

“No Political Solution: The Occupation of Palestinian Narrative in Raja Shehadeh”

John Randolph LeBlanc
University of Texas at Tyler

For the Palestinian people, the “political” means being caught between “democratic” Israel’s occupation/domination and collaboration by their own democratically-elected “leaders.”¹ Consequently, Palestinians have found it very difficult to find and articulate a functional political imaginary that addresses their everyday conditions and concerns. In this essay, I begin seeking possible sources for such an imaginary in the work of Raja Shehadeh, the lawyer, human rights activist, and writer from Ramallah. Of particular concern is his series of diaries written during various occupations and other Israeli incursions into the West Bank where he still lives.² Shehadeh’s experience of everyday life under occupation and his various resistances to it force us to unmask the “democratic” at work in Palestine/Israel and push our understanding of the political beyond the Schmittian friend-enemy distinction to the need for a politics that serves human beings before even more abstract commitments.

Since the summer of 1967, occupation/domination has been the principal mode of political interaction between the democratic state of Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. While within the state of Israel we can find the forms and institutions of democracy at work, at least for its Jewish citizens,³ neither Israel’s justifications nor its administration of the frequent occupations of Palestinian territories are consistent with the stated ideals affiliated with liberal democracy: respect for persons and their property, freedom of movement, ordered access to basic services (from sustenance to work to education), and the substantive as well as procedural protections of the rule of law.⁴ Absent these possibilities and in the presence of the domination of occupation, we nonetheless may find the seeds of democratic possibilities in practices that emerge in resistance to occupation/domination. In the work of Raja Shehadeh, these resistances take the form of his narrative accounts of life under the various occupations. These accounts serve as counters to the governing narrative of democratic Israel and its “humane occupations” of Palestinian territory. Even when troops are absent, Palestinian lives run through checkpoints, the separation barrier, and, in Israel proper, second class citizenship. Shehadeh chronicles both the physical and psychological tolls that these practices have on occupied persons in the West Bank. In his work we see the distance undemocratic practices place between the liberatory language of democracy and the possibilities for reclaiming the democratic as a mode of politics that prioritizes human being.

I. The Democratic, the Political, and Occupation as Domination

Its universalizing liberal pretenses notwithstanding, the idea of democracy, let alone its institutionalizations, has been unable to shake its origins in exclusivity; it presumes both a *demos* and a barbarian.⁵ Democratic Israel has not only created its barbarian but continually enfold itself in the spaces of its barbarians generating tensions that flare up in violence and keep the space of Palestine/Israel unstable. The forms of democracy in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank—representative government, elections, etc.—yield neither functional politics nor humane

environments.⁶ Instead, those arrangements are driven by and indeed often facilitate an ongoing violence that would seem to be incompatible with democratic aspirations. The key dimension to this problem, I would argue, is the problem of space. The complexity of the space of Palestine/Israel demands that we rethink elder assumptions about democracy. The barbarian is not outside, but next door, behind a wall, rousting people at checkpoints. In such a small, significant space, perhaps, rather than emphasizing democratic institutions, the space of Palestine/Israel itself must be reconceptualized, as Azoulay and Ophir (2013) have suggested, as a democratic space before any other moves are made.⁷ For both peoples, where the barbarian is in such close proximity, the elder notion of democracy as requiring a barbarian cannot function without being overtaken by violence and domination. Instead, I will suggest here, the liberal commitment to the universal must be localized so that those “others” in our midst are taken as human presences first. Reconceiving the space in terms of its occupants means the democratic stands for people governing themselves as people first and as members of particular tribes only secondarily.

In Palestine/Israel as in many other instances, attempts to reconcile the forms, indeed the idea, of democracy with liberal aspirations to universality always run aground on democratic specificity. In the extant case, simply replacing the specific with some recognition of the other as a human presence is deceptively difficult. Beyond overcoming sedimentary layers of mistrust and violence, it suggests the suspension of politics in the name of an ethical commitment bordering on the universal. The difficulties with this kind of approach are well-developed in the work of Chantal Mouffe, specifically in her conception of “radical democracy.” Mouffe is concerned with contemporary liberal theory’s apparent project of minimizing the political and replacing it with some conception of the ethical which may or may not be grounded in a specific community’s experience.⁸ Mouffe argues, after Carl Schmitt, that by trying to remove what she identifies as the antagonism from politics, these theoretical approaches take the political out of politics. In several iterations, Mouffe’s argument suggests that this renders politics vulnerable to the essentialist forms of political identification that lead to violent zero-sum conceptions of politics.⁹

Antagonism is the essence of the political for Mouffe. Politics is always about the struggle for hegemony in a particular space. We cannot remove the concept of struggle from our understanding of the political. The challenge is how to retain it without the struggle becoming a zero-sum contest for permanent hegemony. Mouffe argues that no hegemony is permanent. A responsive democratic politics should not only recognize the impermanence of hegemony but it should also be conducted with that impermanence in mind. Consequently, she seeks to reclaim the adversarial nature of the political. The object of radical democratic politics is not to rid politics of antagonism, but to overcome the fear of antagonisms, and channel those antagonisms into democratic designs. In other words, the task of democratic politics is to sublimate antagonism rather than trying to eliminate it. The resulting “agonistic” politics preserves the antagonism between hegemonic projects that can never be rationally reconciled. Democratic procedures regulate the contest between the projects. The energy of competing hegemonic

projects is mobilized “toward democratic designs, *by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.*”¹⁰

In preserving and domesticating political antagonisms for democratic objectives, Mouffe finds and preserves a place for ethical considerations. Underlying her agonistic politics is an assumption that others be seen as partners or potential partners in the political project. It would seem to be the role of ethical considerations to recognize and preserve that sense of equality. She assumes that there are ethical commitments that must be recognized as part of a democratic ethos and, correspondingly, respected. The provisional hegemonies at which agonistic politics aims must have their methods interrogated by the expectations of ethics. Her project was never to rid the political of the ethical, but rather to resist substituting the ethical for the political and thereby naively abandoning the political project altogether. However, she may assume too readily that the parties’ commitment to a larger common democratic ethos will be enough for the loser in a given political contest to take solace in having the opportunity to press its project another day while the winner remembers that the victory is provisional and temporary. This assumption, I am arguing, cannot bear the weight of the difficulties of living in communities of fear and distrust as is the case between Palestinians and Israel and in the domestic politics of both.

The temptation to the ethical in democratic theory, then, derives from the recognition that the demos is composed of persons recognized as partners in the political process.¹¹ Before we can speak of antagonisms or democratic processes, the first requirement must be met: recognition of who is a person for the purposes of a political partnership.¹² Where no such recognition exists between two or more groups of people, there is domination, *not* politics. The demos’s other can be and often is found within, that is, in those persons among its number who do not enjoy the assumption of full personhood, political or otherwise. In these instances, the barbarians are not at the gate. They live next door, are encountered in the street, at the market, or, in the case of Palestine/Israel, at checkpoints, beyond the “separation barrier,” or outside the walls of another settlement on Palestinian land. If we take Mouffe’s conception of a radical democratic politics seriously, as I am inclined to do, then there is no antagonism in Palestine/Israel to be sublimated and, consequently, no possibility of a “political solution,” democratic or otherwise. The first requirement, one inadequately addressed by Mouffe given her primary concern with European politics, has not been met: recognition of one’s other as a person, that is, as a (potential) partner in a democratic project. In small, homogeneous communities like most Greek city-states, an assumption could be made about drawing stark distinctions between partners and barbarians.¹³ In the small, deeply contested and increasingly crowded and claustrophobic space of Palestine/Israel the assumption is self- and other-destructive rather than liberal and democratic.

If we understand democratic politics as requiring the development of a public self and, correspondingly, providing the conditions, the public and private spaces for that development, then occupation as we find it in Shehadeh puts to the lie the very possibility of a democratic politics in the environment of Palestine/Israel. The occupation experienced by Shehadeh and the Palestinians over time encompasses both oppression and domination in the general forms identified by Iris Young in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.¹⁴ For Young, oppression

involves “systematic institutional processes which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, or institutionalized social practices which inhibit people’s ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen.”¹⁵ As we will see, the closure of schools, courts, and other spaces where the practices of political membership can play out are a persistent part of the policies of occupation and work against the emergence of a political self, let alone spaces in which to practice democratic politics.

More obvious and more directly related to way we usually think about occupation is Young’s understanding of domination. Young argues that domination involves “institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. Persons live within structures of domination if other persons or groups can determine without reciprocation the conditions of their action, either directly or by virtue of the structural consequences of their actions. Thorough social and political democracy is the opposite of domination.”¹⁶ In Shehadeh’s accounts of life under occupation in the West Bank, Palestinians endure this kind of domination in many subtle and not so subtle forms. Systematic restrictions on the freedom of movement, as we will see below, are only the most obvious instance of domination. More subtle is the requirement of permits—to travel, to build homes and businesses, to work--and their routine denial by Israeli authorities.¹⁷ The object of this kind of domination is two-fold. First, it makes clear that the autonomy of Palestinians goes just as far—and no farther—as Israel wishes it to go. Second, it works against opening up new spaces for the development of anything resembling civil society.¹⁸

Young argues that there is overlap between domination and oppression and that, indeed, the latter implies the former. Her purpose is to identify non-dominative sources of oppression in functioning democracies. I am assuming that democracy—inasmuch as I am concerned with Shehadeh’s milieu—is not functioning even as its categories are deployed by the occupier to its own exclusionary purposes. Though they apply to different circumstances in her work, Young’s categories and their overlap are useful to describe Shehadeh’s occupation experiences. Occupation as oppression and domination form a context that can only be called political in the worst Schmittian sense of that term where the categories of friend and enemy seriously limit its possibilities. More to the point, perhaps, the way occupation defines the environment of Palestine/Israel suggests we broaden Young’s suggestion and say that occupation—whether living under it or imposing it—is the opposite of social and political democracy.

In what follows, I will use Shehadeh’s occupation journals as reflections upon the conditions of occupation/domination and the consequent failure of the political. Shehadeh’s work illustrates the problems inherent in relying on a conception of the political that presumes, even privileges, antagonism between two unequal communities. In circumstances like Shehadeh’s, that is, living and working in the West Bank since 1967, there is little or no room for the kind of gainful opposition that Mouffe considers essential to the development of a democratic politics. In other words, where there is occupation/domination, there is no politics. But we would be remiss if we left it at that, for Shehadeh’s work also points to specific forms of resistance that take us

back to what it means to act democratically. As a form of what Edward Said called democratic criticism, Shehadeh's work offers resistance to the dehumanizing effects that occupation/domination can have on conceptions of politics and life among one's fellows and others. Especially important for our purpose will be how Shehadeh's self-interrogation explores and combats the ethical degradation that living in the ever-presence of these conditions can work.

In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), Said offered a way to think (and live) the relationship between democratic aspirations and the requirements of human presence suggested by liberal conceptions of human rights. In this his last work, Said posited democratic criticism as a transgressive mode of interrogating assumptions made about or in the name of othered groups like the Palestinians. Said's democratic critic was suspicious of the assumption that the presence of institutions meant the practice of democracy.¹⁹ He understood that institutions make it all too easy to deny the human presence. Consequently, the democratic critic takes as his task saying what things are, how ideas and assumptions work on real people, and how they generate impossible conditions. The critic then becomes a kind of countermemory, exposing accepted and unjust practices to critique in the name of what Said called a "noncoercive community."²⁰ If democratic politics requires politically viable selves interacting on more or less equal terms on the levels of meaning and stuff, then politics must be oriented to allowing for, encouraging, even creating an environment in which those democratic human selves can be developed. What Shehadeh confronts in occupation/domination is an ongoing denial of the possibility of the development of a democratic ethos in these terms. And this effect is not just felt by Palestinians. Shehadeh wrestles with the behavior of occupation forces, later of Palestinian law enforcement, and his own positionality within the context of Palestinian resistance. His work and life are a response to the way the practices of occupation degrade the possibility of a humane democratic politics for both occupied and occupier.

II. Shehadeh's Occupation Diaries: The Failure of the Political

Over the last thirty five years, Shehadeh has published four books of diaries kept during various phases of Israeli occupation of his home in Ramallah in the West Bank. In *The Third Way* which covers the period from Winter 1979 through Autumn 1980, Shehadeh embraces practices recognizable as political through his fight for the human rights of his fellow Palestinians. The appeal to human rights—he helps found the human rights organization Al Haq—demonstrates his sense of the efficacy of political action. The humanity of the occupied, he believes, will be recognized by the occupier when the case for the inhumanity of the occupation is made in the right terms and falls on the right ears. By the beginning of the second set of diaries called *The Sealed Room* (1992), covering the period from September 1990 through the first Gulf War and its aftermath, Shehadeh's faith in political action has been bolstered by the mostly nonviolent methods of the first Intifada.²¹ Palestinians have taken the work of their own liberation in hand and, proceeding peacefully, they have met with some success. But this early optimism is short lived. The bulk of the diary describes the many ways the Gulf War becomes a

disastrous two-pronged turning point for Palestinians and the possibilities of political action. First, the conditions of occupation drive Shehadeh and many of his fellows to believe that Saddam Hussein will do what no one else has done—stand up to the Israelis, at least in part in the name of the Palestinians.²² Shehadeh comes to recognize Hussein as another Arab leader using the Palestinians as a rallying cry without committing to the cause. Second, and even more catastrophically, Palestinian support for Hussein gives the Israelis license to smother the Intifada through curfews and the like when not smashing it outright through other more violent means.²³

The last two sets of diaries are post-Oslo, another disaster for Palestinians and their aspirations for liberation. *When the Birds Stopped Singing* (2003) is an account of Palestinian life during the Israeli siege and invasion of Ramallah following upon the suicide bombing in a hotel in Netanya that killed 29 people during Passover celebrations on 27 March 2002.²⁴ From Shehadeh's perspective, the senseless violence of the bombing, part of the violence that distinguished the second from the first Intifada, marks the failure of politics manifest in Oslo, in the actions (collective punishment of Palestinians) and inactions (halting settlements) of the Israeli government, and in the futile incompetence of the Palestinian organs of self-governance like the Palestinian Authority which could neither prevent the criminal act of the bombing nor the collective punishment of the Palestinians by the Israelis in its aftermath. Shehadeh's accounts of this period shine a bright light on the relative worth of the Oslo Accords at least as far as generating any equality between the two communities is concerned. The fourth of Shehadeh's collections, called *Occupation Diaries* (2012), dating from December 2009 to May 2012, shows how the occupation has been domesticated. The Israelis can now count on their Palestinian peace partners to patrol the cities of the West Bank, cracking down on dissidents and those who would fight the occupation.²⁵ Efforts at normalizing post Oslo social and economic conditions in the West Bank take the teeth out of Palestinian resistance to the occupation, while the spoils available as a result of these new conditions serve to divide the Palestinians politically and culturally. Normalization reveals deep rifts among Palestinians: between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas; the West Bank and Gaza; the secular Palestinians and religious fundamentalists, especially Islamicists; those who resist the occupation and those who have begun to profit from the new order of things.²⁶ To be sure, there is still an Israeli occupation. Palestinians cannot move freely when at all from one town to the next. They cannot use roads designated for settlers and their own are left in utter disrepair by the occupiers. They cannot stop settlers from taking their land in violation of international law. But these realities, rather than remain the key issues, become the background of everyday life under ongoing occupation.

This brief overview of the context of the diaries suggests the failure of politics in the macro or geopolitical sense, giving a sense of how the modes and orders of occupation have morphed over that time, with periodic military incursions punctuating the occupation's gradual institutionalization. For the present discussion, however, we find the real value of Shehadeh's work in its ability to communicate the effects of these large political forces on the microprocesses of daily life in the West Bank. The first choice Shehadeh makes in the aftermath of the Six-Day War is to stay on the West Bank in Ramallah. His upper middle class family—his

grandmother owned a hotel and his father was a successful attorney and advocate for reconciliation with the Israelis-- had been displaced from Jaffa during the nakba.²⁷ In *The Third Way*, Shehadeh develops the idea of *sumud*, that is, “steadfastness” as a form of resisting the occupation of the West Bank by Israeli forces and colonial practices.²⁸ In choosing to stay, Shehadeh enacts a first form of resistance, namely, refusing to be made invisible by insisting on one’s own presence, that is, by carrying on with everyday life.²⁹ A naturally recurring motif in the diaries is his chronicling the way Palestinians resist occupation through their efforts at maintaining the habits of everyday life in the face of the persistent and arbitrary presence of Israeli soldiers and bureaucrats. At the outset of our encounter with Shehadeh, then, *sumud* means foregoing abstract claims to justice and the good—the typical stuff of “political” discussions--in the name of the concrete, of preserving spaces for the realities of everyday life.

Occupation means encroachment upon spaces in which to live everyday life. We may begin to unpack the inconsistency between the possibility of politics, especially a democratic politics, and occupation by working through two broad tendencies we find in the various occupations Shehadeh recounts. First, the tactics deployed by the occupations’ agents consistently involve violations of both intimate spaces and public places. These violations deny the two sites necessary to develop a more or less stable conception of self, that is, a self capable of engaging in politics in any but the most extreme forms. The second tendency we find in Shehadeh’s occupation experience relates to the vanishing outer landscape in which Palestinians are forced to live. The persistent vulnerability both of public and private spaces and the disruption of a collective connection to the land represented by the separation barrier, the settlements, and checkpoints all force Shehadeh and his fellow Palestinians to internalize their experience, tempting them to a justifiable sense of isolation and withdrawal that is anathema to participation or even conceptualization of the political.

The vulnerability of private spaces is a recurring theme, particularly during the periodic Israeli incursions into the West Bank, marking an encroachment upon spaces in which Palestinians (or anyone else for that matter) may be human.³⁰ In a telling but certainly not the only example in the diaries, Shehadeh’s brother Samer has his apartment occupied by Israeli soldiers in the aftermath of the Passover bombing. The family’s beds and baths are used by the soldiers, their property is broken and destroyed, some of their food is consumed by the soldiers in violation of the regulations governing the occupation. At one point, Samer’s children won’t settle down; they are fearful and nervous with the soldiers in the house humiliating their parents and taking over their spaces. They are quieted when a number of the soldiers point their weapons at the children. There is a general atmosphere of terror in being at the mercy of the soldiers’ presence. As the soldiers depart, Samer engages an officer with whom he has found thoughtful conversation possible. As this was not the first time Samer’s apartment building had been occupied by Israeli forces, Shehadeh writes, “Samer had one question to ask this soldier. He wanted to know whether the army would be taking over his apartment every time they invaded Ramallah.” The officer “assured him” that “Your building is marked on our map with a number and a circle. We will come back to it every time we return to Ramallah.”³¹

A number of critical things impose themselves on us in this encounter, so common under the regime of collective punishment. Samer, his wife, and the adults around, though fearful and angry, can process this experience as part of a recurrent pattern in their lives. To be sure, these home invasions are disruptive, unsettling, and potentially deadly. But the adults can recognize that these violations are part of being subject to the kind of domination that characterizes the occupation. More to the point, perhaps, one cannot help but wonder after the impact such an encounter has on those not old enough to be able to process it. Samer's children will affiliate this violence, both actual and implied, with Israelis in particular and, as they get older, with politics in general. It is the kind of trauma that is very difficult to unlearn and that gets passed on from generation to generation—as it has in Palestine/Israel. Shehadeh reflects on the relationship between this kind of interaction and politics as he thinks about his family and, in particular, his mother who lives alone in another part of town.

My private orderly world had crumbled. *Cruel, irrational politics was all around me, refusing to leave me alone.* The events of the past few years had soured relations between us and the Israelis to the point that even their reservists did not see us as human beings.³² The affiliation of occupation and domination with politics in Shehadeh's mind is critical and ongoing. Each time he mentions politics or the political, we are reminded of the limitations of this kind of activity for Palestinians. It finds reflection in the soldier's matter-of-fact response to Samer: the army will be back, when it decides it needs to, and this decision will be its own. The politics of Oslo, of Palestinian "self-governance," cannot preserve you in your space. Whatever one's position on suicide bombings, and Shehadeh is rightfully appalled by the Passover bombing, being subject to domination means that your spaces and, therefore, your life is not your own. Whence the possibility of politics?

The violations of private spaces, however, are only part of the difficulty. What Shehadeh calls "petty humiliations" are more part of life under occupation. In *The Sealed Room*, Shehadeh identifies Israeli efforts at occupying Palestinians out of existence by controlling their movements and by overrunning their public spaces. Throughout this text and beyond, the settler movement transforms the physical space of the West Bank into spaces that exclude Palestinians. "Not only have our roads been marked for the convenience of the settlers, but our town has been turned into a ghetto of sorts," Shehadeh notes, where "occupiers roam the streets in their jeeps" hiding behind their guns. "If for any reason their suspicions are aroused" by a young Palestinian "or if they become scared or bored (they don't have to explain their reasons), they shoot and sometimes kill."³³

Exclusions from spaces are also exclusions from the category of human being. Nowhere is the combination of these two exclusions more evident than at roadblocks. Being rousted by Israeli soldiers at roadblocks is a common enough occurrence in these diaries.³⁴ In one instance, however, the tension between human being and the kind of politics represented by roadblocks is manifest. During the course of a stop, Shehadeh is taken aback by the presence of a "gentle" soldier who speaks softly and respectfully to him in Arabic as he checks Shehadeh's papers. In response to this rare and unexpected recognition of his humanity by an Israeli soldier, Shehadeh

cannot help but bid him a “warm and genuine” farewell. But life under occupation for Shehadeh means constant self-scrutiny and the encounter rankles as he thinks it through. “The friendly soldier at the roadblock was a solitary soul,” Shehadeh writes, “surrounded by the usual bullies who seemed to exaggerate their crass conduct in order to counterbalance his politeness—perhaps afraid that we Arabs might get the wrong idea.”³⁵ Shehadeh is nonplussed by the bullies, but wonders after the gentle soldier’s attempt to hide his discomfort with the policy of which he is an agent by “assuming a gentle attitude.”

Shehadeh wants to hate the gentle soldier for his hypocrisy, but he reflects that jail would await the soldier if he refused to serve, that the soldier too must provide for his family, and that it is his democratic state that forces him to engage in this political activity.³⁶ Like the roadblock itself, like the occupation, and the terror that issues from arrests and invasions of private spaces, the soldier is the product of a democratic state. Shehadeh interrogates himself and finds that “this goes much deeper: *underlying my anger and demands is an idealistic belief in the rationality of a democratic society—that these gentle souls would succeed by persuasion to reverse policies.* This seems to be increasingly untrue of Israel.”³⁷ The checkpoint manifests both the outcome of domestic politics in Israel and the impossibility of a politics in Palestine/Israel grounded in anything but the power to harass civilians at checkpoints. The rationality that guides Israel as a democratic polity not only conceives of checkpoints but then forces the democratic citizen to man them. Thus is the democratic citizen the agent of denying the harassed member of the occupied community the possibility of knowing what it means to live as a free democratic citizen. In other words, democratic politics cannot protect a community from its baser instincts any more than it can prevent generating them in its citizens. “These gentle soldiers who hate the occupation,” Shehadeh concludes, “when the day comes, they will follow their leaders’ call to war, just as now they don their uniforms to be part of the occupying reserve forces.”³⁸

But Shehadeh knows that *sumud* cannot protect the occupied from bitterness or from losing faith in the possibility of politics and retreating into one’s own private spaces.³⁹ Living in constant fear in confined spaces generates what we can call the “occupied mind.” Owing to its lack of freedom of movement, of safe private spaces, of public spaces in which to share ideas and experiences, this mind internalizes its responses to the conditions of occupation and, in doing so, risks being drawn away from its own humanity. The humiliation of daily encounters with occupation, by their mere repetition, generate a rage that turns inward on the occupied and is then projected outward onto the occupier. The occupier, who doesn’t deal with the occupied as human, can no longer be seen as a human presence. During the Gulf War, we see Shehadeh wrestling with the hatred that is born of having no place to go but inside himself, inside the “sealed room” where he plumbs his own depths. In an entry on 23 January 1991, Shehadeh writes with a bitterness even he can’t deny:

Of course we like to see you hurt. You have refused to make peace; you take our land, kill our people, and defame our name. Your unbridled power dictates our lives and fate; is it any wonder we now relish your vulnerability? And do not, for God’s sake, think that in addition to severing all our lifelines over forty-two years, you can also shape our spirit

and dictate our hopes. Yes, I will say these words that so ill become me: I would like to see your cities under siege, your soldiers crushed, and your arrogant noses stuck in the mud.⁴⁰

In the circumstance of occupation, which paradoxically generates circumspection, the occupied mind finds refuge only in “words that so ill become” their utterer. Confinement, encroachment, frustration, and desperation all take Shehadeh away from himself. He rails against “democratic Israel” whose generosity he bitterly “enjoys” by being “cooped up at home for the ninth day of continuous curfew.”⁴¹ Even after the Gulf war, Shehadeh is “unrepentant” for relishing “Saddam’s military bravado.”⁴²

But there is also the nagging feeling that something about him is being lost: “At the same time,” Shehadeh laments, “I do not believe I am one who prefers war to non-violence. I would like to believe that justice can be achieved using other means. But I tried and saw that we were getting nowhere. Justice seems to be reserved for the powerful.”⁴³ Politics in these terms is unfit for human habitation and, despite his hatred of the occupier, Shehadeh cannot deny the human toll of the conflict. He does not even allow himself to relish in “victories.” His entry of April 10 deals with a bombing that has struck back at the Israelis. As he watches on television, Shehadeh notes their reaction:

They are confused; we can see how confused they are. Gloved men wearing plastic over their shoes look for body parts. For a moment we revel in our power, the sudden reversal of our fate, our sudden, all too sudden, victory over our enemy. Then we see the old woman crying. It is no longer abstract and faceless victims, it is now harm inflicted on an individual with whom we can identify. She can be our mother, older sister, or neighbor. This changes everything.⁴⁴

In this moment, Shehadeh reaches to the heart of the conflict. Over and again he observes how Israeli soldiers and the braying leadership on both sides fail to recognize the humanity in the other. He too, in the dark moments of rage he honestly records in his diaries, succumbs to the temptation. But it is in seeing one’s other as human, not as a thing, or a number, or an unwanted and unwelcome presence that Shehadeh’s fragile hope consists. Here ethical considerations not only interrogate the political, but they put to the lie that so conceived the political serves any human purpose whatever. He recognizes that despite the power (read, political) differential, Palestinians and Israelis exist in sealed rooms in reference to one another. What politics that obtains between the occupier and the occupied is about power exercised as one can; there is no intrinsic concern for one’s others as human beings. Shehadeh, faced with his own abyss, chooses to come out of it. The best one can do is to refuse to stay in one’s sealed room.

Through these experiences, Shehadeh’s faith in political solutions all but disappears. He goes from being a human rights activist to someone whose fight consists in forging a humane existence for himself, those nearest to him, and those for whom he works.⁴⁵ Yet he records these experiences testifying to the fact that the politics of occupation generate precarity, vulnerability, and isolation for those who are subject to it. Politics, Shehadeh concludes in *Occupation Diaries*, “is not about good ideas and clairvoyance. The way it is practiced here (and perhaps everywhere

in the world) it is about domination and power. It is about who will sit on the empty throne.”⁴⁶ But Shehadeh’s willingness to honestly confront the physical conditions of occupation and the psychological impact of the occupied mind suggests a possibility that finds its echo in Said’s notion of democratic criticism. As they seek to reclaim his own, Shehadeh’s journals seek to reclaim the humanity that is lost in conditions of domination by saying what is lost, identifying what needs to be found, and demanding a space from which a humane politics can be practiced.

III. Democratic Criticism: Reclaiming the Political

We began by suggesting that personhood is a prerequisite to the possibility of a democratic political environment. The liberal tradition, especially manifest as human rights discourse, seeks to flesh out the conditions of personhood. Whatever the shortcomings of that discourse as practice—Arendt’s objections have yet to be adequately overcome⁴⁷—it does give us a picture of what it means to be a person. The practices of occupation seem designed to cut off the development of that sense of personhood. Overcoming the blocks to the development of personhood would seem to be a prerequisite for a democratic or any kind of humane politics. As the first requirement of democratic politics, personhood demands a place to be a person, a space in which personality can be developed and tested out, a place for the trial and error of character development among one’s fellows and strangers. We think here of homes and neighborhoods, of the kinds of spaces Young argued were denied by structures of domination. In Shehadeh’s narrative, there is an ongoing lack of respect for persons and their property via home invasions, rooftop patrols, road and travel restrictions, and the disregard for Palestinian property—if such an unstable category can be deployed at all. This domination has been an ongoing part of Zionist and the Israeli approach to the “development” of Palestine/Israel.

In Palestine/Israel the object of interactions between the two sides has always been to make the other uncomfortable in their spaces. From very early on, acts of “terror” and the collective punishment that answers them (or provokes them in the first place) always strike at the heart of the everyday lives of persons on both sides. These disruptions work against the development of what Ariella Azoulay calls a civil imagination, that is, the capacity to imagine oneself interacting in civic spaces with one’s others. Azoulay suggests that a politics worthy of the name requires such an imagination even before what she calls a political imagination.⁴⁸ The spatial sense necessary to conceive of oneself outside of one’s own fragile, vulnerable spaces is further hindered by restrictions on the freedom to move about. A political environment called democratic, that is, one that houses different populations on some minimal basis of equality, requires the freedom of mobility that enables one to make connections with others beyond one’s immediate cohort. The development of a sense of self among others demands access to experiences with strangers and explorations of one’s physical environment more or less unmolested.⁴⁹ By contrast, the lack of freedom of movement we see in Shehadeh’s accounts of the occupations generates a nearly Foucauldian sense of being monitored all the time. Curfews, the humiliations at checkpoints, the constant need for one’s papers, being pulled over to have one’s car searched for no particular reason are all ongoing aspects of occupation as domination’s

will to drive the occupied mind into its own interiors and, not coincidentally, the occupied person away from public spaces and from politics.

The politics of occupation as domination is one of antagonism run amok. It suggests the danger that Mouffe's work wants to recognize and then domesticate through her notion of agonism. The politics experienced by Shehadeh is not one wherein a hegemony is provisional or contingent. The very point of political interactions between Israel and the Palestinians—even now with nominal Palestinian control over shrinking areas of the West Bank and over Gaza—is the permanent hegemony of Israel over the territory of Palestine. Getting from occupation and collective punishment to an agonistic politics where hegemonies are provisional and subject to contest would mean overcoming not merely institutionalized inequalities, but reconceptualizing what it means to be human in that space. The ethical interrogation of political arrangements that Mouffe finds necessary but problematic cannot so readily be relegated to the service of the political where the political means domination. A radical democratic politics that embraces antagonism, the struggle for hegemony, risks the kind of domination that Young finds incompatible with a thoroughgoing democratic politics.

In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Said argued for “critique as a form of democratic freedom.”⁵⁰ The democratic critic, in the name of an open-ended idea of the human that Said identified in contemporary postcolonial forms of humanism, served as countermemory and counternarrative to prevailing conditions, especially those having to do with the bases of power. The critic, not unlike Mouffe's understanding of the role of the ethical, must always be ready to call the assumptions of the present order back to the requirements of human beings living together in community. The democratic critic's role, on Said's reading, was to expose the tensions of the present order while remaining mindful that others were also engaged in this “common project.”⁵¹ Shehadeh's work falls well within Said's understanding of democratic criticism. In an overtly political sense, the diaries function as a counter to the narrative that depicts embattled Israel holding off her barbarians in the most humane ways possible. Against this storyline, Shehadeh offers a countermemory—that of Palestinians under occupation—in which democratic citizens like the “gentle soldier” are forced by their democratic masters to generate and enforce conditions that dehumanize the human occupants of the West Bank.

Beyond these macropolitical considerations, however, it is Shehadeh's response to the conditions of occupation that suggests democratic criticism doing the work of reclaiming the human for the political. Shehadeh's forced interrogation of his own humanity and his ability to recognize the dilemmas represented by the “gentle soldier” suggests that it is possible, even for the occupied mind, to draw lines of what is acceptable and not acceptable in human behavior and motivation. He does not deny his own weakness when succumbing to the temptation to hate those who occupy and transform his land. To that extent, the diaries have a confessional aspect. But the diaries also demonstrate how his own self-interrogations move him beyond the kind of self-indulgence that justifies both hate and the actions driven by it. His disgust at the Passover bombings, his resignation to the inevitable Israeli response of collective punishment, his struggle with the aftermath of the “victory” over the enemy when confronted with the face of the grieving

Israeli woman all speak to the possibility of retaining some measure of human compassion in the context of occupation. In this capacity for self-interrogation and in working through his struggle in the very public context of the written and published word, Shehadeh's work should be read as a resistance to dehumanization and an effort in which the requirements of what it means to be human are interrogated and reconsidered in light of that experience. In short, Shehadeh's occupation diaries suggest the futility of a politics of domination, especially one masquerading as "democratic," and the utter necessity of reclaiming personhood as prerequisite for any form of liberal democratic politics.

NOTES

¹ See As'ad Ghanem, *Palestinian Politics After Arafat: A Failed National Movement* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010). Edward Said's criticism of the Arafat regime and his successors in the Palestinian Authority was ongoing from the first Gulf War through Oslo and until Said's death. See the occasional essays in and commentaries in Edward Said, *Peace and Its Discontents* (New York: Vintage, 1995), *End of the Peace Process* and *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map: Essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

² The texts we will use here are Raja Shehadeh, *The Third Way: A Journal of Life in the West Bank* (London: Quartet Books, 1982); Shehadeh, *The Sealed Room: Selections from the Diary of a Palestinian Living Under Israeli Occupation September 1990-August 1991* (London: Quartet Books, 1992); Shehadeh, *When the Birds Stopped Singing: Life in Ramallah Under Siege* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 2003); and Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries* (London: Profile Books, 2012). See also Shehadeh's memoir, *Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

³ The self-analysis of Israel as a democracy and the working through of the tensions between the requirements of Zionism and democracy are ongoing. See for example the work of Bernard Avishai, *The Tragedy of Zionism: How its Revolutionary Past Haunts Israeli Democracy* (New York: Allwoth Press, 2002) and *The Hebrew Republic: How Secular Democracy and Global Enterprise Will Bring Israel Peace at Last* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008). More recently, Ben White considers the problem posed by Palestinians for Israeli democracy in *Palestinians in Israel: Segregation, Discrimination and Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).

⁴ Though beyond the scope of the present essay, Shehadeh has done extensive work on the way the "rule of law" functions in the occupied territories. See Shehadeh, *The West Bank and the Rule of Law: A Study* (West Bank: International Commission of Jurists, 1980); Shehadeh, *Occupier's Law: Israel and the West* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1985); and Shehadeh, *From Occupation to Interim Accords: Israel and the Palestinian Territories* (London: Kluwer International, 1997). See also the important work of Tobias Kelly in *Law, Violence and Sovereignty Among West Bank Palestinians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵ See James Bohman, *Democracy across Borders: From Demos to Demoi* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

⁶ For an example of the dysfunction of Israeli politics, see Richard Silverstein, “Israeli MKs Storm from Knesset During EU Parliamentary President’s Speech” *Tikun Olam*, February 14, 2014, <http://www.richardsilverstein.com/2014/02/12/israeli-mks-storm-from-knesset-during-eu-parliamentary-presidents-speech/> (accessed March 16, 2014). On Palestinian politics, see Ghanem, *Palestinian Politics After Arafat*. As far as the environment in which the “political” plays out, Human Rights Watch reports:

“**Israel:** In 2013, Israeli forces killed Palestinian civilians in the West Bank, most in circumstances that suggest the killings were unlawful. Israeli authorities destroyed homes and other property under discriminatory practices, forcibly displacing hundreds of Palestinian residents in West Bank areas under Israeli control. Israel imposed severe restrictions on Palestinians’ right to freedom of movement, continued to build unlawful settlements in occupied territory, and arbitrarily detained Palestinians, including children and peaceful protesters.

“**Palestine:** In the West Bank, Palestinian Authority (PA) security services beat peaceful demonstrators, and arbitrarily detained and harassed scores of journalists. Credible allegations of torture committed by the PA’s security services persisted. In Gaza, Hamas committed executions after unfair trials. The authorities permitted some local human rights organizations to operate, but suppressed political dissent, free association, and peaceful assembly.”

<https://www.hrw.org/middle-eastn-africa/israel-palestine> (accessed March 21, 2014).

⁷ See Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *The One State Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Brooklyn, NY and London: Verso Books, 2009) and Mouffe, *Return of the Political* (London: Verso Books, 2005).

⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics* (London: Verso, 2013), 8.

¹⁰ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 9; my emphasis.

¹¹ Democratic theory tends to focus on institutional arrangements first and then considers how to incorporate new populations into that framework. Ian Shapiro illustrates the propensity for institutional design among democratic theorists when speaking of the need for deliberation among democratic citizens: “Because people cannot really be forced to deliberate, the challenge for democratic institutional designers is to structure the incentives so that people will want to deploy deliberation to minimize domination in the course of their endeavors.” See Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5. While the problem of institutional design is a vexing and important one, it puts the cart before the horse in our present discussion. People must first agree to live in conditions conducive to democratic practices before the latter can be efficaciously engaged in. Marla Brettschneider is closer to our problem when she proposes that “As we engage with the ‘how’ question, of how to get on together in a democracy based on the experiences and insights from the margins, we find that we must reevaluate concepts that are currently seen as core facets of Western democratic thought.” See Brettschneider, *Democratic Theorizing from the Margins* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 199-200.

¹² For example, Michael Walzer argues that deciding who gets to be a member is the first, most important question a polity asks itself. See Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

¹³ See Paul Woodruff, *First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) where she argues that “the right to a place to exercise self-determination does not entail exclusive rule of the bounded territories Israel now claims. Because Palestinians also have legitimate claims to self-determination, certain vital resources, such as water, must be fairly shared, and certain spaces, such as the city of Jerusalem, must also be shared jurisdictions” (262).

¹⁵ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 38.

¹⁶ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 38.

¹⁷ These occur throughout the diaries but are especially pronounced in *The Third Way*. Shehadeh’s account (pp. 51-54) of trying to get a permit to travel to meet the publisher of his book *The West Bank and the Rule of Law* is illustrative. He chronicles the weeks of waiting for paperwork to go through, standing in lines, dealing with bureaucrats, and no guarantee of success. See also Shehadeh’s efforts to get permission for his American wife to live with him in the West Bank in *The Sealed Room*, pp. 10-13.

¹⁸ In *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012), Ariella Azoulay distinguishes the civic imagination from political imagination. The latter is usually “attached to speech, action, creative activity or imagination” and “distinguished from its inverse—‘not political.’” Azoulay argues that civic imagination emerges as the perspective of the engaged spectator, enabling her to take in and address the conditions of citizens and non-citizens alike.

¹⁹ See John Randolph LeBlanc, *Edward Said on the Prospects of Peace in Palestine and Israel* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2013), especially Chapter 1.

²⁰ Edward Said, “Traveling Theory” in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 247.

²¹ See *Sealed Room*, pp. 174-75. See also Mary Elizabeth King, *A Quiet Revolution: The First Palestinian Intifada and Nonviolent Resistance* (New York: Nation Books, 2007).

²² Shehadeh recounts the struggle to get gas masks for Palestinians and the corresponding dangers and inequities in his entries for January 1991 in *Sealed Room*, pp. 65-151.

²³ See *Sealed Room*, pp. 174-75.

²⁴ See Shehadeh's preface to *When the Birds Stopped Singing*, vii-viii.

²⁵ Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries*, 42-43.

²⁶ Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries*, 1-7 is illustrative.

²⁷ See Shehadeh, *Strangers in the House*.

²⁸ Unlike many of his compatriots, Shehadeh has a choice to make where leaving is concerned. Educated at the American University in Beirut and a practicing attorney, Shehadeh could have made his way to Europe or America or even Lebanon instead of remaining where his family had settled after the nakba. See *Strangers in the House*.

²⁹ See Said's work along with Jean Mohr's photography in *After the Last Sky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

³⁰ Suicide bombings generate the same sense of insecurity in otherwise "safe" non-military spaces.

³¹ Shehadeh, *When the Birds Stopped Singing*, 44. These accounts are underscored by the testimonies of Israeli soldiers enforcing the occupation, some of which are compiled in *Our Harsh Logic: Israeli Soldiers' Testimonies from the Occupied Territories: 2000-2010*, compiled by the organization *Breaking the Silence* (New York: Picador, 2012).

³² Shehadeh, *When the Birds Stopped Singing*, 19; my emphasis.

³³ Shehadeh, *Sealed Room*, 44.

³⁴ Shehadeh, *Third Way*, 30: "Road-blocks: West Bankers and residents of the Gaza Strip have blue and white license plates respectively, to single them out from the yellow-plated cars of their Israeli counterparts. On the blue and white plates, on the left-hand side corner, is a Hebrew letter, the first letter of the Hebrew name of the driver's town. Each town's special letter is in a different colour. The license-plates make the job of singling out an Arab driver easy. They are usually automatically stopped and searched at road-blocks, while Israeli drivers are waved through.... Some road-blocks are permanent, in Israel, but mainly in the occupied territories; others are put up for specific purposes. I often think that, unlike many Fedayeen who joint the armed struggle for noble and weighty reasons, if I ever find myself on the other bank of the Jordan River it will be because my luck in getting through road-blocks with my sanity intact has run out."

³⁵ Shehadeh, *Third Way*, 65.

³⁶ Shehadeh, *Third Way*, 65.

³⁷ Shehadeh, *Third Way*, 66; my emphasis.

³⁸ Shehadeh, *Third Way*, 66.

³⁹ At the end of *Sealed Room*, Shehadeh loses his own faith in sumud: “It is difficult now to go back to my sumoud after I’ve renounced it” (159).

⁴⁰ Shehadeh, *Sealed Room*, 119.

⁴¹ Shehadeh, *Sealed Room*, 125.

⁴² Shehadeh, *Sealed Room*, 156.

⁴³ Shehadeh, *Sealed Room*, 156-57.

⁴⁴ Shehadeh, *Sealed Room*, 78.

⁴⁵ See Shehadeh, *Strangers in the House*.

⁴⁶ Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries*, 187.

⁴⁷ See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1973), especially “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” 267-302. See also the neo-Kantian argument for human rights in Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*.

⁴⁹ The image of the unoppressive city in Iris Young is a tremendously appealing one for a shared political space. See Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, “Chapter 8: City Life and Difference.”

⁵⁰ Said, *Humanism*, 46.

⁵¹ Said, *Humanism*, 140.