

Hues of Protest: Graffiti and Street Art in Beirut

Mortada Haidar

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Mortada.haidar@uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

Nadine Sinno's *A War of Colors*, a study of street art and graffiti in postwar Beirut, is the first of its kind. Drawing on Bakhtinian concepts and theories of embodiment to complement her field work in Beirut, Sinno situates her work within the existing scholarship on visual culture in the Arab world. The book focuses on how the streets of Beirut are a space for protest, the reclaiming of space, and a dialogical conversation with the city and its components. The book succeeds in many of its endeavors, but falls short in its simplistic representation of the complex socio-political landscape of post-war Beirut.

Schattierungen des Protests. Graffiti und Straßenkunst in Beirut

German Abstract:

Nadine Sinno's *A War of Colors*, eine Studie über Straßenkunst und Graffiti im Beirut der Nachkriegszeit, ist die erste ihrer Art. Sinno stützt sich auf Bachtins Konzepte und Theorien der Verkörperung, um ihre Feldforschung in Beirut zu ergänzen, und ordnet ihre Arbeit in die bestehende Forschung zur visuellen Kultur in der arabischen Welt ein. Das Buch konzentriert sich darauf, wie die Straßen von Beirut ein Ort des Protests, der Rückeroberung von Raum und der dialogischen Konversation mit der Stadt und ihren Bestandteilen sind. Das Buch ist in vielen seiner Bemühungen erfolgreich, scheitert aber an seiner vereinfachenden Darstellung der komplexen sozio-politischen Landschaft des Nachkriegs-Beirut.

How to cite:

Haidar, Mortada: "Hues of Protest: Graffiti and Street Art in Beirut [Review of: Sinno, Nadine: *A War of Colors*. Graffiti and Street Art in Postwar Beirut. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024.]" In: KULT_online 70 (2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2024.1490>



Hues of Protest: Graffiti and Street Art in Beirut

Mortada Haidar

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Sinno, Nadine: *A War of Colors. Graffiti and Street Art in Postwar Beirut*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024. 323 Seiten, 51 EUR. ISBN: 978-1-4773-2874-3.

Post-war Beirut is a landscape of contrasts, as Nadine Sinno's study of street art and graffiti in the Lebanese capital reveals. Her survey of the streets of Beirut looks at how the efforts of graffiti and street artists beautify the city and resist Lebanon's sectarian politics. One such example is the graffiti "To be free or not to be" (Figures 1.22 and 1.23, p. 65–66) by Ashekman, which Sinno explores not only in terms of its meaning but also in terms of its public's reception. The artwork was removed by the government on the grounds that it was political, but the ensuing backlash led to an apology from the city's mayor and an invitation to repaint the mural in the same location as before. Sinno analyzes not only the artwork itself, but also the social and political context of the graffiti, and the impact of such work on Beirut.

For this study, Sinno combines a variety of theoretical approaches, drawing in particular on Bakhtinian concepts and various theories of embodiment, as well as existing research on street art and graffiti by scholars of the global south. It is worth noting, however, that as mentioned at the end of the book, the author has only studied selected areas of Beirut, such as Hamra, which are close to the Downtown area of the city. This is crucial to note as these districts are known for their multiplicity and lack of homogenous political or sectarian identity, allowing for a larger freedom of expression. Sinno is excellent in her thorough analysis of graffiti and street art, but tends to provide too many contexts and references that sometimes stifle her own voice.

The book is divided into six chapters, including an introduction and an "inconclusion" as the final chapter. Sinno is reluctant "to end the book with a conventional conclusion" because of the "unfinalizability of graffiti" (p. 229). In her view, there is no conclusion because graffiti is never final and the streets of Beirut continue to be shaped by it. Each chapter approaches the

process of graffiti making from a different perspective, whether it is enriching the visual culture of the city, breaking social taboos, or bringing environmental issues in the country to the fore, with the common denominator being the role of graffiti in presenting and establishing counter-narratives in post-war Lebanon. The main concern of the book is how graffiti and street art attempt to ‘reclaim space’ in post-war Beirut, or as Sinno puts it herself: “I explore the various ways by which graffiti and street art reclaim and transform the cityscape, commemorate cultural icons, voice feminist and LGBTQ+ concerns, protest political corruption and environmental violence, and animate resistance” (p. 14).

It is in this aim that the book’s main strengths and weaknesses lie. In her analysis of the various works of street art and graffiti, Sinno shows a remarkable depth of knowledge of Lebanese culture and society. For example, as discussed in chapters 1 and 2, Sinno introduces the reader to the vibrant world of cultural references in Lebanon, from local icons such as Fairuz and Sabah (p. 24) to Japanese anime characters such as Grendizer (p. 44). The graffiti featured in this chapter engage in local and international discourse, attempting to replace sectarian and post-war graffiti with more unifying and artistic works. The main argument in these chapters is how graffiti artists seek to replace the sectarian visual culture of post-war Lebanon with Lebanese and international cultural icons, both as a way to ‘beautify’ the city and to resist the overwhelmingly sectarian atmosphere of the country. Sinno’s interviews with two artists, Ashekman and Yazan Halawani, add to the depth of her work, as they explain their own vision of the city and the motivations behind their work.

However, by positing that these works are primarily anti-establishment, she misses some of the more important nuances of post-war Lebanon. The book’s explanation of post-war Lebanon divides the country into two factions: ‘the people’ and ‘the government.’ This is understandable from the perspective of the book, which deals almost exclusively with activists and artists who oppose the government. However, this narrative simplifies the complex reality of post-war Lebanon and the place of sectarianism in it. A case in point is chapter 3, where the author describes the Lebanese as “complacent” (p. 135). But a look at the street art and graffiti in Beirut shows that support for the sectarian system is found amongst

the people. Sinno mentions this fact in chapter 5, which discusses pro and anti-Syrian regime graffiti, an issue that is often divided along sectarian lines.

The book's strengths lie in its analysis of the street art, with only one example that could have been misinterpreted (p. 133) due to the linguistic play of the stencil itself. The stencil says "Mukāfahat al- sha'b" which Sinno translates to "The struggle of the people" (p. 133) However, it is likely that the stencil is mocking the riot police, known in Lebanon as *mukāfahat al-shaghab*. The difference in Arabic between the word *sha'b* (people) and *shaghab* (riot) is one letter, made distinct by the addition of a dot (شعب \ شغب). Here *mukāfahat* does not mean struggle, but rather combatting, altering the meaning from combatting riots to combatting the people. The author also shows excellent insight into the cultural background and underpinnings of the art analyzed, which enriches the book and its content. One of the more insightful aspects of Sinno's work is her focus on the dialogical nature of the art, linking it to the city and the people of Beirut. The street art and graffiti present in Beirut are not merely decorative. On the contrary, they are in conversation with each other, with the citizens, and with the state. As seen in chapters 1 and 4, some of the artists themselves have to negotiate with law enforcement and state actors in order to get their art on the streets of Beirut. A prominent example is the riot police, who, according to one of the artists interviewed in the book "stood for 2 hours with his flashlight helping me while I painted" (p. 189).

The book is an important study of the streets of Beirut. It makes it possible for the uninitiated to understand the make-up of the streets of Beirut, even if it has some gaps to fill in regarding the complexities of the country and the extremely tangled history of the city. It is hoped that this book will pave the way for a keen interest in the place and space of Beirut, as seen through the impact of its citizens and residents on the city in the era of post-war reconstruction. The focus of the book is on the city's anti-government and anti-sectarian art of the city, but it is also worth noting the presence of sectarian and pro-government graffiti in the city, because the city population is not a homogenous entity; it is made up of supporters and detractors of the state, which exercises its control over the streets of Beirut in an uneven and somewhat ambiguous manner, and struggles with the complexities of the sectarian

system it represents. This book will appeal to anyone interested in street art, urban space and place, and memory in post-war societies.