jewish and not Israelis) [...] Power to the eastern people!

The fact that our companion from the above vignette immediately noted the presence of Arab women, emphasising their status as students, is telling. While a small part of the Palestinian audience of Anna Loulou does come from Jaffa, the great majority originate from the predominantly Arab northern regions and only recently moved to Jaffa pursuing their studies or employment opportunities. Distinguished from most Jaffans by their relatively better economic and educational background, these Palestinian gentrifiers can afford the rising rent in the city and thus consume the “fruits of gentrification.” At the same time however their very presence marks Anna Loulou as a site of authentic alterity, increasing in the process its appeal to radical Jewish gentrifiers. Finally is what Niv refers to as the occasional Jewish-Israeli “tourist” who comes to “see Arabs” but for a lack of Orientalist signifiers (such as distinct clothing style), oftentimes fails to

...
single them out in the crowd. The binational spectacle thus works in both ways, as Jewish Israelis explore a bar frequented by “Arabs” and Palestinians come to experience a liberating alternative scene. The conscious orientalisating of internal design, music and ambiance serves as the place’s staple of authenticity.

The sight of a largely Jewish crowd “belly-dancing” to the tackiest Arab pop songs does prompt a part of the Arab audience to smirk occasionally. Similarly, the fact that most of the Israeli customers do not understand the lyrics and at times move their bodies euphorically to music that references a future Palestinian victory over the Jewish colonizer, seems quite comical to some Palestinian observers. Notwithstanding the peaceful multinational atmosphere, some Palestinian resentment persists also in Anna Loulou, as mirrored on the bathroom walls, where a small graffiti in Arabic makes clear that despite Jewish presence Jaffa remains a Palestinian city.

On other nights, headed by Eyal Bizawe, an Israeli Jew of Egyptian descent, a scholar and DJ, contemporary Mizrahi pop songs are blended with Turkish Psychodelica from the 60s, and Greek Rebetiko classics, while an Egyptian film from the 70s is projected on a wall. The musical mix clearly celebrates Israel’s subaltern identities, while at the same time reinserting the hyphen between the categories of Arab and Jew, otherwise a well-established oxymoron in the hegemonic Zionist discourse [Shenhav 2006].

Transcending the politics of borders and checkpoints, the voluntary sociality of Jews and Arabs creates surreal moments of utopian translocal connectivity. Dancing to a remake of “Wen 3a Ramallah” (Where are you going? To Ramallah), a popular Palestinian song of longing and return, enables a shared affective experience of a cosmopolitan Jaffa, forming an integral part of the Arab Middle East. Thus a liminoid sense of coexistence of their main goals is to promote Palestinian and Israeli expectations, put forth a subversive move that does without political slogans. Thus on a poster featuring boikutt, a Ramallah based iconic figure in Palestinian hip hop and electronic music, who for the first time performed within Israel proper, Jazar Crew: “No more resistance for the sake of resistance!” Through art activism, 7arakeh Faureyeh tries to reach the mainstream. “We are like a Trojan Horse,” Eyal explains, “we organize events that are hip and sexy, and at the same time we inform the audience about political issues.”

A more straightforward way of reclaiming Palestinian presence in urban space was devised by Jazar Crew, a group of young Palestinians from Haifa, who started organizing cultural events in Haifa, Jaffa, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah. As opposed to the Jaffa events at Anna Loulou, Jazar Crew consciously dispenses with the use of common Orientalist tropes in order to establish authenticity. Instead, one of their main goals is to promote Palestinian and Arab culture, beyond what is considered to be “typical Palestinian.” Events, which aim to challenge both mainstream Palestinian and Israeli expectations, put forth a more progressive move that does not separate. Through a poster featuring boikutt, a Ramallah based iconic figure in Palestinian hip hop and electronic music, who for the first time performed within Israel proper, Jazar Crew named the location of the event as “Haifa, Palestine,” a simple symbolic relocation that makes standard nationalist slogans à la “Free Palestine” redundant.

By reconnecting Palestinian urban spaces Jazar Crew contributes to a growing alternative transurban subculture that unifies the marginality paradigm, putting places like Jaffa back on the map of Palestinian cities. Viewed from within this network, Jaffa is no longer a spatially bounded and economically defined ghetto. “Jaffa is not a hool any more,” Anna Loulou resident DJ Muhammad Jabali (originally from Taybeh) says, “you cannot look at it without looking at the same time at places like Haifa and Nazareth.” The influx of Palestinian gentrifiers, young professionals, students and artists, though not always welcome by the...
more conservative strata of Palestinian society, clearly contributes to the cultural and economic diversification of the Palestinian community in Jaffa. Incoming Palestinian students considerably strengthened the circles of young Jaffani activists. By organising vigils and protests around issues such as prisoner hunger strikes the Jaffan Youth Movement (al-Shabiba al-Yafiyya) thus managed to become one of the most vocal and visible political forces within the community.

At the same time due to the renewed interest in Jaffa, Muhammad observes that “Jaffa is moving back north.” Centred since 1948 around the ‘Ajami neighbourhood, Palestinian owned businesses, such as the restaurant Haj Kheil or the Hinnawi chain, started opening branches in the north of Jaffa, seen until recently as lost to the Palestinian community. And yet, one of the main distinguishing factors between Jaffa and cities such as Haifa, remains the relative lack of Palestinian ownership. “The question of who is running a place is essential to the definition of space,” Muhammad concludes.

Rather than focussing on the continued dispossession and victimization of the Arab community, Palestinian activists and artists have started to channel their energies into ideas based on the projection of a utopian future onto the binational present. Examples of this include Gazan artist Mohamed Abusal’s Gaza Metro project10, Khaled Jarrar’s passport stamp project11, and the Palestinian Space Agency12—an art project hailing from Jordan. Less artistic, but equally ironic is the Facebook community Tourism & Immigration to Gaza13, which promotes a fabricated propaganda welcoming tourists and new immigrants to the besieged city. Similarly, Visitor Center Jaffa 2030, an event organised by project Autobiography of a City in Jaffa in 2012, invited its audience to “visit a city we don’t live in, yet, but we should ask ourselves how we might”14:

JAFFA 2030 will try to actively imagine Jaffa’s near future as a cosmopolitan city that gives answer to Israeli populations that are constantly excluded from the cultural hegemony, that can confront the historical-auto-biographical fraction line that took place in the urban space in 1948, and that holds daily connections to other regional cities through a Mediterranean transportation network between Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Amman, Tunis, Barcelona, Marseilles and the ports of Italy, Greece and Turkey.

The event featured a gallery displaying the works of mainly Palestinian artists, an information stand providing instructional maps, postcards and guided tours in the city, open-air cinema, music shows and concluded with a party organized by 7arakeh Fawreyeh. While the event brought together a broad audience, mostly Israeli Jews, but also Palestinians from Jaffa and beyond, it was also criticized by some activists, who denounced it for being funded by the Tel-Aviv-Jaffa municipality, and thus for whitewashing the image of a state institution, implicated in discriminatory policies against the Jaffa community.

The Yafa Café: Binational “Coexistence”

Founded in 2003, the Yafa Café was the first bookstore in Jaffa since 1948 to systematically specialize in books in Arabic. The shop was then jointly owned by Dina Lee, a Jewish recent newcomer to Jaffa and Michel al-Raheb, a Palestinian resident of Ramle. Heralded by the owners, journalists and customers as one of the few places of “real coexistence,” the café functioned as an intellectual meeting place for Jewish/Arab artists and local residents. It hosted readings on Palestinian literature, political discussions, Arabic courses and musical events. Proposing a real binational alternative to conservative political consensus in Israeli society, the founders have symbolically chosen the Arabic name of the city (Yafa), rather than the Hebrew name (Yafo) or the more neutral English one (Jaffa).

For the Yafa Café owners, the place fulfilled a historical role in re-urbanizing Jaffa and in restoring the city as an Arab cultural center. In an interview to Ha’aretz, Dina Lee stressed that the shop was of great importance to the local Jaffa culture:

I can’t say that we have opened the McDonald’s of Jaffa and now all the Palestinians who were hungry for books are flocking here en masse. But the place is definitely gradually becoming a social center, a center for information about the city, a center of creativity”15.

Lee however noted that she does not like the term “co-existence,” and that what was happening in Yafa to her delight was not “co-existence”—in the self-congratulatory sense of the word—but rather a “local experience growing on a street corner.”

One counter-hegemonic site of action associated with Café Yafa’s many activities in the early 2000s, was an independent project entitled “Autobiography of a City.” The project was founded by artists Sami Bukhari and Eyal Danon and later directed by Muhammad Jabali. Operating through educational work with
children, visual arts and a website, which documents life stories of elderly Palestinians in Jaffa, the project focused on collective memory as a main site of political action:

The “Autobiography of a City” […] is committed to promoting a public multicultural discussion with which to expose, document and raise the awareness to the untold story of different national, ethnic, religious and gender groups within Israel as part of a future process of reconciliation and healing. The project is an attempt to examine the ways in which urban-communal memory and consciousness are being shaped via the use of artistic and documentary tools and through the direct and wide involvement of the community members.

Like the Yafa Café itself, the project started in the wake of the 2000 October Events as a reaction to the failed attempts of liberal “co-existence” and the deep sense of distrust between Jews and Arabs in Israel. By voicing the Palestinian collective memory of the city the project wishes to challenge the official Zionist narrative. The focus on memory and narrative explicitly seeks to give pride of place to Palestinian voices. Providing funding and visibility to radical artists, “Autobiography of a City” promoted such projects as “The ghost of Manshiyya awakes” by artist Ronen Eidelman [2007], in which soccer field marking equipment was used to mark the layout of the now-demolished Palestinian Manshiyya neighborhood as a means to protest the neighborhood’s erasure and to imagine its resurrection. Palestinian artists also used these opportunities to introduce sophisticated ruptures and poetic interventions that undermine not only the Orientalism of the “Zionist story” but also any essentialist nationalist narrative as such. Scandar Copti’s 2009 Oscar-nominated Ajami, directed by Copti and Yaron Shani, features non-professional actors from Jaffa who were working on five intersecting Jaffan stories that culminate in a common ending. The protagonist, Scandar insists in an interview, “might as well be the bad guy. We proceed until the spectators understand that reality is all about perspective.” More than any artist working in Jaffa, Copti has made semiotic indeterminacy and urban ambivalence his creative trademark. Making virtue out of reality, he preaches a rashomon of shifting positions.

In 2009, the owners of Café Yafa split up. Michel passed away in 2012. Two Palestinians from Jaffa bought her place and gave it a new identity: Café Salma. Realizing the potential of its location on Yehuda Hayamit Street, lined with beautiful old buildings, the ground floors of some were already turned into cafés, and opposite a vegan friendly bakery, an organic store, and a Pizza place, Café Salma was from the outset thought of as a real estate investment. Not much care was given to the interior design, or the creation of a comfortable atmosphere, all of which had characterised Dina’s place, yet the place was soon branded a Palestinian hang out, and due to the presence of known local activists its popularity and real estate value rose steadily. Merely two months after it opened the new owners sold the place again for a much higher price, this time to a Palestinian entrepreneur from the Triangle region in Israel, who re-gifted it to his then fiancé. With a new management, Ibrahim, known to his friends as Buddha, a young Palestinian from the Galilee, who is very involved in both the Tel-Aviv and the Jaffa cultural and party scene, the place slowly changed. Iconic political art was put up on the walls, and the Ikea type furniture was replaced by a conglomerate of different retro furniture, reminiscent of a hip café in Berlin. The place did not only appeal to the binational activist community, who would come there to hold meetings and throw parties, but also to the emergent group of apolitical Jewish Jaffa hipsters. In a way, we were told, Salma managed to become what Café Yafa could never achieve, a Palestinian-owned popular activist hang out for both Palestinians and Jewish-Israelis, and a location for cultural events, such as live Arabic music performances. Curiously, at the peak of its success, the owner apparently broke up with his fiancé and was no longer interested in keeping the place and it was sold yet again. While still keeping its old name, Salma effectively disappeared.

Café Salma: A Palestinian Hangout

After Dina Lee’s passing in 2012, two Palestinians from Jaffa bought her place and gave it a new identity: Café Salma. Realizing the potential of its location on Yehuda Hayamit Street, lined with beautiful old buildings, the ground floors of some were already turned into cafés, and opposite a vegan friendly bakery, an organic store, and a Pizza place, Café Salma was from the outset thought of as a real estate investment. Not much care was given to the interior design, or the creation of a comfortable atmosphere, all of which had characterised Dina’s place, yet the place was soon branded a Palestinian hang out, and due to the presence of known local activists its popularity and real estate value rose steadily. Merely two months after it opened the new owners sold the place again for a much higher price, this time to a Palestinian entrepreneur from the Triangle region in Israel, who re-gifted it to his then fiancé. With a new management, Ibrahim, known to his friends as Buddha, a young Palestinian from the Galilee, who is very involved in both the Tel-Aviv and the Jaffa cultural and party scene, the place slowly changed. Iconic political art was put up on the walls, and the Ikea type furniture was replaced by a conglomerate of different retro furniture, reminiscent of a hip café in Berlin. The place did not only appeal to the binational activist community, who would come there to hold meetings and throw parties, but also to the emergent group of apolitical Jewish Jaffa hipsters. In a way, we were told, Salma managed to become what Café Yafa could never achieve, a Palestinian-owned popular activist hang out for both Palestinians and Jewish-Israelis, and a location for cultural events, such as live Arabic music performances. Curiously, at the peak of its success, the owner apparently broke up with his fiancé and was no longer interested in keeping the place and it was sold yet again. While still keeping its old name, Salma effectively disappeared.
Conclusions: Situational Radicalism and the Limits of Unruly Politics

Emerging from the same post-Intifada field of radical activism described above, System Ali, a hip-hop ensemble comprising ten rappers based in Jaffa vows to “Building the House Anew.” The band, founded in 2006 in a public bomb shelter in ‘Ajami by young community activists crystalized in the context of the struggle for housing in Jaffa. Performing in Arabic, Hebrew, English and Russian, System Ali bemoans the “home that collapsed onto itself” but employs the urban predicament as a leverage to expand the horizon of political struggle. Mobilizing difference and engaging multilingualism, songs such as “Yafawiyye hiye Hawiyye” (Jaffan is an identity) seek to recover what one band member termed “a vernacular Jaffan language.” Conceptualized as a “sound box” the mixed city thus emerges as a space of cultural resonance fused with pain (Granowsky, Kunda, and Weter 2009:9):

The fragments of innumerable tunes and songs, stories and legends, tongues and dialects reverbere in its belly, seep into its life and generate its creations. And the heavy hand of the past continues to strum the chords of Jaffa’s present, with fingers that are well acquainted with the scale along which the city’s painful refrain slowly ascends [...] a thin seam that runs among the patchwork neighborhoods, languages and historical narratives that make up contemporary Jaffa.

Jaffa’s transition from the center of the Palestinian national project to the margins of the Jewish metropolis exacerbates the difficulty of its residents to articulate the city’s language, namely the symbolic code that mediates one’s experience of place. Reflecting this predicament, System Ali, like the initiatives described above—Anna Loulou, Café Yafa, Autobiography of a City, Salma Café—are all grappling with questions of language, recognition and historical justice. Notwithstanding their revolutionary intentions and postnational frames of reference, members of the Palestinian and Israeli Y generation are disillusioned with party politics and failed mass mobilization. Searching for new modes of political action, they displace their creative energies to the sphere of artivism—which bespeaks radical politics but is distinguished from it. How can we qualify these modalities of political action? Can the alternative scene in Jaffa propose a revisionist radical agenda?

The last two serious attempts at mass politics—the 2007 campaign against house evictions and the 2011 Social Justice Protest launched in response to the Arab Spring—even failed to bring about the desired social change in the power structure. In both cases radicalism remained situational in scope and limited in effect—a far cry from the historical event it sought to become [Monterescu and Shaindlinger 2013]. This failure rested on a persistent inability to formulate an efficacious definition of politics, peoplehood and power. The two facets of politics stressed on the one hand by Rancière (2001) who argued that “politics is a specific rupture in the logic of arche,” i.e. the founding principles of power, and on the other hand by Badiou who posited that “politics is of the masses” [Badiou and Barker 2011: 73] clarify the conundrum of alternative culture in Jaffa. Trapped between a notion of politics as symbolic rupture and alternatively as collective action, artivism is an exciting form of “unruly politics” [Khanna 2012; Shankland et al. 2011] yet one whose long-lasting potential for change remains unfulfilled. Proposing “to create an alternative reality to the Israeli separation regime” artivists situate their action in the “creation of beauty, inspiration and meaning.” Chained to the field of consumption and the logic of the market, these initiatives eventually conform to the neoliberal order by replacing struggle with utopia. Creative marginality thus springs from the double edge of the nationalist and capitalist order and its history of creative destruction [Harvey 1990].

Whether the alternative scene can redefine subjectivity and facilitate what Badiou terms the “rupture with oneself” (ibid.), i.e. the unveiling of the workings of power and privilege, remains an open question. By celebrating aliterity and projecting binational utopias, these initiatives run the risk of being co-opted by the discourse of co-existence, which normalizes the status-quo, rather than bringing about co-resistance. Jaffa’s oppositional groups, be they Jewish or Arab, are thus situationally “empowered to organize in place, but disempowered when it comes to organizing over space” [Harvey 1990: 303]. Their predicament reflects the larger powerlessness of counter-hegemonic movements in Israel/Palestine, yet under current conditions the very act of imagining a different (postnational) world is already a significant achievement.
I Notes


2. Traditionally, Shabbes Goy is a non-Jew who performs certain types of work forbidden by Jewish religious law on the Sabbath. Here I use the term to denote the symbolic function Jaffa Arabs perform on Saturday and on holidays, by providing services unavailable in Jewish cities.

3. For stylistic reasons the article is written in the first person plural however it reflects the diverse experiences of both authors.


5. Ron Huldai has been mayor of Tel Aviv since 1998. See, http://www.justjlm.org/1875

6. The term ‘mixed towns’ (madun mukhta-lata [Arabic], ‘arim me’enu’av [Hebrew]) refers to the pre-1948 modern urban centers that were officially transformed from Arab into Jewish cities during the first years of Israeli statehood.

7. Café Yafa is owned today by the second (see below): https://www.finedininglovers.com/blog/culinary-stops/yafa-cafe-bookshop-jaffa/

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RÉSUMÉ

Marginalité créative. La scène alternative judeo-arabe de Tel Aviv-Jaffa

Considérées comme les « arrière-cours » du paysage urbain israélien, les villes pluriethniques ont surtout été étudiées à la lumière du paradigme de la marginalité. Or ce paradigme omet de reconnaître la dimension sociale de ces espaces, qui sont des mondes vécus à part entière. L'article aborde la problématique de la marginalité et du pluralisme dans une ville judeo-arabe en s'appuyant sur des données d'archive et de terrain. Il ne fait pas de cette ville un espace unidimensionnel d'hyperségrégation mais un lieu de marginalité créative, qui conteste paradoxalement l'hégémonie des nationalistes, qu'ils soient palestiniens ou sionistes. En examinant de quelle façon l’altérité se manifeste au quotidien, les auteurs montrent que c'est précisément la marginalité et l'exclusion qui donne toute sa vitalité à Jaffa, l'une des périphéries urbaines les plus créatives d’Israël.


ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Kreative Marginalität. Juden, Palästinenser und die alternative Kulturszene von Jaffa


Marginalidad creativa : la escena alternativa judéo-arabe de Tel Aviv-Jaffa

Tradicionalmente vistas como el “lado oscuro” de los paisajes urbanos israelíes, las ciudades étnicamente mixtas han sido consideradas sobre todo en función del paradigma de la marginalidad. Este descuida reconocer estos espacios como sitios sociales, es decir como espacios de vida en ellos mismos. Este articulo, escrito a partir de un trabajo de terreno y archivístico en Jaffa, propone un acercamiento antropológico a la problemática de la marginalidad y del pluralismo en las ciudades judía-arabes. Estas ciudades no son vistas aquí como sitios unidimensionales de híper segregación, sino como espacios de marginalidad creativa, propone un acercamiento antropológico a la problemática de la marginalidad y del pluralismo en las ciudades judía-arabes.

Shoilot Yirotit : yehudit, palastinit, agbolot ha'eshkolot ha'dirkit ha'ifi

Jews, Palestinians and the Alternative Cultural Scene in Tel Aviv-Jaffa

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