

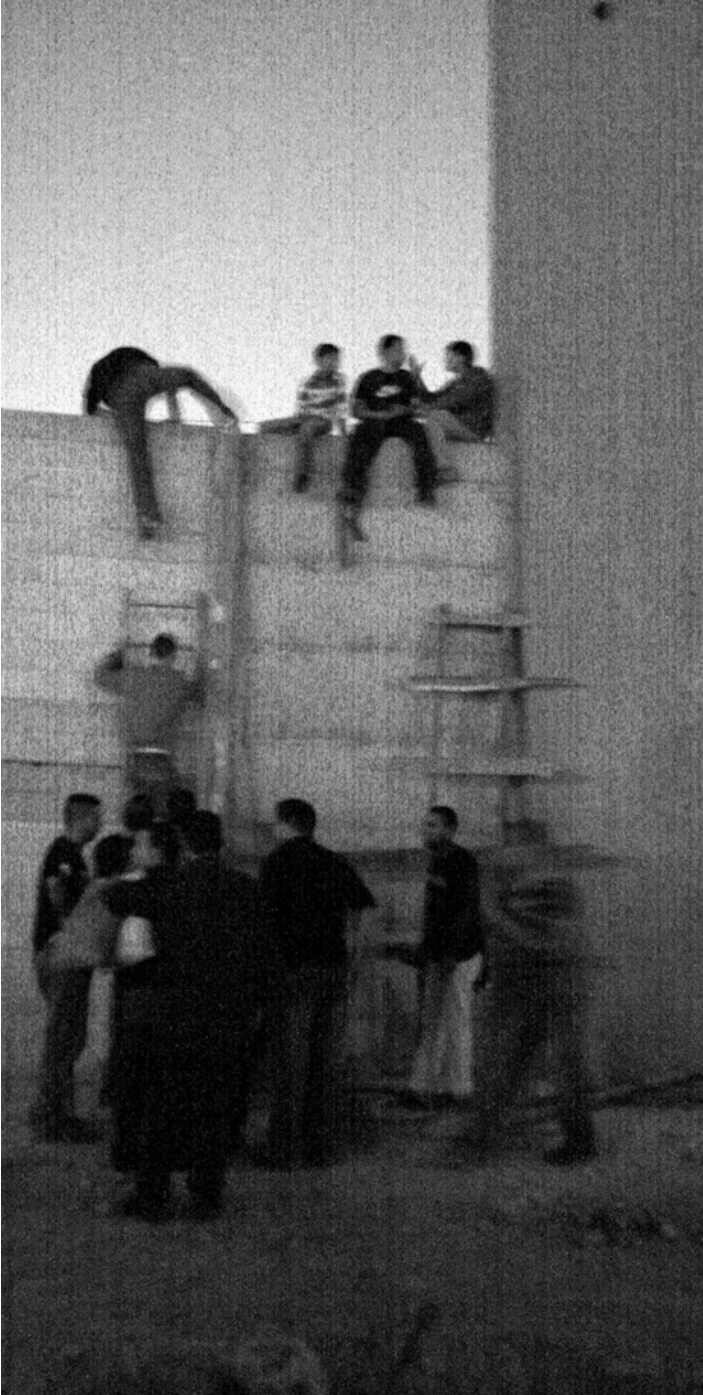
BODIES ON THE LINE: SOMATIC RISK AND PSYCHOGEOGRAPHIES IN URBAN EXPLORATION AND PALESTINIAN ‘INFILTRATION’

BY HANNA BAUMANN

Balbuk had been born on Huirison Island at the Causeway, and from there a straight track had led to the place where she had once gathered jilgies and vegetable food with the women, in the swamp where Perth railway station now stands. Through fences and over them, Balbuk took the straight path to the end. When a house was built in the way, she broke its fence-palings with her digging stick and charged up the steps and through the rooms.¹

Balbuk, an aboriginal woman in Stephen Muecke's fictocritical travelogue *No Road (Bitumen all the Way)*, is a trespasser, a destroyer of private property. She is also merely maintaining her routine, doing what she has always done and asserting her relationship with the land irrespective of changing ownership rights and newly-built obstacles. In a similar manner, the two types of infiltrators I discuss here also defy access restrictions in order to claim a space that has been taken away from them. Taking as my starting point the 2013 documentary *Infiltrators* by Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar, I juxtapose practices and discourses of Palestinians who enter Jerusalem without a permit with those of Urban Exploration (Urb-Ex). Urb-Ex, engaged in predominantly by elites in the cities of the global North, involves the recreational physical exploration of derelict and abandoned locations in the city, but also of exclusive securitised spaces. The practice has become highly visible due to spectacular actions that generated numerous media reports, but also thanks to self-promotional films and blogs. (Incidentally, a low-budget action film also titled *Infiltrators* about urban explorers was released in 2014). While the physical acts involved in these two types of infiltration are similar,

¹ Stephen Muecke, *No Road: Bitumen all the Way*, Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1977, 116.



Still from *Infiltrators* by Khalid Jarrar (2013)

the meanings attached to them differ in many, albeit not all, areas. This is an attempt, then, to link descriptions of somatic experience involved in 'infiltration' with the psychogeographies they produce, which are in turn also produced by them.

Academics writing on Urb-Ex — including geographer Bradley Garrett, an avid practitioner of Urb-Ex himself — have been criticized for failing to interrogate the various level of privilege at play in the practice.² Mott and Roberts (rightfully) take issue with the assertion that, apart from those engaging in Urb-Ex, everyone has “stopped exploring.”³ In fact, encounters with homeless people documented by Urb-Exers show that supposedly abandoned spaces are not unchartered territory, waiting only to be discovered with abseiling equipment and an expensive camera. Instead they function as safe spaces for other types of trespassers, who seek to escape the surveillance apparatus of the city.

If Urb-Exers have not sufficiently acknowledged that they do not have a monopoly on trespassing within the cities of the global North, they also have failed to see the relationship of their activities to infiltration taking place on different scales. Indeed, millions of 'illegal' or undocumented migrants would most likely disagree that the world has stopped exploring. Both Urb-Ex and migration across international borders involve overcoming a high-tech security apparatus in order to make use of spaces designed for the Other, and both entail gaining access to exclusive neoliberal spaces — be they high-rise buildings like London's Shard or zones of economic privilege such as the EU.

Like many migrants, Palestinians are without citizenship rights or territorial sovereignty. Palestinian topography is defined by severely restricted movement, making it a particularly rich terrain for infiltration. Due to the ubiquity of ever-changing boundaries both around and inside the Palestinian territories, any form of movement becomes a transgression, any use of space for daily activities is interpreted as an expansive outward-movement, and the breach of boundaries becomes an integral part of going about one's everyday life.⁴ The 'infiltrators' shown entering Jerusalem from the West Bank in Jarrar's film represent a cross-section of society. We don't only see labourers entering Jerusalem to make a living, but also older women wishing to pray at al-Aqsa mosque, middle-aged men who laugh at their

2 Bradley L. Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City*, London: Verso, 2013.

3 Carrie Mott and Susan M. Roberts, "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls: Urban Exploration and the Persistence of Masculinist Geography," *Antipode* 46:1, 2014, 236.

4 Ariel Handel, "Where, Where to, and When in the Occupied Territories: An Introduction to the Geography of Disaster," in Adi Ophir, Michal Givoni and Sari Hanafi (eds), *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion. Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*, New York: Zone Books, 2009, 216.

in own ineptitude in attempting to climb the Israeli Wall separating East Jerusalem from the West Bank, as well as a baby being carried through a tunnel. A young boy shoves dozens of loaves of ka'ek bread through a drainage hole in the Wall, refusing to allow *normal* life — and everyday desires such as fresh bread from Jerusalem — to be interrupted by a massive piece of physical infrastructure. The rather casual, sometimes dilettantish, approach to trespassing seen in *Infiltrators* mirrors the recreational character of Urb-Ex in certain ways, but it masks a vastly higher level of physical risk. While Urb-Exers may spend a night in jail (and wear this as a badge of honour), Palestinians crossing the *de-facto* border without a permit risk — and, we are told, sometimes lose — their lives. Because they take place within structurally vastly different contexts, the somatic experiences they involve and the spaces in which they take place are conceptualised differently.

The Tactics of Smoothing Striated Space ///

The city, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is the “striated space *par excellence*” — and this striation is only exacerbated if the city is bifurcated by various kinds of borders.⁵ Urb-Exers work within, not against this system of constraint. If it weren't for access restrictions, and the potential legal repercussions of entering securitised spaces, the act of infiltration would lose much of its thrill. Garrett describes Urb-Ex as a form of “place-hacking” because, next to the physical feats required in trespassing on spaces that are off bounds, it involves the cerebral activity of identifying the weak spots in their striation — undermining the system while working within the grid of its logic.

Palestinians similarly use their intimate knowledge of the Israeli security apparatus to make use of gaps in the system, but their infiltration serves to smooth out the striated spaces through which they move.⁶ Not merely evading state control by avoiding soldiers and circumventing checkpoints, Palestinians are seen forging rhizomatic new paths by driving off the road and moving on foot through the landscape. By moving outside of the formal road system, and thus the parameters controlled by Israeli security services, they can more freely act outside the purview of the state. They utilise information networks to keep track of the ever-changing security landscape, and constantly update tactics to reflect the current closure of roads, staffing of checkpoints, or army patrols. *Infiltrators* shows Palestinians scaling the Wall with the help of ladders, passing through drainage

5 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi (trans), London: Continuum, 1987, 481.

6 Nurhan Abujidi, “Surveillance and Spatial Flows in the Occupied Palestinian Territories,” in Elia Zureik, David Lyon and Yasmeen Abu-Laban (eds), *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine: Population, Territory and Power*, London: Routledge, 2010.

tunnels underneath the Wall, cutting through wire fences, evading and running from security personnel — physical acts not at all unlike those involved in Urb-Ex, yet with vastly different meanings.

Somatic Experiences and Psychogeographies ///

Infiltration is not merely about evading state control, it is also about taking back an area no longer under one's control. Garrett describes Urb-Ex as a rebellion against the feeling that “the city is built for others and we may look at it but we may not touch it.”⁷ This desire to establish more direct contact with the city and experience its inner workings first hand is a natural consequence of contemporary urban planning, if we are to follow Richard Sennett's argument that “the stretched-out geography of the modern city, in concert with modern technologies for desensitizing the human body” have weakened the tactile sense.⁸ What Garrett calls “edgework” — actively seeking out dangerous activities in the spaces of exploration — leads to tangible, real experiences.⁹ The thrill of illegality and physical danger appear to bring about a heightened state of psychological awareness: what Garrett terms the “meld” is a feeling that comes about when Urb-Exers perceive their personal body to merge with the social body of their group of explorers, but also with the urban body as a whole.

Urban explorers thus appear to achieve a feeling of oneness with the city, or, one might argue, even a sense of ownership over it. Documentation of the feats seems to constitute a major motivation for Urb-Ex, and photography is seen as a means to achieve an intimate connection with places. Another aspect of reaching this state of mind is to “inscribe yourself into the place” (by posting stickers in hard-to-reach locations or rubbing objects with one's “salival DNA”), the desire for which, Garrett writes, “becomes unbearable.”¹⁰

As opposed to Urb-Exers, who see overcoming obstacles to infiltrate off-limits spaces as a way to become one with the city, for Palestinians moving through securitised spaces, the physical strains and dangers to which they are exposed serve as a constant reminder of their exclusion from Jerusalem. Lack of detection is of the highest importance for Palestinians, and documentation of their tactics would endanger them. This is not to say, however, that *Infiltrators* do not

7 Bradley L. Garrett, *Place Hacking: Tales of Urban Exploration*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2012, 259.

8 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, New York: Norton, 1994.

9 Garrett argues this is in part because these experiences are not mediated by consumer society of spectacle, when in fact they are highly spectacular and marketable themselves.

10 Bradley L. Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City*, London: Verso, 2013, 52.

recount their achievements with a certain degree of bravado. Retelling episodes of risks taken and dangers survived serves both as a way of sharing information about constantly evolving circumstances and as a means to regain a sense of agency in a process involving asymmetrical power relations. The risk may therefore heighten the meaning of the act. The smugglers in Jarrar's film proudly keep track of the number of individuals they have helped across the Wall. They appear to conceptualise this as a national duty rather than a way to make money. In fact, one smuggler is proud enough of his work that he provides his real phone number in case viewers want to call to thank him.

Not only the language of conquest reflects the masculinist approach inherent in *Urb-Ex*; the practice also grants authority to certain types of bodies, as Mott and Roberts argue, in particular those "performing an able-bodied, heteronormative and typically white masculinity."¹¹ The physical challenges Palestinians face in scaling the Israeli Wall also privilege certain bodies, but because this transgressive form of mobility is imbued with rhetoric of national resistance, it also allows traditionally less mobile bodies more freedom to move. In framing movement across Israeli-imposed lines as resistance, women can at times also increase their mobility, challenging patriarchal forms of control.¹² We see a fashionable young woman scaling the Wall with the help of a smuggler to attend a concert in Jerusalem, not to visit a dying relative or to ensure her family's economic survival. Her motivations are pleasure and leisure, not survival, but the risk she is taking is potentially lethal.

The insistence on a Palestinian right to accessing Jerusalem becomes especially clear in such cases in which 'infiltration' takes place for casual reasons, or no reason at all. Palestinians enter the city without a permit, taking an enormous risk, in order to merely assert their presence. Both *Urb-Exers* and Palestinians entering Jerusalem 'illegally' seek to (temporarily) appropriate space controlled by the Other, and subvert it, even if doing so clandestinely. Yet the Palestinians shown in Jarrar's film do not only exercise their right to the city — this city — but enact an alternative geography. Like Balbuk, the aboriginal woman pacing through a new spatial reality she does not accept, they disavow the meaning imposed by the concrete barrier, they refuse to heed to the physical obstacle it poses. While *Urb-Exers'* conquests hinge on the sense of transgression, Palestinians entering Jerusalem without a permit do not need the border — they neither accept that their act should be one of trespassing, nor do they legitimise the Wall by adhering to the restriction it imposes. They may have to engage with its physical reality by developing tactics to

11 Mott and Roberts, "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls," 234.

12 Sophie Richter-Devroe, "Palestinian Women's Everyday Resistance: Between Normality and Normalisation," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 12, 2009, 32-46.

overcome it, but they refuse its symbolic demarcation, smoothing out its striation instead. In not acknowledging the occupier's geography, they embody a psychogeography in which Jerusalem remains an integral part of Palestine.

Creating Thirdspace at the Edges of the City ///

In Urb-Ex, the edge (of buildings as well as the limits of the body's capabilities) plays an essential role in freeing the autonomous subject from society's constraints and underpinning his experience of conquering the city. Borders, and especially walled borders are constitutive of the nation-state.¹³ For Palestinians, who do not have a state and who did not chose the border signified by the Wall, the undermining of this imposed boundary may act as a constitutive movement (and moment). The border zones at the edges of Jerusalem, which are permeated by acts of infiltration on a daily basis, act as a kind of thirdspace between here and there in the sense of Bhabha: These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaborations in the act of defining the idea of society itself.¹⁴

If we understand thirdspace not merely as a space for hybridising cultural identity, but also for the marginalised to renegotiate power relations and act as spatial agents, it may be that the in-between spaces at the seam zones, the grey areas of legality, jurisdiction and ownership are the spaces in which Palestinians can affect the spatial power configuration.¹⁵ The act of infiltration, and the disregard for the (border)line it displays by putting bodies on the line and exposing them to potential physical harm, reshapes the territory itself, if only momentarily.

13 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, New York: Zone Books, 2010.

14 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1994.

15 See Edward Soja, *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.