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## On (not) Suffering at the Checkpoint; Palestinian Narrative Strategies of Surviving Israel's Carceral Geography

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*This article explores Palestinian strategies of negotiating collective suffering through a focus on their narrations of the checkpoint crossing. The main argument is that Palestinian narratives of crossing military checkpoints overwhelmingly work to normalize the effects of Israeli sovereign violence in an attempt to reconstitute agentic selves capable of creating a liveable world within an on-going structure of colonial violence. A main narrative mode through which this is accomplished is by submerging the self into the moral community of the checkpoint crossers thus enabling individual experience of Israeli sovereign violence to be domesticated as part of Palestinians' collective normal. This ultimately enables Palestinians to deny Israeli sovereign violence (as instantiated through the checkpoints) the powers of individual subjection. However, these strategies involve immense, conscious effort in the cultivation of resistant selves capable of being immune to the arbitrary logics of Israeli colonial violence that unfold as cruel intimate encounters at military checkpoints. As well, these strategies rely on the fragile grounds of constructing a moral community from the myriad Palestinian subject positions found at checkpoints borne by individuals who simply want to get across it. Checkpoints narratives are ultimately a window into Palestinian ethics of suffering and survival. That simply being born Palestinian marks you out for a life of suffering is Palestinian common sense. But refusing to be made abject by that suffering is what makes you a member of this particular moral community.*

Listen, I'm sick of it. Suffering? What use is talking about suffering, everyone's suffering and talking doesn't do anything, nothing, doesn't change a single thing. And me, my situations fine, I'm okay, I have nothing to complain about, I'm doing better than others, go talk to people who are suffering, not me ... If you want to feel

suffering you have to go feel with the workers working in construction and the buildings stopped, that's it no more work and before that they used to go to Israel and that went too. They're the ones suffering. (Abu Ahmad, Surda Checkpoint Coffee Seller)

The above is an excerpt of an interview I did (or tried to do) in the spring of 2003 with Abu Ahmad a coffee seller at the Surda military checkpoint (CP) that severed Birzeit University (and 33 surrounding villages) from Ramallah, their urban center. Surda was the last of three Israeli military checkpoints that I had to navigate just to reach the University from my home in East Jerusalem; at the time numerically, more or less the norm for any Palestinian trying to get to work, home, school, a hospital or simply to accomplish daily life.<sup>i</sup> Abu Ahmad had 'made' work at the checkpoint like many displaced or unemployed workers, who informally supplied a human infrastructure of services (porter carts, food and drink stalls, peddler stands, horse-carts) that made it possible for commuters to keep crossing the checkpoints, or made their crossing more bearable.<sup>ii</sup> Plying tea and coffee from a battered Ford van he'd re-equipped into a drinks truck, parked just beyond the soldier's station, he was generous with tea but not with words. I had been promised an interview for months, but he always stealthily avoided my tape-recorder. Finally, cornered, he said there was nothing to say. I kept pushing and it was when I used the word *mu'annaa* (suffering) that he suddenly exploded and answered as in the text above. He continued:

Look the checkpoint didn't affect my work, I didn't suffer, lots of people suffered but not me. If work was outside the checkpoint I worked outside, if the checkpoint was closed, I'd work inside the checkpoint. Nothing happened to me, nothing affected me. I used to work as a painter. The work got light, not enough painting, but it made no difference I worked on coffee, no difference, in fact it was better. See, if I didn't have this work to feed my kids, I'd go buy a shoeshine box. Your shoes aren't clean, I'll clean them for you, I'll do them up nice for you and say, "there you are". I want to work I don't want to sit. I'm going to work and going to stay working until I die. And there's no power other than God's that can stop me, from doing whatever it takes to take food home so I can feed my kids.

Abu Ahmad's work history had begun with a relatively optimistic start; as a waiter in a prestigious East Jerusalem hotel that he subsequently left for an opportunity to make better money in Saudi Arabia as a housepainter. That job fell through; he returned home and the Israeli closure of Jerusalem to West Bankers made it impossible to return to his former job. He'd worked a string of unskilled building jobs (that workers disparagingly called '*boottun*'—concrete) then saved enough to get the truck from which he built up a clientele in front of the Ramallah courthouse. The Israeli military flung down the checkpoint between his home in the village and his business in Ramallah—so like all of the other workers, he'd simply made a virtue out of necessity and 'worked the checkpoint'. He was 45 years old and complained of a bad back—the product of the intermittent hard physical labor that marked his work history. Married late, he had five children, the oldest

at the time was only ten years old: 'Tell me—is the state going to look after them? Does the government take care of the crippled? The aged? Do they give social security? No. There's nothing, so I have to take care of them. Whatever's needed, I have to do it'.

We then came to the present at the checkpoint:

You know a patrol comes and chases people and then hit the cars. I got hit four times. They hit the lights. Another time that jeep starts ramming me and then once they threw a tear gas canister inside the truck—what do I need with such a headache? Four times. The jeep comes—it wants to move the cars, like that just because it feels like it. It's trying to get to them and it starts to destroy everything in its way—that cart carrying vegetables it turns it over. Just like that. Not because there's anything happening, just because he feels like it ... you get flooded with anger ... we got so used to dirges. You say what's the worst thing? And our whole life is from the worst to the worst. And everybody's saying, I heard so-and-so was killed, so-and-so was martyred and the other one was wounded and transported in a porter cart and we count and we count. I just want to work and what happens? Some man's son is hit by a van, it's not his fault the blood on his hands, and the young man's blood is leaking out and it's not allowed for an ambulance to cross. Where's the solution? There's no solution. In the end there's no solution. No one's done anything, all empty words. It makes no difference if I die today or tomorrow, if I lived or died, if I found work or didn't—it makes no difference. Here I am as I am, like a person whose been given an anesthetic needle and he's no longer awake, no longer awake—that's our lives.

Abu Ahmad's life; his past, present at the checkpoint, as well as how he looked to his future was a narrative river of suffering whose banks finally overflowed. A work-history that began with modest opportunity became marked only by the constancy of vulnerability to joblessness unfolding along a path of ever-narrowing horizons. Family life in these circumstances was suffused with burden and the ever-present anxiety that he would not be able to secure his children's present nor future; a fear aggravated by the fact that their security depended on him alone. And although he'd recovered his livelihood from between the teeth of the most recent violent technology for its collapse (the checkpoint), it meant working within a dense node of Israeli military violence, where he and those around him were its constant (though often random) daily targets.

The stark disjuncture between Abu Ahmad's narrative, in which forms of suffering are its organizing grammar, and his adamant refusal to accept 'suffering' as the idiom of his life is my starting point to interrogate how Palestinians negotiate individual and collective ontologies of suffering. The only thing exceptional about Abu Ahmad's refusal to identify with suffering, was the degree of rage he exhibited in the refusal. In the narratives I collected in the Second Intifada from Palestinian men, women and children from all walks of life at Israeli military checkpoints as they struggled through the everyday carceral

geography that Israel had made of their lived world, the constant Palestinian refrain was that suffering was something that happened to someone else.<sup>iii</sup> Everyone was suffering, but no one was.

### **The Checkpoint as Settler Colonial Technology**

Though checkpoints have long been a central technology of Israeli control over Palestinian mobilities, possibilities and life-worlds, it was in the Second (or al Aqsa) intifada post-2000 that their sheer magnitude turned them into the archetypal symbol of contemporary Palestinian life under Israeli rule. Jumping from approximately 30 checkpoints prior to the Second Intifada, to as high as 600 assorted barriers to movement at various periods during it, in 2014 there were approximately 500 in place (OCHA-oPt 2014, 15).<sup>iv</sup> Both Israel and international agencies tend to differentiate between ‘internal’ checkpoints versus those constituting ‘crossings’ into Israel, for Palestinians they are all internal—fragmenting Palestinian space, cutting off previously organically linked communities from each other, as well as severing social, economic, familial and personal ties.<sup>v</sup>

As a critical component of Israel’s ramified spatial regime (that includes settler-only roads, closed military areas and buffer zones, more than 700 kilometers of concrete wall and electronic fence, as well as a crushing bureaucratic regime of mobility permits) checkpoints play multiple functions for Israel’s settler colonial project at different scalar levels. At the macro scale, they function to create spaces of eviction, unlivable space that can then be opened up for colonization while disciplining Palestinian circulation through territory congruent with larger colonizing plans. Simultaneously they are critical means of surveillance, operating as staging sites through which Palestinians can be regularly monitored at specific locations as they pass through space. Checkpoints generally do not function to stop Palestinian mobility in toto (though they can and do), but in order to control and discipline it in specific spatial and temporal ways.

As Azoulay and Ophir point out, in the interregnum between ethnic cleansing and the metrics of rolling out the colonizing project, more important than the wall,

... it is these gates and the zones of friction around them, which, ... constitute the constantly changing network of permeability through which power is spaced out, the colonizing process continues, the Palestinian population is encamped and its daily life dissected. (Azoulay & Ophir 2005)

Importantly, this network of permeability—does not function to routinize Palestinian movement (even if it does channel them through specific routes) but operates in ways to make the experience of everyday mobility arbitrary, chaotic and uncertain. Indeed, the logic of power materialized through the checkpoint regime aims to create a constant state of uncertainty (is it open or closed? does this permit work or not? what’s the mood of the soldiers?). Rather than an effect,

this constant state of uncertainty is the very logic of Israeli sovereign violence that checkpoints instantiate, as well as produce.<sup>vi</sup>

At the more immediate bodily scale, checkpoints are where the order of violence and power between Israeli soldier and Palestinian civilian, occupier and occupied/colonizer and colonized are acted out. As Sherene Razack points out, the checkpoint is an asymmetrical intimate encounter whose asymmetries must be *performed* (Razack 2010). The face-to-face encounter between the armed Israeli soldier manning the checkpoint and the Palestinian civilian trying to cross is the time and place where everyday the colonizer and colonized repeatedly enact their place in the order of things: sovereign and subject; subjugator and subjugated; agent of power versus object of power.

In comparison to other forms of embodied Israeli colonial violence that are experienced as event (arrest, invasion, killing, home demolition) and that have some sense of before and after, checkpoints defy temporal boundaries and turn violence into an ongoing context in which lives are lived.<sup>vii</sup> At the same time, in their everydayness checkpoints are a visceral reminder of the colonial sovereign's ontological power over Palestinian subjects, as well as that its usually submerged violence can at any moment break into the real. Through this ubiquity and constancy checkpoints materialize the wider logics of Israeli necropolitics at the level of the everyday for wide swathes of the population. I use *necropolitics* here to refer to the situation in settler colonialism where techniques for the biopolitical management of native populations are fundamentally driven by the necropolitical logics of elimination. Or as Hunaida Ghanim states in relation to the native ... 'from the moment that power is directed to destroying, eliminating and dismantling their group, the decision about their life becomes a decision about their death' (Ghanim 2008).

In late modern settler-colonial projects such as Israel's, modern techniques for population management (planning, population registries, land-use/zoning schemes, resource management, 'law' etc.) are all made instruments in the service of this eliminatory logic. However, as Achille Mbembe (who originally theorized the workings of the necropolitical in colonial contexts) points out, Israel's settler colonial project ultimately needs to be understood as a concatenation of biopolitical, necropolitical and disciplinary power (Mbembe 2003). The checkpoint regime is profoundly bio/necropolitical and disciplinary, managing the Palestinian population through technologies of space that preclude the possibility for healthy, or what Judith Butler calls 'livable', lives (Butler 2009; 2003); simultaneously inscribing sovereign colonial power on individual Palestinian bodies that pass (or attempt to pass) through them. The quotidian acts of daily life (health, school, work, social connection and reproduction) are constantly confronted with these technologies of their undoing. Ultimately, checkpoints are a means through which colonial violence

both habitually and spectacularly imbricates itself into the colonial subjects' everyday.

### **Narrating Violence**

Needless to say, narratives and the experiences they lay claim to are co-constitutive rather than forming a linear relationship of event and representation—events are never meaningful outside their narration. Among the increasing number of anthropological studies on contexts where violence is enmeshed in the everyday, Veena Das's and also Carolyn Nordstrom's work centrally focus on the workings of narrative (Das 2007; Nordstrom 1997). Both view narrative as modes for the active renegotiation of meanings of violence in the everyday and as the means through which the self can be reconstituted in order to create a survivable world in the present. This process in which narrative forms are so central is what Nordstrom calls 'world building' (1997, p.15) or Das calls 'the work of repair in the everyday' (2007, p. 80). Both point to the active life of narratives in the present—as being continually produced in relation to the self, and what Das calls '... an engagement in the everyday with the creation of boundaries in different regions of the self and sociality' (2007, p. 80).

Both point out that narratives of violence do their work of repair not only through what is said but also through what is left silent and unsaid. For Nordstrom, silences allow for meaning to remain fluid and unformed thus opening a range of possibilities and options for creating modes of survivability in the present (1997, p.24). Das, in contrast, in attending to the silences of subaltern women in their narratives of gendered and sexualized violence during the Indian Partition sees them as a different mode of telling that can prevent what she calls 'poisonous knowledge' from becoming a weapon in the present, thus once again, enabling the creation of a present that can be lived in (Das 2007, p. 54). Individual narratives are eminently social or cultural constructs, not only in terms of the conventions that inform their structure, but also in terms of the histories and meanings they rely on, as well as the norms that shape what is meaningful and hearable. This is nowhere truer than when dealing with narratives of violence, where the limits of the intelligibility of human experience are at their most extreme. Thus for Das, it is through narrative that we can actually understand the relationship between pain and language that a culture has evolved, since narratives frame violence in ways that it can be assimilated into what she calls, '... a culture's experimentation with the edges of human experience' (Das 2007, p. 59).

### **Constructing 'the Normal'**

These processes of world building or creating a survivable world in the present were very much apparent in Palestinian narrations of their checkpoint crossings. And though performed individually, the narratives share various collective modes of meaning-making that are rooted in a rich Palestinian discursive tradition of national survival and

resistance. Temporally however, checkpoints were not a violence of the past continuing to haunt the present but were about violence that fused past, ongoing present and immediate future. As such, narratives about the CPs were an ongoing construction of the self as agent in order to keep crossing them, an ongoing negotiation in and against a situation of violence that had no foreseeable end.

So what do CP narratives (as particular narratives of violence) have to say about the ways in which Palestinians negotiate the everyday ontologies of collective suffering in the here and now? What patterns can we find in the relationship between pain and language that says something about a collective way of negotiating violence and suffering?

I get stopped by soldiers a lot—**its normal**, but I don't know why they stop specifically me all the time. I'll be walking in a group and they'll pick me out, say "you and the one next to you come here" ... Its just provocation, you start asking yourself why me? But Khalas [never mind] you feel that what they do to you—they do to everyone, for sure there are girls before me and guys before me and after me are going to be put in the same situation. (Hiba, Birzeit University student, Surda Checkpoint)

My parents wanted to take me out of the school and put me in one in Ramallah, my Mum said, "That's it I'm putting you in Ramallah in school" and I told her "No, I won't leave my school, I refuse". I told her not to worry, it's become **normal** crossing the checkpoint, but no way, I'm not changing schools ... You know stuff happens all the time [by which she means violence at the CP] but it's become normal, it's how our life is. (Isra', 13 year old schoolgirl, Qalandiya Checkpoint)

That the checkpoint and its violence is *aadi* or normal is a common recurring narrative stance. However, normalizing or naturalizing its everyday violence is not a given, but is an active and self-aware construction of self; one that must be continually reproduced:

In the beginning with the soldiers, I would get upset, they really pissed me off—then I realized one has to ignore them, pretend that you don't see or hear ... It's become a situation that you get used to, there's nothing I can do—it's become routine ... And look, when we get upset—we're the losers not them—it makes no difference to them ... You reach a point where all you can control is your reaction (to them) ... They still piss you off but you realize you can't do anything about it—you reach a point where you say—enough, just ignore it ... (Beisan, Birzeit University Student, Surda Checkpoint)

For Beisan, normalizing the checkpoint involves her active construction of it as a routine—a self-aware strategy through which she attempts to elude its (or the soldiers') ability to subjectivize her. Twice in this short narrative she states, 'You reach a point' suggesting the ongoing-ness of this process; only through careful cultivation of

the self and repeated performance is it possible to domesticate the checkpoint into the everyday. For Isra' the schoolgirl whose parents wanted her to change school so she wouldn't have to cross the checkpoint, its violence ceases to be an issue because it has become so much 'the normal' that a change of schools would be more upsetting than having to cross it. At the same time, like Beisan, she is aware that normalizing violence is an active construction; but perhaps as a child she is able to articulate the dissonance that often exists in the process of negotiating between experience and the construction of it:

But another time, there we were, 9 students and three teachers, in the morning—we waited to cross together and they'd [the soldiers] closed it, so we were all standing waiting and then they shot the first time and then the second time and three times together and we're standing there and the shooting's going on and we're talking with each other and laughing—like it was normal. (Isra', schoolgirl, Qalandiya Checkpoint)

Ethnographers of the Second Intifada have consistently noted this overarching ethic among Palestinians of normalizing or routinizing Israeli military violence through spatial, narrative and cultural practices. Lori Allen has shown that 'getting by' or 'getting used to it' were the dominant expressive modes of Palestinian agency in the Second Intifada that worked to routinize Israeli violence into a livable context (Allen 2008). Similarly Penny Johnson in her analysis of narratives in al Amari Refugee Camp uncovers various rhetorical modes (deflation, inversion, exaggeration) through which all encompassing violence can be domesticated into the everyday (Johnson 2007). While, Tobias Kelly has focused on spatial and social practices that involve the normalizing of violence through what he calls 'the search for the ordinary' (2008).

### **Excess and the vulnerable grounds of normalizing colonial violence**

That this is the dominant or even normative Palestinian stance can be seen in narratives that run counter to it; those that explicitly refuse to accept checkpoints and their violence as 'normal':

Any specific day or incident I talk about the checkpoint means I'm not giving full due to all the other days, the five days a week of the last five years, and I don't remember a single time that it became normal. Because for five years and I'm at the checkpoint it fills me with a feeling of bitterness and loss, loss of myself when I stand there. It's true that we survived the existence of the checkpoints and they became part of our daily lives, but for me Qalandiya checkpoint has become a deep and bleeding wound inside of me. (Ruba Birzeit, University student, Qalandiya Checkpoint)

Ruba explicitly notes the dominant norm of naturalizing the checkpoint ordeal but claims this was never her experience. However, the context of this claim is a story she tells about a particular moment of the



checkpoints' excess—a moment where the dominant norm becomes impossible to construct:

[...] Some school kids got angry and started to throw little stones on the zinc roof over our heads which made the soldiers even more aggressive and made them slower, then stop passing people altogether and they started threatening even more, shouting, screaming making us feel we were surrounded and that they could start shooting. I started thinking about the kids throwing the pebbles on the zinc, were they just having fun at our expense, don't they have the right? ... The soldiers were all worked up, they all had their hands on their guns, and the kids' pebbles kept making them move. The soldiers would only let 5 people come forward towards the turnstile, shouting and screeching, and then take one in the turnstile with the automatic button they'd be stuck like in a cage. So people were pushing and shoving to be in the five—it got nasty and I think that's exactly what the soldiers want to see us fighting with each other, I can't stand it when this happens—when we're like that in front of them. And they're the ones who started this mess—they created the situation. But the soldiers lost it as the kids were throwing the pebbles so suddenly they start screaming no one can pass and they raised their guns, and really like they were ready to shoot—they looked terrifying, and they're aiming their guns at all of us. Two of the soldiers came out and grabbed one of the kids really violently and started beating him in front of us then let him go and we're just standing there and watching as they're beating this kid [...] (Ruba Birzeit, University student, Qalandiya Checkpoint)

It is in analyzing such moments that are experienced as an excess of the checkpoints' violence that cannot be mastered that it becomes possible to see the fragile grounds on which the ability to construct the 'normal' depends. In the account above, the aggression and threat of the soldiers appears to be what makes the checkpoint experience exceed Ruba's ability to domesticate it. But as seen in the narrative of Isra', even spectacular violence by the soldiers against the collectivity at the checkpoint can usually be tamed into the everyday (even though Isra' points to the dissonance this process can evoke). What surfaces in Ruba's account are multiple elements of what regularly appears in narratives of those moments when checkpoint violence cannot be re-contained within the bounds of the 'normal'; firstly this is when violence is individualized rather than being meted out against the collective. In this specific case (as in many others) when the collective is forced to witness a boy or young man being beaten or 'punished' in front of them. In a similar example Amani's witnessing of just such an event breaks open a painful admission of all the moments when creating the normal becomes impossible:

This morning when I crossed they'd caught a guy who'd tried to smuggle through the quarry and they held him on the side and were beating him, it's a sight you can't ... it's ... it's horrible, the worst (b'il mara) they put him in the sun without water and he had his hands like this [tied around the back]. Lots of things. Lots of things make you lose it [...] (Amani Birzeit Student Qalandiya)

What fundamentally enables the cultivation of a self that is not subjectivized by violence, but located in an impermeable 'normal' is the fusion of the self into the collective. The collectivity of suffering is what most profoundly creates the ability to relocate Israeli violence from individual subjection into the realm of the political; collective suffering produces collective experience, collective response, and collective ethics of survival and resistance.

However, dependence on the collective has its own vulnerabilities—if some of its members do not act on its behalf, but behave counter to its assumed norms and interests. In Ruba's narrative, we see exactly this situation, in the string of dynamics in which the crowd breaks down into in-fighting and competition: 'people were pushing and shoving to be in the 5 [allowed to cross through the turnstile] ... it got nasty'. For Ruba, the internal fight is made more painful because of the soldiers' gaze, 'I can't stand it when this happens—when we're like that in front of them'. And although Ruba, in her narrative blames the soldiers as the fundamental source of the situation, in her actual reaction at the time she blames the resisting kids who threw the pebbles—an act that she weighs in terms of contending ethical claims (Is it fun at our expense? Don't they have the right?). Ultimately, she could no longer contain herself and screamed towards the kids:

Get out of here; you just come here to fight with each other, you deserve what you got, not here, not here, you're not here for school or education, you're just here to make trouble, get out of here, there's kids, there's old people, there's the sick and people just wanting to pass, you're just ruining [it for] them, they got oppressed because of you, you turned the soldiers on them [...] (Ruba Birzeit, University student, Qalandiya Checkpoint)

The internal solidarity between Palestinians at the checkpoint, the capacity of the collective to be cohesive through practices of civility despite the soldiers' attempts to create the conditions for internal fighting and thus individual subjection is the primary grounds on which domesticating the CP stands. This constantly surfaces in narratives of rage and anger when that civility breaks down. Beisan, another student from Birzeit: 'I can't take it when people fight with each other or start to curse at each other; the soldier enjoys it, when he sees us fighting with each other, he closes the crossing and stands there watching ... it's the occupation that makes us take it out on each other, it's what they want'. Internal conflict, competition or behavior by Palestinians that will make the crossing 'worse' constantly surfaces as what makes the capacity of individuals to normalize violence breakdown. The acts showing a lack of civility remarked on include line-jumping (the usual cause of in-fighting); forms of sexual harassment (that became for many young women another layer of violence at the Checkpoints they had to try and normalize); as well as more innocent everyday behavior that however was viewed as thoughtless because it would make the crossing slower or more difficult for everyone. Amani's narrative gives an example of the latter case: 'What really gets to me is when we're all pressed against each

other (in line) and then a woman comes with three or four kids and she's coming from the vegetable market in Ramallah with all those bags—it really provokes me, like there's no vegetables in Jerusalem or Ram? And those bags are sticking in your back ...'. Amira comments on the same example, 'When a woman arrives carrying bags of vegetables and you know they're going to fall on your head, she's brought her kids with her because she doesn't have anyone to sit with them, you don't know whether to be sorry for her or fight with her, you know what I mean, we all get provoked'.

The case of the woman with children carrying the vegetables, such an ordinary innocent act, becoming transposed into one of incivility and the cause of collective anger at checkpoints seems ludicrous. But this case actually most clearly reflects the deeper contradictions of creating the collective normal out of and against Israeli military violence. The woman carrying vegetables is involved in performing her own act of the normal and everyday. As well, the young shabaab who regularly harass young women walking towards the crossing, throwing comments about their dress or their looks, are also creating their own normal despite and against the violence of the checkpoint. The line jumpers, focused on their need to get somewhere faster than the others waiting in line are also engaging in the normal—doing what people in endless lines or traffic jams anywhere might do. And even the young boys whom Ruba screamed at because they were throwing pebbles at the soldier post were also performing the normal—regardless of whether they were 'having fun' or 'resisting'. The underlying logic of their act in the first instance was to naturalize the CP as a playground, while the latter case for a child is a more natural or normal reaction to oppression than that of the majority standing in line. In sum, creating the normal everyday against colonial violence as a collective enterprise is always vulnerable to individual meanings and acts of what constitutes the normal. That the 'we' targeted by the checkpoint is made up of a range of inter-locking subject positions and identities by class, gender, and age, among others, inevitably means that even what is shared (experience and collective ethics) will be open to varying meanings, interpretations and therefore performances. Ultimately, the ethic of creating the 'normal' rests on the fragile grounds of the performance of the collective 'we'. Time and again, members of the collective undermine individuals' ability to elude individual subjection by simply performing their own meaning of 'the normal'.

### **On Not Suffering; Targets versus Subjects of Violence**

Abu Ahmad's enraged refusal in the opening narrative to identify himself with suffering is a logical outcome of this collective ethic of de-personalizing Israeli violence. Given that Israeli violence is a technique and effect of settler colonial power—it is a structure rather than an event (Wolfe 2008).<sup>viii</sup> As such the native Palestinian population experience it as targeting them collectively, as well as creating an ontological world in which they must make livable lives

against and in resistance to its necropolitical logics. That simply being Palestinian marks one out for a life of suffering is a Palestinian common sense. But the refusal to be made abject by that suffering is what marks you as a member of this particular moral community. Thus Abu Ahmad narrates his own life of suffering as a series of losses and obstacles that he has overcome, as well as those that he prepares himself to face into the future. Where he does explicitly locate 'suffering' is among those who are unable to overcome what Israeli necropolitics has taken from them. Specifically, as a breadwinner he can identify with workers who have lost their jobs, '... If you want to feel suffering you have to go feel with the workers working in construction and the building's stopped, that's it no more work and before that they used to go to Israel and that went too'. And then he goes on to describe his own losses of work as a series of challenges he met and will continue to: 'See, if I didn't have this work to feed my kids, I'd go buy a shoeshine box. Your shoes aren't clean, I'll clean them for you, I'll do them up nice for you and say, "there you are"'. Abu Ahmad may have the same life experience of suffering as those out-of-work breadwinners he mentions, but does not see himself as suffering like them because of his capacity to keep defying joblessness—subjectively for him, the most significant way he might be made abject.

Throughout the various checkpoint narratives, suffering when explicitly acknowledged, always referred to vulnerable others. In Ruba's final tirade at the boys throwing pebbles she names those who are being 'ruined' by their actions as: '... there's kids, there's the sick, there's old people'. Her categories of the vulnerable (the aged, children, the sick) are the ones that consistently crop up in other narratives:

In the car while I'm waiting I try and read ... When it's two, three hours and you're waiting and then suddenly they close it and you're in the middle of the traffic and you can't move forward or back. So I try and read but there are things you can't ignore, an old woman with a walking stick and you see her walking all the way and then she's returned, they don't let her pass. A mother walking along with two little children in the pouring rain and they've got to wait in all of the chaos and cold. (Nazmi, Birzeit University Professor, Qalandia Checkpoint)

While Nazmi cultivates his own sense of normalcy by reading books in his car, what he cannot 'ignore' is the sight of old women or women and small children facing the checkpoint. He can recognize suffering because here it is attached to vulnerable bodies; children and the aged who are marked off in any collective as in need of special care and protection. Their bodily vulnerability in this specific context is however an indication of a more critical one—of their limited capacity to cultivate a moral self that can elude subjection by the checkpoint's violence. And similar to those earlier cases of being forced to witness a young man being beaten in front of you—these moments become

painful spectacles of one's own powerlessness in the face of brutality, and thus ultimately specters of one's own abjection.

### **Conclusion: The Logic of Power and the Suffering Body**

For Palestinians under the particular logics of Israeli colonial violence self-mastery and the careful cultivation of selves capable of eluding subjection as part of a collective creation of a resistant moral community is perhaps the only option available to them. As Lila Abu Lughod has pointed out, reading the particular forms that human agency takes in a given context provides a particular diagnostic of power that shapes the form that agency takes (Abu-Lughod 1990). Condemned to an ontological world shaped by and suffused with the violent logics of settler colonialism, it is no surprise that the logic of Palestinian resistance has been to create the normal within and against this violence in the quest to create lives that are livable in the present. This is all the more so given the massive asymmetries in this power. At checkpoints time and again the subject population is forced to 'learn' the cardinal rule of the colonial sovereign's political rationale: that all forms of overt collective resistance to checkpoints (and other technologies of colonial violence) will simply worsen their effects (Hammami 2004; 2006; 2010). Over and over again, peaceful protests led to harsher checkpoint systems, while the continuing everyday resistance of kids' stone-throwing always inevitably leads to the immediate dead end of 'the checkpoint is closed'.

But even when Palestinians do not overtly resist, Israeli sovereign power needs its colonial subjects to actively embody their status as ungovernable ontological threats—indeed to constantly perform it. One way this is accomplished at checkpoints is through a dynamic of disciplinary violence that Hagar Kotef and Amir Merav have named 'the logic of the imaginary line' (Kotef & Merav 2008). The imaginary line refers to a well-known practice by soldiers at checkpoints where they tell the Palestinians waiting to not step across a line that a soldier invisibly draws with his finger on the ground. That the line is invisible means that it will inevitably be 'trespassed' by those who are supposed to submit to it. And this inevitability of transgression is actually what the power that marks the invisible line produces. It is a 'corrective technology' intended to produce failure, thus justifying the very violence that has created the transgression and that produces Palestinians as permanent transgressors (Kotef & Merav 2008). From the point of view of its victims, the logic of the imaginary line suggests the degree to which checkpoint crossings are experienced as being trapped in a sadistic maze of arbitrary power that at any moment can break into open brutality. The cruel logics, enormous asymmetry and everyday ubiquity of these encounters thus embody for Palestinians their most constant intimate confrontation with the possibility of subjection by Israeli violence. Thus we can understand the extreme levels of self-awareness Palestinians exhibit in the management of self, as well as the rage they displace onto individuals seen as not conforming to the collective ethic—those whose behavior can pierce

the creation of a collective outer skin that is 'our' only psychic protection.

But while suffering as a subjective state and individual identity may be eluded through the narrative work that normalizes violence and that animates a sense of resistant personhood and collectivity in the everyday, it cannot be eluded altogether. The constant diligence in attempting to elude psychic pain over and over again cannot prevent that pain from being registered through the body.

It's true that we survived the existence of the checkpoints and they became part of our daily lives, but for me Qalandiya checkpoint has become a deep and bleeding wound inside of me (Ruba)

I never imagined how I would be wasted to the bone, exhausted in my skin. (Amal, Mother Qalandia Checkpoint)

I get home and after everything I've seen the first thing I drink a glass of water, it's become like the law, everyone in the house knows not to come near me, first I take a shower and then I have to lie down and sleep, just a little and then I wake up with a coffee and I've finally returned home. (Nazmi, Birzeit University Professor, Qalandiya and Surda Checkpoints)

[...] What more can we take? We've become a people who have stopped living with feelings. (Abu Fadi, Accountant, Qalandiya Checkpoint)

Here I am as I am, like a person whose been given an anesthetic needle and he's no longer awake, no longer awake—that's our lives. (Abu Ahmad)

Elaine Scarry has famously argued that pain doesn't simply resist language but actually destroys it, thus making the claim that physical pain is incommunicable through words (Scarry 1985). In contrast, Veena Das suggests that rather than focusing on the possibility of *understanding* the pain of others, we might better focus on the ability to *acknowledge* (or deny) their pain—a relation she sees as based on ethical rather than intellectual capacities (Das 2007). Through her treatment of women's mourning lamentations as an example of culturally mediated forms for communicating the experience of pain Das also offers a counter to Scarry's position on the resistance of pain to language.

In Abu Ahmad's narrative at the opening of this article, he spoke of 'working the checkpoint' an idiom often used by the assemblage of porters, peddlers and van drivers who built a living from the same checkpoints that had destroyed their previous livelihoods. But the CP workers' idiom also aptly describes the larger experience discussed so far; that to survive the entirety of the checkpoints' violences, Palestinians must actively and relentlessly 'work' them i.e. work through them and work them out.<sup>ix</sup> In the narratives above—profound

exhaustion and numbness of feeling—express in somatic language the complete depletion of psychic and physical resources the enormous energy exerted in this relentless process of everyday survival results in. Depletion is also expressed in the sense of harboring a bleeding wound—though this particular soma obliquely references the actual state of being injured by violence. Rather than representing a breakdown in the collective Palestinian ethic of denying one's own suffering in order to keep surviving in the present, voicing it through acknowledging physical pain perhaps becomes the path through which denial and acknowledgement of the personal experience of suffering can co-exist. Or more specifically, through the language of the body, one can acknowledge the poisoning experience of abjection while denying the poisonous status that experience implies.

Das has argued that the failure to acknowledge the pain of others is a failing of the human spirit. The failure of external actors (for want of a better term) to acknowledge their suffering is one that Palestinians know all too well and is a failure that continues to play a critical political role in perpetuating their disinheritance and destruction. But the focus of this paper has been on the more intimate and internal acknowledgment of one's own pain in the process of surviving and resisting colonizing violence. In this latter context, perhaps the ability to acknowledge one's own pain while denying it the power of self-definition might be seen as a victory of the human spirit as well as the very condition of its possibility.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> After a year of this grinding decathlon, on the verge of breaking down I found the way to cope was by objectifying my subjugation—turning my checkpoint-ridden commute into an ethnographic project; an anthropologist's 'weapon of the weak'.

<sup>ii</sup> I have written on the checkpoint workers' moral economy, see Hammami (2004, 2006, 2010).

<sup>iii</sup> From Spring 2003 through July 2005 I undertook 'ethnography' of two checkpoints that were part of my daily commute; the Surda checkpoint on the

way to Birzeit University (subsequently removed by the IDF in 2004); and the Qalandiya checkpoint on the way to Jerusalem that ultimately became a 'high tech crossing Terminal' in Israel's Wall and is operative to this day. For the Qalandiya ethnography I had a research team and am grateful to Hussein Mughmas and Lena Meari who were critical participants in the research process.

<sup>iv</sup> Currently in the language of the Israeli military, many of these are 'eased', with barriers in place, but with no soldiers manning them. However the point is that with the infrastructure permanently in place, within half an hour the whole West Bank can be physically 'locked down' into an archipelago of more than 60 separate and enclosed cells.

<sup>v</sup> Given the position of the International Court of Justice Ruling on the Separation Wall in 2014, International Law would tend to agree.

<sup>vi</sup> I originally thought of this as an effect—given the soldiers seemed constantly to pursue some type of 'order'—but all acts that seemed to be about order—actually created more disorder. Subsequently, I found that 'undoing routine' was the Israeli military's operational orders. For theorizing of this logic of power see Kotef & Merav (2008).

<sup>vii</sup> For violence as context see Vigh (2008).

<sup>viii</sup> See Patrick Wolfe on settler colonialism as a structure, Wolfe (2008).

<sup>ix</sup> I'm grateful to Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian for prodding me to unpack the wider meaning of 'working the checkpoint'.

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