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Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

"My Government Did This:" Exploring the erasure of the Beirut port wall

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"MY GOVERNMENT DID THIS." EXPLORING THE ERASURE OF THE BEIRUT PORT WALL

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Abstract | This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork to examine the affective and agentive power of graffiti in Beirut after the August 4 Beirut explosion, specifically the graffiti on the port wall: "My government did this." The paper investigates the whitewashing of the port wall, the erasure of this phrase, and the subsequent policing that took place. I study how graffiti has an emotional or affective hold on civilians and is intrinsically tied to the practice of agency. In short, the paper discusses how graffiti opens a space for the transgression of dominant or hegemonic systems of power.

Keywords | Graffiti, policing, August 4 explosion, agency, affect.

Résumé | Cet article s'appuie sur un travail ethnographique de terrain pour examiner le pouvoir affectif et agentif des graffitis à Beyrouth après l'explosion de Beyrouth le 4 août, en particulier les graffitis sur le mur du port : « Mon gouvernement a fait ceci ». L'article enquête sur le blanchiment à la chaux du mur du port, l'effacement de cette phrase et le maintien de l'ordre qui a suivi. J'étudie comment le graffiti a une emprise émotionnelle ou affective sur les civils et est intrinsèquement lié à la pratique de l'agentivité. En bref, l'article discute de la façon dont le graffiti ouvre un espace pour la transgression des systèmes de pouvoir dominants ou hégémoniques.

Mots clés | Graffiti – Police – Explosion du 4 août – Agency (agentivité) – Affect.

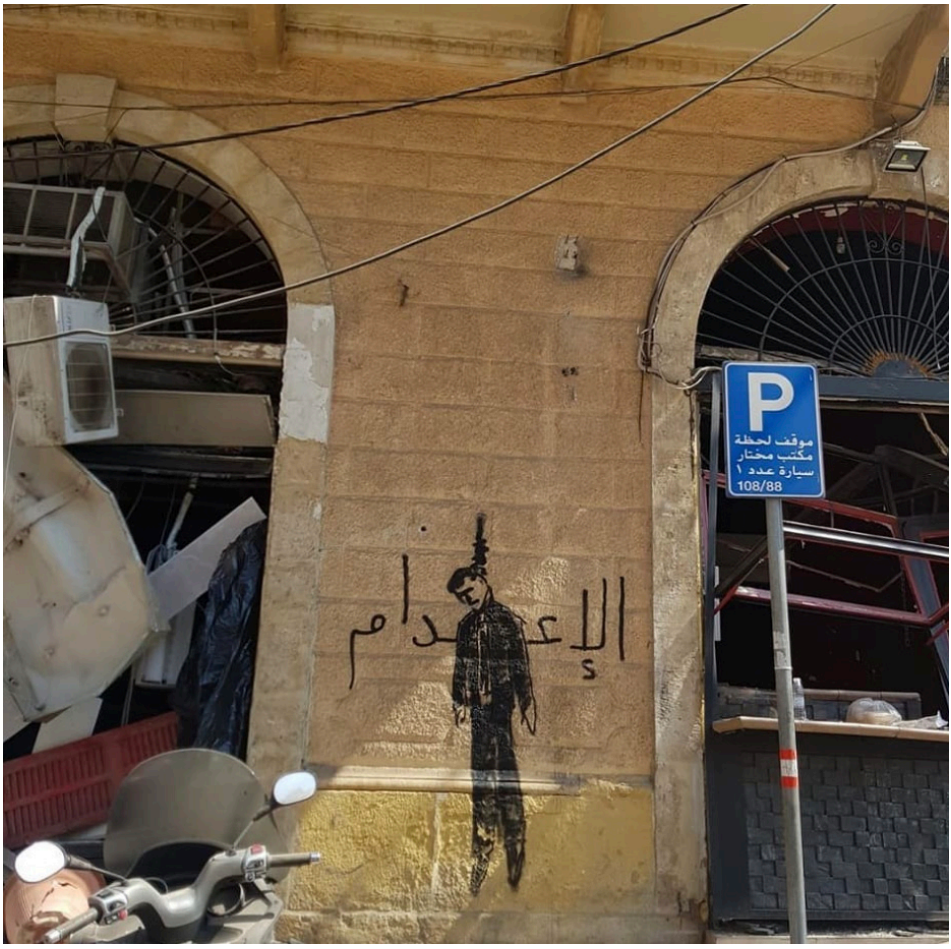

Figure 1 "Execution." August 2020. Gemmayze, Beirut.

The days and weeks following the August 4 Beirut port explosion in 2020 were marked by an atmosphere filled with extreme anger and vengeance. The most popular, repeated slogan was "hang the gallows." It was repeated in the streets in the form of a protest chant, drawn in the dust of destroyed car windows, and literalized in spray on the walls of the main square in Downtown Beirut[1]. [Fig. 1] Four days after the explosion, on August 8, a mass demonstration was organized to mourn those who lost their lives and demand justice. Protestors set up gallows in Martyrs' Square and pretended to hang, with sculptures and wooden models, notable politicians deemed responsible for the explosion.

1- All photos by author unless otherwise noted.

A citizen of Lebanon and a life-long resident of Beirut, I was struck by the sense of possibility and the extent to which people took to anger amid so much devastation and grief. Their feelings of anger and desire for revenge were not just registered online, through Facebook posts or tweets, but manifested concretely on the city's streets and in the protest square. What was it that made these transgressive acts possible? In this essay, I attempt to answer this question by looking at an exemplary transgressive act graffiti as a case study. More specifically, I explore one of the most famous graffito revolving around August 4: "My government did this." This graffito was painted on the Beirut port wall a few days after August 4 in 2020, and then subsequently erased in 2021. I use this case study to argue, drawing from Anahi Alviso-Marino, that graffiti functions as a "sensitizing device for political awareness," or a channel through which to mobilize people or capture their attention.[2]

Based on ethnographic research, the essay relies on collections of testimonies from political activists and civilians, participant-observation, ethnographic photography, and my own participation in political mobilizations over the past year.

The Wall's Repainting

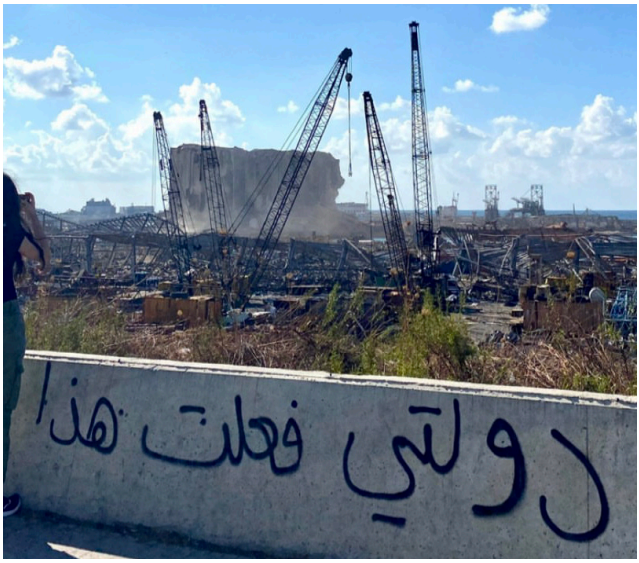

Figure 2 "My government did this." August 2020. Photograph by Eva Malik.

A few days after the port explosion, we woke up to find that someone had spray-painted "My government did this," in Arabic and English, on the wall facing the port. [Fig. 2] Very quickly, the photograph of the graffito went viral on social

2- ALIVSO-MARINO Anahi, "The Politics of Street Art in Yemen (2012–2017)," *Communication and the Public* 2, no. 2 (June, 2017):120–35, p. 130. Accessed May 1, 2022 at https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047317718204.

media. It was a visual expression of anger, and a politically charged phrase. The graffito became a powerful symbol of what would become the dominant narrative explaining the port explosion, showcasing how graffiti plays a role in the production and representation of narrative, meaning and voice.[3]

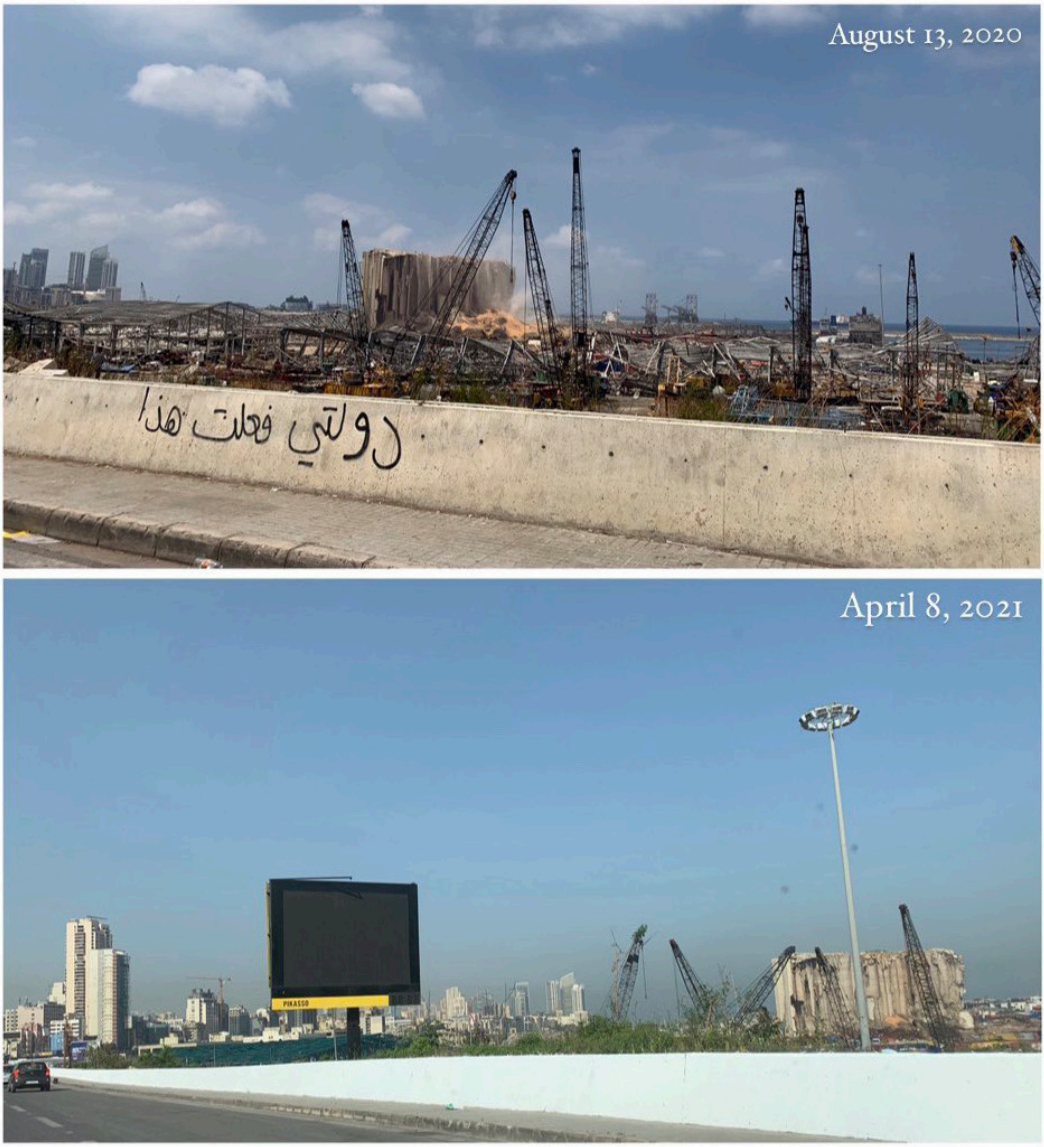

Figure 3 Image showing the transformation of the port wall from August 2020 to April 8, 2021, when it was repainted. Source: Megaphone News.

3- PETEET Julie, "The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (April, 1996): 139–59. P. 147. Accessed April 25, 2022 at http://www.jstor.org/stable/656446.

Eight months after the port explosion, in April 2021, I found that the port wall had been repainted with a fresh white coat. [Fig. 3] This repainting triggered an uproar on social media. The following are some examples of the things people said:

> *They are trying to bury the crime.*
> *If I was in Beirut, I would go and graffiti over it and ruin it. It's not something that we need right now. We're not getting over the explosion, we're not getting over it.*
> *This is their attempt to paint the crime into oblivion.*
> *Painting over the graffiti may seem minor, but it is an example of state-sponsored amnesia in action.*

Interestingly, all the comments people relied upon an assumption that the Lebanese state had engineered the wall's repainting. I, too, immediately understood the repainting as governmental action. However, news soon broke that an NGO dedicated to "nonviolent communication," not the government, was responsible. The NGO director stated that the intention was to initiate an "artistic activity" to pay tribute to the victims of the port, announcing that, "this activity is to remember the pain and to create a message of peace stained with pain, tears and blood, mixed with hope."[4]

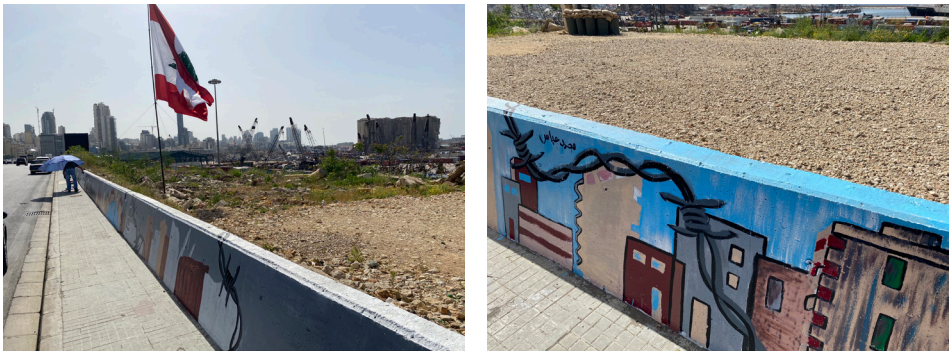

Figure 4 The NGO's "artistic activity."

When I learned that an NGO had undertaken the repainting, I felt confused about how to react or assess the situation. I expressed my confusion to one of my main interlocutors, George, an activist in a state-opposition group. He replied:

> It didn't change much for me when I found out that it was an NGO that repainted the wall and not the government. Because it still stems from the hegemonic culture and set of norms of the regime, which revolves around a refusal to understand how violence exerts itself and how we are entitled

4- AL-ARAB, "Lebanese Recall the Beirut Port Crime" (2021), al-Arab [online]. Accessed April 10, 2021 at https://alarab.co.uk/ لبنانيون-يذكرون-ةميرجب-أفرم-بيروت-اذهتلعفيتلود

> to fight back. The NGO director has her own values and she's free to paint wherever she wants, but what I have a problem with is the policing or the imposition that took place – this idea that she decides what's better than what, or what should be on the wall and what shouldn't. If she wants to write something she can do it in the corner like everyone else. It's the hierarchy that constitutes what can be on the wall or not which is behind the erasure.

George's interjection invites us to think about the state and assciated not as stable, homogenous, physical entities, but as sets of practices produced and reproduced by different actors. George's focus on the "policing" of the port wall recalls Jacques Rancière's ideas regarding "the police order." Rancière argues that the police is "an order of bodies that defines an allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying… It is an order of the visible and the sayable."[5] This definition insists that the police need not be necessarily identified with what is termed the "state apparatus," because the latter assumes an opposition between state and society and makes the state an isolated machine.[6] By contrast, the police order names as "police" those who enforce written laws, as well as those who uphold the unwritten rules that define social practices and customs and punish others for daring to deviate from them. The police order is thus a "logic of identification which wants everybody to be in his or her place."[7] Rancière presents a way of thinking about policing or censorship outside of the narrow if powerful apparatus of the state. With this way of thinking we can consider processes configuring the world into a stable place of identities and functions. As both George and Rancière demonstrate, while the repainting of the wall might not have been done directly by the state, the NGO that did it practiced a form of "policing" by designating what can or cannot be on the wall, or what the wall *should* look like. Repainting the wall can thus be understood as covering up the scene of the crime by re-dressing (literally) it, making it clean and proper, and, if in a small way, restoring the authority, or even cleanliness, of the government which the initial phrase's spray-painting had accused and sullied.

The Phrase's Repainting

When the uproar over the repainting of the wall erupted, the phrase re-appeared in the same site. On May 4, 2021, I went to the port wall and observed one of the NGO's artists re-painting this phrase in a starkly different way. He was doing it carefully, taking his time, in broad daylight. He clearly and openly sought to placate both those who were against the repainting of the wall and those supporting its beautifying. I was especially intrigued by this careful, painstaking

5- RANCIÈRE Jacques, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 29.
6- Ibid.
7- RANCIÈRE Jacques, "What Does it Mean to be Un?" *Continuum* 21, no. 4 (April, 2007): 559-569. DOI: 10.1080/10304310701629961561).

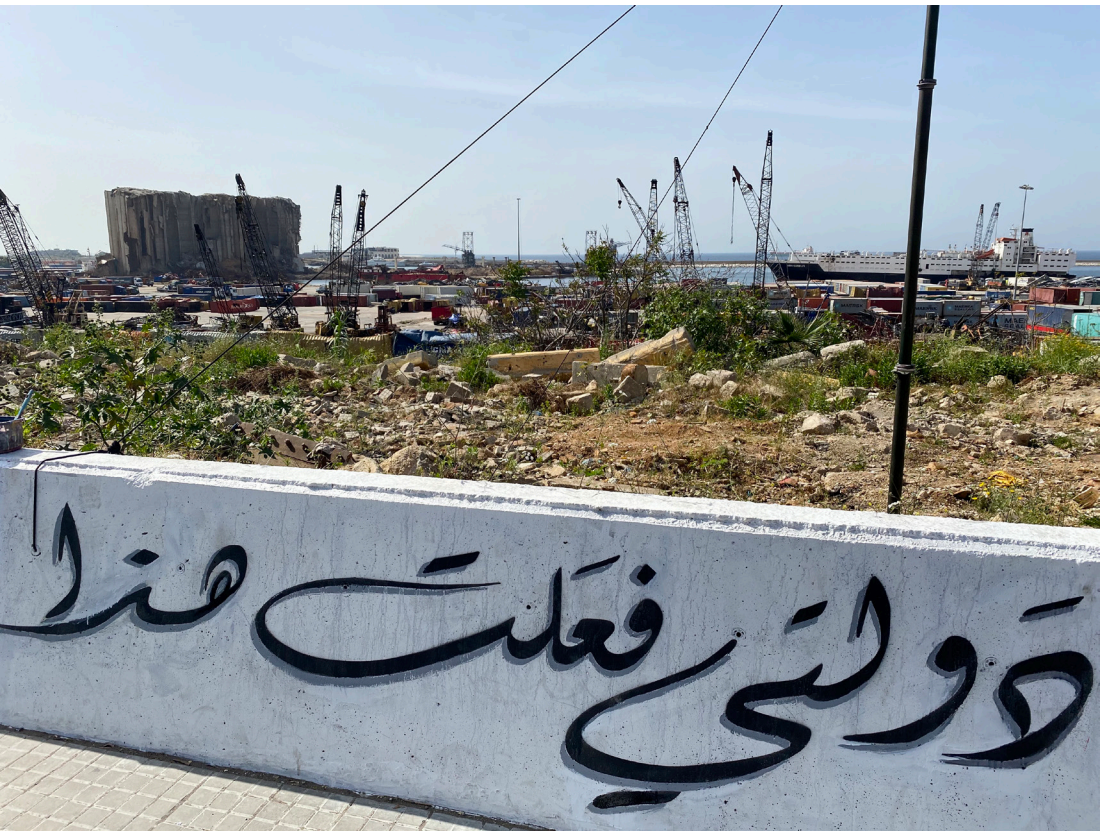

Figure 5 The new version of "My government did this." May 4, 2021.

effort for it contrasted deeply with my own experience of doing graffiti around Beirut. As a participant in a graffiti campaign for a political group I supported, I had been anxious and fully alert to my surroundings. Our faces were covered, we acted quickly and inconspicuously. We avoided active or high-traffic streets. We saved time and exposure by using stencils. The thought of a powerful entity – the government – imposed on us the awareness that we were transgressing and painting on the city's walls "without permission."

The transformation of the contested graffito can be better understood by drawing on anthropologist Alfred Gell's theory of agential art. Gell calls the process of the creation of collectively meaningful art the "technology of enchantment," noting that technological processes from which we tend to be alienated, can "cast a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form."[8] In other words, we are more enchanted by the creation processes of an art object than by the object itself. Somewhat counter-intuitively then, Gell showcases that art objects have agentic capacities. In the formation of social bodies.

8- GELL Alfred, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology." *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics* (Malden, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994): 40-63. P. 44.

I asked Ismail, a 30-year-old researcher, his thoughts about the newly painted version of "My government did this." He replied: "It looks like a tattoo. I don't like it, it's too pretty. They [the government] don't deserve that; they deserve something messy and ugly written in 5 seconds." His disdain towards the new version of the phrase, echoed by several other interlocutors, recognizes art objects' particular "power" on people depending on how the artists are made. While the original scribbled and seemingly spontaneous phrase evoked the anger with which it must have been written, the new one had an alienating effect by creating distance (embedded in the graffiti artist's time and in his use of a haughty bureaucratic script) from those who looked at it.

Therefore, although the state did not repaint the wall itself, the artist's relaxed effort repainting the wall, even while writing a regime condemning phrase, indicates state approval for the whole project. That, as well as the carefully calligraphed style of the writing, dilutes the meaning and the original potency of the phrase.

Rejecting the White Paint

Even after the phrase "My government did this" was repainted, civilians remained livid at the white paint and the prospect of beautifying the port wall with colors. Online, people wrote things like "Shame on you and your colors." An interlocutor messaged me saying, "They are trying to romanticize the tragedy." Although it was erased, the affective or emotional force of the original graffito was evidenced in the uproar that arose and people's insistence to rewrite it "The endurance of the graffiti in people's minds after they have been erased accentuates the affective power of the message imparted."[9]

Indeed, the white paint moved people not only to comment angrily on social media but to go physically to the port and to write transgressively in politically-charged phrases *over* the white paint. These civilians disrupted the police order and the coercion imposed by the NGO's white(-ning) paint. They exerted their own control over space and their own narrative upon it, engaging in what Rancière calls *dissensus*. Rancière speaks of dissensus as a "conflict – not between individuals – but between one sensible order and another. There is dissensus when there is something wrong in the picture, when something is not at the right place."[10] The civilians who painted over the white wall established dissensus both by disrupting the social order, regulated by laws and norms, *and by* disrupting the sensible or aesthetic arrangements *upon which* this social order rests.

9- NAGUIB Saphinaz-Amal, "Engaged Ephemeral Art: Street Art and the Egyptian Arab Spring," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 7, no. 2: (2016): 53-88. Available at https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/view/23590/17362. 62).

10- RANCIÈRE Jacques, "What Does it Mean to be Un?" *Continuum* 21, no. 4 (April, 2007): 559-569. P. 560DOI: 10.1080/10304310701629961.

To elaborate, I argue that these spray-can bearing civilians understood the repainting of the wall as an erasure of a different version of the events. The white, painted wall covered from public eyes the government's culpability for the criminal explosion. The social order rests upon the "sensible arrangement" such whiteness provided. In turn, people enacted dissensus: they stubbornly expressed and insisted on remembering the crime and rendiring its perpetrators visible through rapidly graffitied, readily legible, everyday script, thereby soiling the regulated whiteness of the wall surrounding the destroyed port.

One of the ways in which the social power of graffiti expresses itself in what Mark Levine has identified as questioning the graffito's indication of "who controls physical space – the state or the opposition."[11] As a social power still in their hands, graffiti allowed individuals to respond to the newly painted wall by disrupting the "politics of the police" and spraying anew, "My government did this," multiple times. amidst which were also fostered other transgressive phrases.

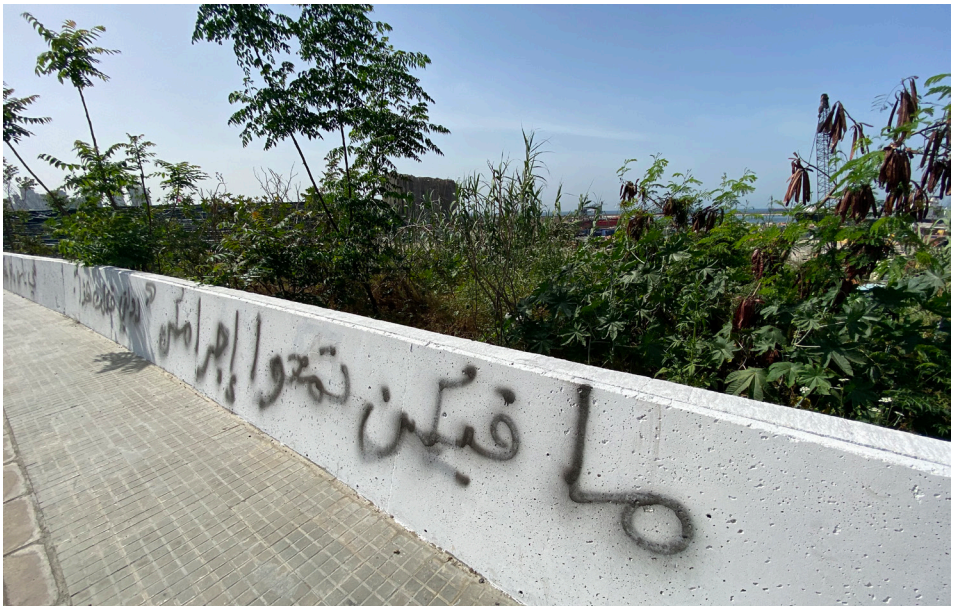

Figure 6 "You can't erase your crime: My government did this."

By offering a counter-hegemonic mechanism for producing public opinion, the notorious graffito marked the public sphere in a manner that directly *destabilized* the state's sense of security.[12] The newly-painted phrases emerged from a place of anger and grief, now spatialized onto the wall and port, as if geared to remind

11- LEVINE Mark. "When Art Is the Weapon: Culture and Resistance Confronting Violence in the Post-Uprisings Arab World," *Religions*, 6, no. 4 (November, 2015): 1277-1313. P. 1296. Available at https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6041277.

12- Ibid., p. 1294.

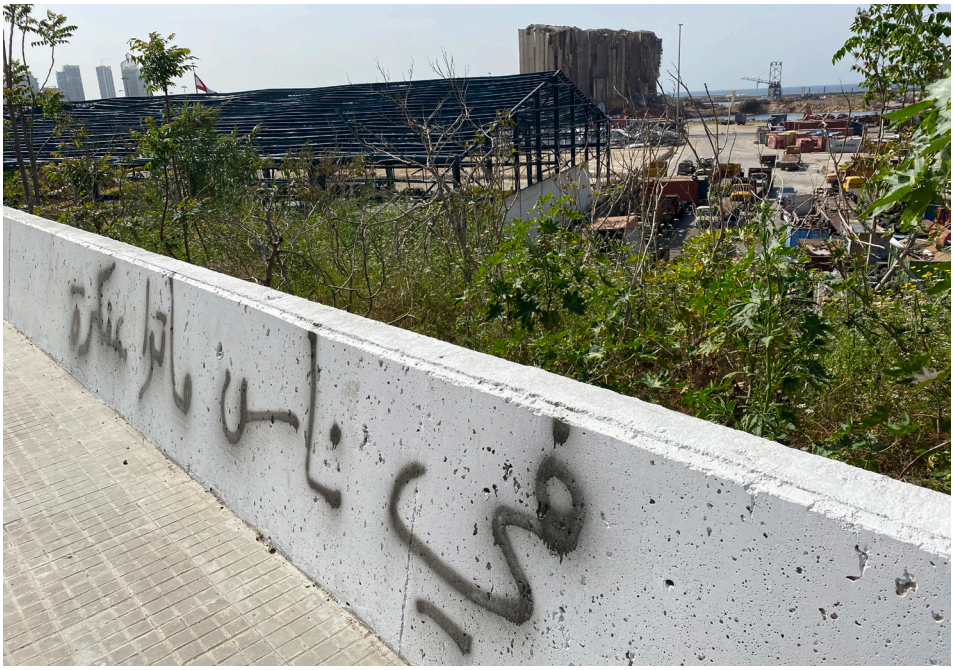

Figure 7 "There are people that died, by the way."

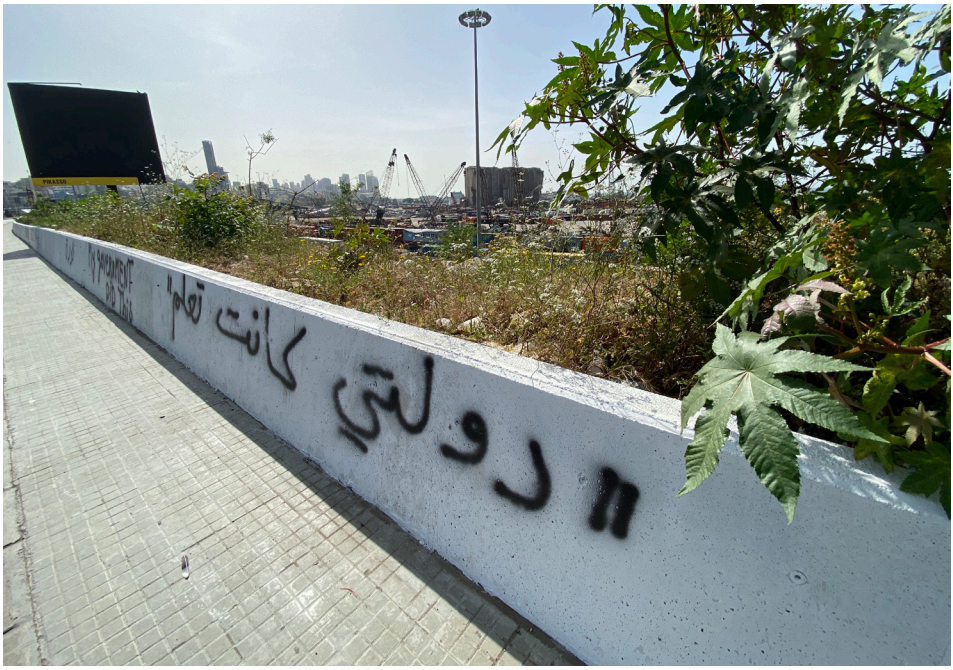

Figure 8 "My government knew [about the ammonium nitrate stored at the port]."

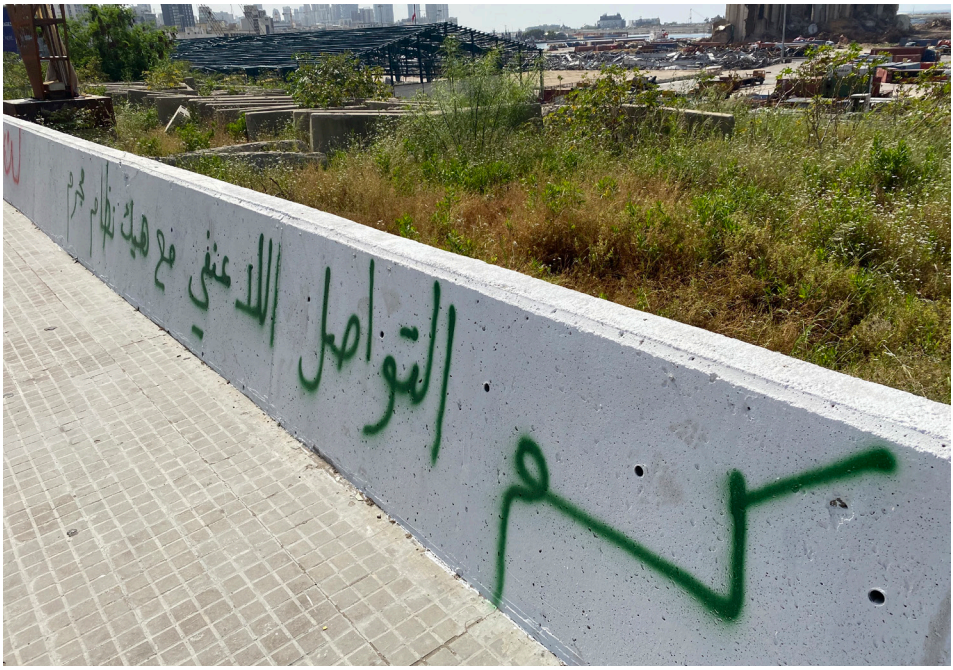

Figure 9 "Fuck nonviolent communication with a violent regime like this one."

viewers of the crime and move them to action. They thus positioned the wall as a site of remembrance of an inarguably *government*-instigated (and now, in the context of graffiti, verified) crime.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the question of agency in relation to graffiti after the August 4, 2020 port explosion in Beirut. As someone who has been involved in various political mobilizations since my high school years in Beirut, some of the most frequent questions that I've asked myself are: What is it that moves people to act? Why is it that there are these occasional and short-lived insurrectionary moments? What is the force behind them? In my disquisition on a single graffito, I have ventured to answer these questions by studying how people make their imaginations a shared, if painted, reality. I have detailed what happened when people rushed to the port to stain the literally white-washed wall with their own transgressive sentences. The affective or emotive hold engendered by the original graffito, "My government did this," fosters and reappears in the anger triggered by the repainting of the wall eight months after the port explosion. In this way, graffiti emerged as a channel through which to mobilize people.

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ملخص | يستند هذا المقال إلى العمل الميداني الإثنوغرافي لاستكشاف القوة العاطفية والتأثيريّة للكتابة على الجدران في بيروت بعد انفجار مرفأ بيروت في ٤ آب ٢٠٢٠ ، وتحديداً على جدار الميناء: "حكومتي فعلت ذلك". يبحث المقال في طلي جدار الميناء بالكلس، ومحو هذه العبارة ، وما تبع ذلك من أعمال أمنية. أنا أدرس كيف أن الكتابة على الجدران لها تأثير شعوري أو عاطفي على المدنيين وترتبط ارتباطًا جوهريًا بممارسة الوكالة التمثيليّة. باختصار ، يناقش المقال كيف تفتح الكتابة على الجدران مساحة لانتهاك أنظمة القوة المسيطرة أو المهيمنة.

كلمات مفتاحية | رسومات على الجدران ، شرطة ، انفجار ٤ آب ، وكالة ، أثر.

Notice biographique | Lara Sabra is an anthropology PhD student at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst studying prison systems and incarceration in Lebanon. Her MA thesis focused on multi-species relationships in Beirut, specifically examining relationship-making, agency, and urban space. She also contributes to a visual research project about intangible heritage practices in Ras Beirut funded by the RELIEF Centre. Her interests are driven by and include visual anthropology, state violence, women’s studies, and engaged anthropology.