

### Bordering the Frame: Superheroes, Art, and the Rethinking of Borders in Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour's *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*



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In this article, I am primarily concerned with looking at the superhero not only as a figure of transformation, but also as one of transgression who crosses a myriad of borders. I am particularly interested in exploring how the genre of the superhero moves in the contested spatial politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and conversely, how the spatial politics of comics and the graphic novel, the traditional home of superheroes, create what Mohamad Hafeda calls “a bordering practice”. (Hafeda 4-35) In his research, Hafeda looks primarily at how visible material and invisible immaterial borders are produced and how they direct residents to negotiate, narrate, and transform the divided and contested cityscape of Beirut. I am borrowing his idea that the negotiation, or crossing, of borders can be seen as both a passive and active mode of resistance. Hafeda contends that “bordering practices” aim “to transform certain border positions. [...] [I]n times of conflict, the critical bordering practices of research and art can operate as sites of resistance in everyday life by negotiating the bordering practices of political conflict.” (21)

In this paper, I ask whether we can read the superhero genre as a spatial genre of transgression in the context of Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour and Israeli artist Oreet Ashery's collaborative publication project *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009). Sansour works predominantly with video and Ashery with live performance. Both artists' practices were at the time of the project defined by the broadening of identitarian and cultural roles bestowed on them, either by their own societies or from the outside. In her early work, Larissa Sansour critiqued the terrorist/victim dichotomy attributed to Palestinians by tapping into, and appropriating, Western popular culture and recasting herself as a Mexican gunslinger fighting the separation wall in *Bethlehem Bandolero* (2005), or as a Palestinaut, a Palestinian astronaut, planting a Palestinian flag on the moon in *A Space Exodus* (2008). Oreet Ashery has in her earlier performances resorted to the alter ego of Markus Fisher, an Orthodox Jewish man, as well as the 17th century Jewish mystic and Messianic figure of Shabtai Zvi, who converted to Islam. These characters have afforded Ashery to cross historical, gender, and religious boundaries and inhabit roles unavailable to her as a (Jewish) woman. The performance of alter egos and other identities is thus not strange to both Sansour and Ashery's artistic practices. However, whereas in their other work identities are expanded, troubled, and complicated in the service of the artwork, in *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, there is an attempt at simplifying, rather than complicating, the alter ego in the service of political action, rather than art.

### Origin Stories and Masquerade

*The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* is a hybrid publication, part institutional critique on the art world and how it deals with Arab artists and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, part autobiography in which the artists' respective backgrounds are described, and part graphic novel illustrated by seven commissioned artists. In the graphic novel part Ashery and Sansour become infected with a virus, lose their artistic abilities and become superheroes, respectively named Nonel and Vovel, who liberate Palestine. The occupation of Palestine turns out to be an intergalactic plot by an alien overlord commanding the Fifth Planet, who wants to turn Earth into an intergalactic vegetable garden and wipe out humanity. The separation wall surrounding the occupied Palestinian Territories will serve as a basin for fertilizer. The superhero genre is marked by origin stories and by the process of transformation. The origin story is "a bedrock account of the transformative events that set the protagonist apart from ordinary humanity [...] the superhero genre is about transformation, about identity, about difference, and about the tension between psychological rigidity and a flexible and fluid sense of human nature." (Hatfield et al. 3) In *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, the reader encounters not one, but two, origin stories in which the latter erodes the former. The first origin story is a national one, identifying Ashery as Israeli and Sansour as Palestinian. While care is taken to establish commonalities rather than difference—both women left home at a young age to move to the UK, both felt estranged, both ended up studying art and becoming artists—in terms of national representation they remain in opposing camps. Cultural collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians, particularly since the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) gained traction in 2005, is frowned upon by the Palestinian side. In fact, this collaborative project became politically toxic for both artists as they were both accused of betraying their respective communities.

The second origin story, in which both protagonists become superheroes, is twofold: it lifts Ashery and Sansour out of their respective national contexts and facilitates a collaboration that has a political mission rather than an artistic one, hence diluting the first origin story. It also places the narrative in which the story unfolds into a fantastical realm of possibility in which the lives of Nonel and Vovel are, to a limited extent, divorced from the historical and political realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Dan Hassler-Forest suggests that:

Superhero narratives [...] creat[e] an alternate world that in many ways follows the familiar trajectory of human history, while in others presenting its stories as entirely fantastical and explicitly unhistorical. [...] The genre provides metaphorical representations of historical conflicts as part of a battle that takes classical narrative categories as its basic components and presents catastrophe as an attractive form of spectacle to be safely consumed by passive spectators. (47-48)

The difference with this particular narrative, however, is that catastrophe in the form of the 1948 Nakba (the foundation of the state of Israel and dispossession of over 750,000 Palestinians) and the ongoing occupation of Palestine is real and continues to pull the superheroes out of their

own fantastical narrative. For example, in the chapter titled “Intergalactic Palestine,” scripted by writer Søren Lind and illustrated by artist Hiro Enoki, Nonel’s (Ashery) credibility is questioned because she is Israeli. Origin stories are therefore compromised and challenged in various ways in *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “origin” is formative on both sides. For Palestinians, memory accounts of their villages or cities of origin preceding the 1948 Nakba have become key to forge a sense of belonging and identity and, as historian Nur Masalha points out, “the important provider of ‘legitimacy’ for the internally displaced persons and for their struggle for return” (Palestine Nakba 246). Conversely, for Israelis, Zionist ideology promotes an origin story of the “biblical narrative [...] as a mobilizing myth and as a ‘historical account’ of Jews’ [en]title[ment] to the land”. (Palestine Nakba 29) In one panel, Nonel (Ashery), sporting her superhero costume but with her Markus Fisher face on, concedes that she “know[s her]national make-up is a bit tricky”. (Ashery and Sansour 153) Make-up is the key word here and suggests that national identity might perhaps function as masquerade. If in the superhero costume “functions [...] as a uniform that by its very definition robs the individual subject of [their]unique identity,” (Hassler-Forest 510) then which constraints does the performance of national identity put on individuals? One could argue that even though Ashery and Sansour have lost their artistic abilities, which in many ways is what defines their unique identity, the donning of superhero costumes for Nonel and Vovel has allowed them to break out of the confines of performative nationalism and literally facilitates a “collaboration with the enemy.” As such, the costume becomes a cloak of transgression and makes possible what otherwise would politically be highly problematic. The costume then is not only protective but also adds a layer of duplicity. Throughout the publication slippages of identity, national allegiance, artistic signature, and perhaps rather strangely for superheroes, heroic mission, are negotiated.

Barbara Brown and Danny Graydon have pointed out that usually the superhero costume differentiates “between two vastly different personas: one ordinary, and one extraordinary [...] The civilian wardrobe denies extraordinariness, while the superhero costume denies ordinariness.” (2) But this is not exactly the case for two artists who have based their artistic practice on inhabiting performative and multiple roles. Moreover, Nonel and Vovel ‘s newly acquired superidentity does not necessarily turn them into fearless Others. This happens only in the last part of the book once they have fully relinquished authorship to a writer who writes the script, and artist who draws the panels, and even then, it all happens reluctantly. In a previous chapter they at first reject their superpowers and later on, once they make it to Palestine, run from the Israeli soldiers instead of confronting and fighting them. In other words, the ideological binaries that direct superhero personas—ordinary versus extraordinary, good versus evil, civilian versus hero, violence versus pacifism, order versus chaos, power versus impotence, confidence versus doubt, loyalty versus betrayal—are continuously shifting. An example of the difficulty both artists are grappling with politically and conceptually is exemplified in a panel rich in discomfort and intertextual references that attempts to acknowledge both the subject of antisemitism and the plight of the Palestinians. Once they arrive in Palestine, Vovel (Sansour) is disappointed there are no Israeli soldiers around to harass her, an experience she usually would be subjected to when crossing from Jordan into the

West Bank. “It’s just not *Maus* enough,” (131) she claims, her persona drawn as a cat in the style of Art Spiegelman’s famous Holocaust graphic novel *Maus* (1980-91) in which Nazi Germans are represented as cats and Jews as mice. Nonel (Ashery) stresses the danger of the reference, which not only evokes the holocaust, but also compares Israelis to Nazis. In this frame however, the Palestinian is depicted as a cat (Nazi). Both protagonists dance around the subject of antisemitism, but admit they cannot really broach it. It all ends with Vovel’s character being drawn in the style of Joe Sacco’s graphic novel *Palestine* (2001), an eye-witness account of Sacco spending two months in 1991-1992 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and documenting the human rights violations Palestinians suffer as a consequence of the Occupation. In this conversation both Spiegelmann and Sacco indicate the complexity of the politics. This exchange is an example of how masquerade can interchange complicated and even contradictory subjectivities, whether that is the donning of a costume or being drawn in different styles that respectively identify with Jewish or Palestinian subject positions.

### **Spatial Transgressions and Bordering Practices**

Scholars like Scott Bukatman have theorized how the superhero genre is par excellence one of urban mobility: “Through the superhero, we gain a freedom of movement not constrained by the ground-level order imposed by the urban grid. The city becomes legible through signage and captions and the hero’s panoramic and panoptic gaze.” (173) Extended to the spatial politics of Israel and Palestine in which mobility for Palestinians is severely hampered through a regime of checkpoints, curfews, permits, roadblocks, and the separation wall, and in which Israel’s panoramic and panoptic military gaze controls the Palestinian population, the superhero genre takes on a different meaning altogether. Now that Vovel (Sansour) can fly into Tel Aviv by her own means, instead of traveling a lengthy journey through Jordan, and cross into the West Bank without all kinds of checks, part of her superhero power has already translated into eroding some of the mechanics of the occupation. Moreover, by appropriating a panoramic view of the territory, the superheroes inverse the weaponized panoptic military gaze and as such disrupt the visual dynamic of the occupation. It also challenges the vertical perspective of Israeli settlement design. Eyal Weizmann and Rafi Segal have detailed how the “optical-planning” of Israeli settlements on the hilltops of the West Bank combine security concerns, tactical strength, and a panoramic view to exercise maximum surveillance and control. The urban and spatial planning of the Zionist project in the early twentieth century was very much one of inhabiting the plains, as for example coastal cities like Tel-Aviv exemplify, rather than inhabiting the hills. This resulted as Segal and Weizman point out in a “reversing [of] the settlement geography of biblical times [located in the Judean hills]”. (80) This changes after 1967 when Israel occupies the West Bank and the first settlers start building dwellings actively encouraged by the Labor government. This policy is amplified even further after the hawkish Likud party replaced the Labor party for the first time in the late 1970s, and the political thinking around settlements becomes increasingly, and much more in the mainstream, infused with biblical and messianic belief in the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel), in which “the long and steady climb to the mountains [...] cultivate[s] nothing but

'holiness'". (81) In other words, the mastering views from above are as much about managing and dominating the landscape, as they are about forging a religious identity based on territory. It is useful to quote Segal and Weizman in full:

The hilltop environment, isolated, overseeing and hard to reach, lent itself to the development of this newly conceived form of 'utopia.' The community settlements create cul-de-sac envelopes, closed off from their surroundings, utopian in their concentric organization, promoting a mythic communal coherence in a shared formal identity.  
(83-84)

Utopia is carved into the landscape and the settlements' architecture. It resonates eerily with Bukatman's take that the superhero genre is one of (American) urban modernity in which the utopian aspirations of the city are articulated. Here the ideology of Zionist settler colonialism as a utopian project and its actual spatial and territorial execution are unpacked and the horizontal gaze of the superheroes flying over the territory battles with the vertical architecture of the Israeli settlements. The creation of hilltop settlements as utopian gated communities means that Palestinian communities are physically fenced off, relegated to the valleys, but also that they are visually and ideologically bereft of seeing across the landscape into a future. Nonel and Vovel literally provide a different decolonizing viewpoint that privileges possibility and the imaginary. This is illustrated by the panel where Vovel, flying over the Separation Wall, comments: "[i]t's a fine piece of architecture. An efficient combo of land grab and aesthetic bereavement". (Ashery and Sansour 128)

### **Spatial Fragmentation and Bordering Practices**

Lina Khatib points out that "[m]uch of the political debate in the Middle East revolves around space. Space, both physical and imagined, is not only part of the identity of people, but also a dynamic tool often utilized to define the identity of nations." (15) This is specifically true for Israel and Palestine where territory is currency and foundational for the formation of identity. It is therefore no accident that the print medium Ashery and Sansour have chosen to work in, namely comics and the graphic novel, spatializes narrative in a distinct way. Hillary Chute has demonstrated how the architectural qualities of graphic novels with their panels, grids and gutters are composed to develop a narrative that turns "time into space on the page." She explains how this architecture "place[s] pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality—as well as on the idea that "history" can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one," (4) In a Palestinian context where history has been denied and space robbed, the comics' gutter, that is the space between the frames, not only keeps reminding the reader of the fragmentation of Palestinian territory, but this empty white space also points to the spatial and historical erasures of Palestinian presence.

In *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, there is an estranging tension between resisting the memoricide and toponimicide of Palestine and reckoning with the limitations of the political change art can effectuate. Memoricide and toponimicide, as used by historians of Israel and

Palestine such as Masalha and Pappé, are defined as respectively the systemic destruction of Palestinian memory and erasure of Palestinian place by Zionist settlers before 1948, and later and ongoing, by the state of Israel. The structural renaming of Arabic Palestinian places and sites in Hebrew and erasure of Palestinian sites from maps, contributes to the dilution of collective Palestinian memory and social and cultural identity. As Masalha notes, “the cultural politics of naming was accelerated radically after the establishment of the Israeli state. State toponymic projects were now used as tools to ensure the effectiveness of the de-Arabisation of Palestine.” (“Settler-Colonialism” 15) Nonel and Vovel liberate Palestine by destroying the Fifth Planet with a giant slingshot, but they can only do so as their superhero alter egos, not as artists Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour. Nonel and Vovel literally resist being confined to the frames the graphic novel subjects them to. However, these moments are more reality checks pondering the degree of agency they have over the narrative and their own roles in their artistic practice and this complex collaboration, than a rebellious refusal to conform to the rules of the graphic novel. In the instances they step out of the frame and shed their superhero personas in the graphic narrative, they primarily express doubt about their mission, method, and newly gained powers. The design of the whole publication is such that chapters of the graphic novel are alternated with other types of content, such as critical material that playfully confronts issues around orientalism, art and politics, colonialism, and national identity. In fact, these intermezzos outside of the frame, provide the necessary critical, contextualizing, and conceptual framework to understand the graphic novel chapters.

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