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Soundtracks of War: contesting the temporal  
and experiential boundaries of war ethnography

– Muzna Al-Masri –

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Please send correspondences to:

Muzna Al-Masri

Independent consultant and researcher

[muznamasri@gmail.com](mailto:muznamasri@gmail.com)

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Arab Council for the Social Sciences  
Alamuddine Building, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
John Kennedy Street, Ras Beirut  
Beirut, Lebanon  
00961-1-370214  
[info@theacss.org](mailto:info@theacss.org) | [www.theacss.org](http://www.theacss.org)

## **Soundtracks of war: contesting the temporal and experiential boundaries of war ethnography<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the value of attention to sensory experiences in the study of conflict and war, and in particular those of the ethnographer herself when she has previously lived through war and violence. It is at once an invitation for greater sensitivity to auditory and olfactory dimensions in researching violence and a critical questioning of the perception of a limited temporality in the fieldwork experience. Living through war involves repeated encounters with violence and a prolonged 'living-in' its shadow. Every encounter with violence bridges different temporalities: the present moment, memories of past violence and concerns about their recurrence in the future, all create a sense of we-ness among subjects. The lived experience of war is cumulative; it etches its marks on its subjects' souls and bodies, its impact varying as its subjects go through different life stages. It is also intergenerational as the individual experience of violence is often closely tied to the experiences of past generations and expectations for future generations.

### **Keywords:**

Sensory methods; auto-ethnography; conflict and war; violence, Lebanon; living-in

### **The multi sensorial and the lived experience of war**

Attention to the sensory in ethnographic research has achieved ample recognition, enough to allow for a claim of a 'sensual turn' in anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s (Howes 2003, 28). This article emphasizes the benefit of attention to sensory experiences in the study of conflict and war, in particular those of the ethnographer herself when she had lived through war and violence before embarking on fieldwork. It is at once an invitation for greater sensitivity to auditory and olfactory dimensions in researching violence and a critical questioning of the perception of a limited temporality in the fieldwork experience.

Methodical attention to the sensory, I argue, is one of the ways that can help in capturing the experience of 'living-in' violence (Moghnieh 2017). I focus on the auditory and olfactory experiences in addition to the textual and analytical investigation of the fieldwork experience, with the intention of producing more nuanced accounts that would be 'more faithful to the realities of the field' (Stoller 1989, 9). Violence gains much of its potency because of its spectacular nature and ability to induce fear once encountered (Riches 1986). Giving due attention to sensory experience, and the feelings, memories and concerns it evokes, allows for an understanding of how people process and accumulate – individually and collectively – these violent spectacles.

This article is largely auto-ethnographic (Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner 2011). It serves as an attempt to locate the accumulated and embodied experiences affecting my reading of the field site in times of crisis. The reflection is constructed around a series of ethnographic vignettes that discuss the sensory experience of war and its intersection with the temporal. Living through war or protracted conflict by necessity involves both repeated encounters with violence and a prolonged 'living-in' its shadows. Every encounter with violence bridges different temporalities; the present moment and fear induced with memories of past violence on the one hand, and concerns about their recurrence in the future, on the other. That is, no encounter is an isolated occurrence, for it leaves its mark on the souls and bodies of those subjected to it and tints similar experiences in the future.

This is not to privilege the experience of the ethnographer, but rather to use her own experience as a starting point for further reflection. This is also not to say that an anthropologist's experience - even if she belongs to the context she is studying – resembles or summarizes the experiences of her

informants. Nevertheless, I argue that there is a kind of sharedness in experiences of war regardless of the nature of direct personal encounters with war and violence. These experiences are 'shaped by each society's particular history and myths of collective identity and are energized by sedimented memories of threats to the collectivity' (Coronil and Skurski 1991, 289). Yet, they have facets that transcend national and political boundaries. I have found that they are shared, for example, with colleagues from Serbia or Ireland who lived through civil wars but have never visited Lebanon. Therefore, this is not a discussion of indigeneity, whereby an 'insider' researcher is more attuned to war 'culturally,' but a question of having lived through repeated experiences of war and violence, such that any encounter with violence is incorporated as part of the embodied cumulative sensory dispositions related to living in war.

Methodologically, this means rendering sensory experiences more explicit and examining their cultural and shared dimensions analytically. I follow here what Hage calls 'ethnographic vacillation' (Hage 2010), a state of being produced by the ethnographic navigation between *participation* – and in his case the emotions attached to that participation - on the one hand, and *observation*, and subjecting emotions to the analytical order on the other. I suggest to pay further attention to the researcher's sensory experiences, while at the same time continuously subjecting them to analysis and interrogating the sharedness of such experiences among research participants.

In order to get a deeper understanding of the contours of sensory experience and the particularities of the lived experience of war, I found it useful to juxtapose my own experience with that of friends who have not shared the experience of war. Peirano asserts that anthropology is about difference, difference which is inherently comparative (Peirano 2009, 57–58). Anthropologists historically studied the 'other', and though they have accepted a less exotic other as they shifted to research at home and in urban areas and as more native anthropologists joined their ranks, among other things, the comparative examination of difference is still central to the anthropological craft. In this article, I attempt to understand my research community and my own experience by comparing it to the different – the 'other' – experience of friends who did not live through similar experiences of war and violence. Alterity, anthropology's key identifier, is still central to my exploration in this article, but as a tool to understanding the familiar rather than the exotic.

Attention to direct encounters with seemingly extraordinary moments of violence does not contradict the mundane nature of political conflict for people living in areas of protracted violence

(Kelly 2008; Hermez 2012). Such attention allows us a close look at the sensory dimensions of the lived event and the ways in which it ‘attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary’ (Das 2007, 1). I am exploring here how those ‘events’ of violence, their memory, and embodied experiences, continue to cohabit with the everyday. This is in part why I predominantly use the term ‘war’ rather than ‘violence’ or ‘conflict.’ Besides the observation that most of my informant have rarely ever used the term ‘violence’ in talking about their own experiences of war but rather the Arabic word for war, ‘*ḥarb*’ – or ‘*al-ḥarb*’ (the war) – the term war better encapsulates both the experience of violence and conflict and their protracted everyday nature.

Highlighting the protracted, everyday nature of the lived experience of war should not be understood as a description of an ‘essence’ or a ‘definition’ of war nor does it negate the multiplicity and ambiguities of war experiences. Reflecting on what he chooses to call ‘Lebanon’s war’, Hermez illustrates the impossibility of having a ‘monolithic definition or bounded meaning’ of war (2017: 23). My focus in this article lies on the auditory and olfactory because they triggered the reflection on, and remembering of, my own personal experiences of war. I then make use of this personal reflection, analytically and comparatively. What does my embodied reaction tell me about the experience of living in war in Lebanon, and through war more generally and when does this echo the experiences of my interlocutors in the field? As I compare this with the experience of my friend and flatmate at the time, who has had encounters with the Israeli military in Palestine - and then another six week ‘encounter’ that we endure together – I am offered the chance to highlight aspects of what living in protracted wars entails.

Visual methods have always had their place in anthropology; the auditory has had its space in ethnographic film too. Nevertheless, the literature has brought to the fore a hierarchy of the senses and the epistemologically privileged position of the visual compared with sound, smell, and taste (Bendix 2000; Bull and Back 2003). Berendt (1992), for example, argues that the visual limits our ability to consider the human experience and calls for a ‘democracy of the senses.’ In this article I understate the value of the visual largely because the media portrayal of violence and war has filled our visual repertoire with images that often misrepresent our own lived experiences of war. The media construction and projection of war, which we are exposed to daily, whether through images of destruction and dead bodies or sanitized images of state-sponsored violence, taints our experience when faced with death and destruction in real life. As Feldman argues, the depictive grammar of

mass media 'is an apparatus of internal and external perceptual colonization that disseminates and legitimizes particular sensorial dispositions over others' (Feldman 1994, 305). Relying on the visual to understand the experience of violence is thus a difficult endeavour that requires deconstructing the impact of the media image, whereas the auditory and the olfactory remain less affected by this media inculcation.

### **Boisterous boys and fearing the recurrence of war**

Vignette 1: February 2008

■■ It is Saturday night, during the first week of February 2008. Saad Hariri, leader of the Future Movement and the March 14 political coalition, is on TV mobilising his followers to join the demonstration planned to take place a few days later in the central Martyrs' Square. As has been the custom since 2005, huge demonstrations are planned for February 14 to commemorate the third anniversary of the assassination of the young political leader's father, former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

*I am at home waiting to listen to the televised speech by the rising political leader. Less than 100 meters away, I can hear gunshots fired continuously into the air by supporters celebrating their leader's on-screen appearance: a practice that is becoming a standard accompaniment to every speech of every Lebanese political leader. ■■*

Heavy firing continues after the speech finishes, its sound oppressing the neighbourhood residents who have endured many years of civil war. For them, the sound of bullets and fireworks in Beirut must reawaken the memories and fears of many past wars. I hear the sounds immediately at this moment as I remember sounds that linger in my memory from the 15-year Lebanese Civil War, which ended in 1990. On this February night, I hear the cacophonous rhythmic firing and catch the smell of gunpowder. I feel the acuteness of the silence of everything but the bullets once the firing starts, and I am aware of the increase in my heart rate. All my other senses join in the listening, and I hear the bullets not through my ears alone, but through my whole body.

The account above is based on field notes written in 2008 while I was doing my doctoral field research in Beirut in the years 2008-2010. Although my research was not focused on the lived experience of conflict and violence – but rather on the negotiation and construction of political elites



– the tense local political situation and repeated incidents of violence forced the themes of conflict and violence onto my research. My research community was that of the Nejme Sports Club, Lebanon's most popular football club, which was struggling with internal conflict and schisms that reflected a broader political crisis in the country. It was a particularly tense period politically. Following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, deep divisions split major political players into two sharply opposed camps known as the March 8 and March 14 alliances. Large followings took to the street in the hundreds of thousands to show support for one camp or the other since their inception. During this period, street fights, car bombings and assassinations were regular occurrences. Having lived in Lebanon for many years before fieldwork and through a large part of the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) during my childhood, this was not the first time I had experienced the country in turmoil.

My reflection on the above experience is largely based on juxtaposing it with that of my friend, Layla. My flatmate at the time, Layla is of Arab origin but grew up in Europe. Layla was my same age, of a relatively similar economic background, she knew the local culture in Lebanon well, spoke Arabic and worked in a professional field similar to mine. Both of us were not of Lebanese origin and both have lived in different Arab countries and in Europe, and thus it was not easy to bestow the 'insider' or 'outsider' status on either of us. The main difference that could benefit the juxtaposing of our experiences was that I lived in Beirut during the civil war, while she didn't. She had not accumulated the knowledge of the prolonged lived experience of war that many in my generation had growing up during the Lebanese Civil War. Although she was at home with me in the episode that the vignette describes above, and while she became irritated by the loudness of the shooting and the crude display of masculinity, she was not burdened by the visceral fear of the possibility of a return to civil war.

We interpreted the sounds we heard together differently. For me, they carried cultural and personal meanings that I could understand, interpret and work with. For me the sounds of shooting were the manifestations of the battle of control over the urban space of Beirut, and I felt the threat of an imminent war and the possibility of daily life becoming constrained by the whims of young men in arms.

This fear was attached to several temporal moments at once. The present moment recalled my own past experience of living through civil war as a child and knowing what it means to have warring men

on the street. As Tonkiss asserts, hearing ‘involves a special relationship to remembering, [...]. The past comes to us in the most unbidden, immediate and sensuous forms’ (Tonkiss 2003, 307). My fear, however, was not merely a traumatic recollection of what had passed, but rather a concern about the possibilities for the future and a fear that I would have to relive a state of war should it erupt in Lebanon again.

This fear, I noted was shared with many friends from a similar war generation. Although not the theme of my research, I wrote in my field notes then how many of my research participants and myself – having lived through several cycles of war, not least the Lebanese Civil War – speculated if and when a new civil war would erupt. Friends wondered which political camp would control our neighbourhoods, and – in the most dreaded of scenarios – if any of our houses would fall on the demarcation lines. Such an exploration was not ours alone, but found resonance in newspaper articles and films produced in that period.<sup>2</sup>

Hermez discusses a similar process of anticipation of war in Lebanon that brings together three temporal moments of past, present, and future. In his argument, it is ‘anticipation that causes us to remember’ and causes the ordinary to become inflicted with violence and as such, ‘war remains constantly present as a structuring force in social life’ (Hermez 2012, 330). In contrast to what Hermez (2012) suggests, it could be remembering, prompted by the cues in our surrounding, that causes anticipation of war. I argue that there is a ‘learnt’ aspect to anticipation of war. One built on knowledge accumulated from past-lived experience of war and violence of those who lived through war, which allows for a reading of the cues of possible escalation in the context they live in.

As someone who lived through the Civil War and conducted daily – often unspoken – analysis of the intricate context and its dynamics, I became aware of the depth and distinctiveness of such analysis and recognised my accumulated knowledge about war largely through juxtaposing it with the experiences that others, such as Layla, lacked.

We who had such experience had our theories of the workings of war. We listened to and followed the ever-escalating political discourses and accusations by different political groups and took cues from seemingly mundane and insignificant events and interactions: what posters were displayed and where? How long was that poster displayed before any of the residents objected and how was their objection voiced and reacted to? How was the relationship between the neighbour living on the first

floor, who supports one political group, and the neighbour on the fourth floor, who supports the other? Above all, we took cues from the knots in our stomachs and insomniac nights – from this visceral fear that was induced by the continuous reading of implicit cues of inaudible war drums.

Bull and Back argue that ‘it may be that within the registers of aural culture that memories are carried’ (Bull and Back 2003, 13). In the case of Lebanon, that register of aural culture extends beyond music and song to a soundscape of bombs and bullets. Indeed, the sounds of bullets and bombs were, to a large extent, the soundtrack of my childhood. Following Adorno, Bull and Back assert that ‘sounds are embedded with both cultural and personal meanings; sounds do not come at us merely raw’ (Bull and Back 2003, 9). Experimenting with this I have played a recording of gun shots to several friends on different occasions and asked what it is they hear, and the answer I often got from those who lived in and through the Civil War was that they were hearing ‘war,’ rather than the ‘sounds of shooting’ as others answered. Those who experienced war attached different interpretive registers to the sounds of shooting and thus gave an ‘interpretive’ account of the sound linked to war, whereas those who did not live in and through war gave a largely ‘descriptive’ account.

This process of interpreting sound or ‘agile listening,’ which involves ‘attuning our ears to listen again to the multiple layers of meaning potentially embedded in the same sound’ (Bull and Back 2003, 3), is a skill that anthropologists can learn to hone<sup>3</sup>. Personally, my training as a visual anthropologist and experiments with filmmaking helped in increasing my awareness of sound and reflection on its meaning. As I started field research, I experimented with filming and reflected on what sounds I needed to capture. In one instance for example, while recording for a film, the voices of players shouting at each other while competing for the national cup as it echoed in an empty stadium without being overwhelmed by the cheers and chants, conveyed the absence of the fans much better than the sight of empty stadiums. What is needed is not a fundamental change to the practice of participant observation, but an active sensory participation and reflection on the sensory experience.

### **A war to a different soundtrack**

Vignette II: Summer 2006

■■ *Layla and I discuss the sounds of the airplanes above. The buzzing sound of a drone is new to me. This is new technology that the Israelis are developing and using for the first time*

*for targeted killing.<sup>4</sup> I do know, however, the sounds of other aeroplanes. I explain to her how to differentiate between the sound of an aeroplane on an exploratory mission and that of an aeroplane as it dips low to drop a bomb. I am surprised that I have this knowledge in me. I am not even sure that this knowledge is accurate. Then I remember the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982 and the visit by a family friend who lived in a neighbourhood where shelling was occurring daily. I was a child then and was alerted by his voice screaming 'aeroplane raid!' ('ghara'), mere seconds before a shell dropped over a nearby building. ■■*

The above vignette and the one in the following section relate to the thirty-three day Israeli war on Lebanon, widely known as the 2006 July War, which I lived in and through only eighteen months prior to starting my fieldwork. The war caused 1,100 deaths, 4,000 injuries, and the temporary displacement of over one million Lebanese, and left huge destruction behind (Harbi 2014). As an activist and an employee of a human rights organization at the time, I filmed and conducted many interviews with individuals who lost family members and friends, and whose houses were destroyed. I visited most of the destroyed villages in the South of Lebanon, where I had previously worked for a number of years around a decade earlier. I also kept a personal diary as well as a blog, and contributed some of this documentation to international websites covering the war.

The wars with Israel had a particular 'soundtrack'. No firing shots were heard, only the sound of aeroplanes surveying and bombing, and the loud explosion of missiles. Layla, who had lived in Palestine for a few years during the second Intifada, somewhat knew these sounds. Under the subheading, 'The bombardment only sounds nearby' in a diary published during the 2006 war, she wrote:

*In the night we meet again at Baromètre. From there we can hear the bombardment of the suburbs. One of the explosions sounds as if it had happened around the corner. A girl at a table jumps up and circles around herself in panic. Muzna comforts me. 'It sounds very close, because it was a rocket fired from a war ship. After a while you will be able to distinguish the sounds.' Some of these war sounds are still buried in my memories of Palestine. [...] When they hit, the heart stops for a second. And the brain automatically spits the sentence: 'We will all die.' An irrational thought, because most of the time I was at a safe distance. But my brain would repeat this fixed idea all the time, and wouldn't be able to control it. (Al-Zubaidi 2006)*

Layla writes of an audio-induced fear of yet another kind, fear felt at the present moment, when the 'heart stops for a second,' and of the possibility of death then and there. This was different from the fear I felt when listening to the sounds of bullets in the first vignette, when I had no concern for my physical safety.

Stoller argues that 'cultural memories are embedded in the smells, sounds, and sights' (Stoller 1997, 65). He asserts that 'the body is a major repository of cultural memories' (Stoller 1997, 57). Bendix (2000), however, questions the extent to which sensual perception is actually culturally moulded, and contends, following Greg Urban (1991), that sensory experiences are techniques inscribed in the body even before they are named or become part of consciousness. Nevertheless, Bendix argues that the auditory processes in particular, and I add the olfactory, are not as easily and immediately subjected to processes of social ordering. She proposes, therefore, that we probe the 'contours of sensory perception and reception and seek to understand the transitions between the individual, cultural and transcultural dimensions' (Bendix 2000, 41).

Despite our different interpretations, the sounds of war invited both in Layla and myself not only the memory of past experiences of war, but also the sense that the impact of this is collective. The two of us, along with the family friend mentioned in the vignette and the panicked girl in Baromètre who Layla recalled, are subject to the similar possibility of death. Layla in her diary uses the first person pronoun in the plural, 'we,' not the singular 'I.' In early writings on these experiences, I too only wrote using the plural pronoun. Defining that collective to which the pronoun refers was not easy though. Bull and Back (2003, 6) propose that 'sound connects us in ways that vision does not' and argue for the existence of a state of 'we-ness' or 'being with,' which is inherent to experiencing sound.<sup>5</sup>

This argument alone does not suffice to explain how sounds of war forge a collective. I argue that the state of we-ness, though characteristic of the auditory experience, extends beyond sound and is at the heart of some of the lived experiences of conflict and war. We-ness is not limited to the shared nature of sound only but also includes embodied memories connected to past auditory experiences. When I reflect on doing research in Beirut during and after the July War, the image that comes to my mind is one of an aeroplane that is about to crash: Passengers are brought together by feelings of insecurity, constitute a sort of collective, albeit a temporary one, with little besides the plane trip to connect them. The fear itself is shared, for everyone asks themselves 'what will happen to us?'

knowing that individual survival is hardly possible. Unlike being on a plane where the members and boundaries of the collective are clearly limited within the bounds of the airplane cabin, the collective in Beirut is difficult to define. Yet, what was clear in the July War was that, whoever the collective was, it was bound to be affected by this war, whether or not it targeted oneself or one's family. Ultimately, one's community would be affected, and so would one's spaces of memory and expectations of the future.

Living through war, therefore, is at once an individual and a collective experience; an experience inscribed through the encounters with violence on the bodies of those who lived in war. Yet that closeness to war and its experiences does not always mean consciously knowing what war entails, particularly since that knowledge continues to be inscribed in ways that have escaped our cognitive awareness.

My aim from this discussion is to invite an appreciation of the subject position of the researcher beyond the questions of indigeneity, positionality's relational aspects (Crossa 2012), and 'access' or 'role in the field' (Altorki and El-Solh 1988). Doing research in one's own community – and possibly other communities we have attachments to - interrogates fieldwork as a time-bound experience with clear start and end dates. The actual temporality of research touches on both the past (our memories and lived experiences in a place) and the future (our concern for what might become of a place and its people). The self of the researcher can thus be discussed not just in reference to the researcher's national or ethnic origins, or their knowledge of the language and culture of the community. Their gained insider status and/or perspectives that could affect their research are rather constituted in accumulated memories and life experiences, as well as future concerns.

Here an ethnographer's methodical attentiveness to sensory experiences, particularly when juxtaposed with the experience of the 'other' or the 'alter' – as with my relationship with Layla – or when given a chance to have a break or distance from living through war, allows this temporality to come to the surface. Such comparison, between one's experience and another's or between a present and past aids a researcher's *analysis*, in the practice of 'ethnographic vacillation' between participation/emotions and observation/analysis - proposed by Hage and described earlier. Here again it is an exploration of difference, but not to study the 'exotic other' but the embodied experience of the self.

## Smelling in the time of death

Vignette III: Summer 2006

■ ■ *I am on a research mission in the South of Lebanon during a two-day ceasefire. I receive a call asking me to search for the mother of a friend in a nearby village. The house is half-destroyed and there are no traces of the woman whose whereabouts are still unknown. My colleague and I contemplate the possibility of her being under the rubble, and decide to sniff through the destroyed segment of the house for the smell of a dead body. I had smelt death before. This was the first time, however, that I am searching for the smell, that I am actively engaging it. In past experiences, the smell of death had come to me, surrounding me against my will. I was a child then. Soon after the Israeli attacks end, I talk to my father about the experience of war. I reflect on witnessing three such wars in the three decades of my life. I tell my father that it was one war for every decade of my life. My father is in his sixties. He says it has been the same for him: one Israeli war for every decade of his life. ■ ■*

Smell is far from absent in known depictions of the lived experience of war. Syrian novelist Khaled Khalifeh's recent book, *Death is Hard Work*, narrates the experience of three siblings enveloped by the smell of their father's dead body as they transport it through Syria's war-torn landscape to bury it in their hometown (Khalifa 2016). Similarly, Lebanese director Maher Abi Samra (Abi Samra 2007) chooses the title, *Merely a Smell*, for his short black and white film produced about the 2006 July War. One review described how the film manages to 'distil war to its basics,' and aptly laments the inability of 'film' as a medium to convey smell (Quilty 2007).

Yet, assuming we have managed through new developments in cinema to add the olfactory experience to a film projection, a one-off short encounter with the smell of death is far from evoking the full experience of being in war. Returning from the field visit I describe in the vignette, the act of trying to sniff through a destroyed space in search of death had the most profound impact on me. It was a loss of innocence, as if I had gone through a rite of passage from being a child subjected to war to an adult who engages the aftermath of violence face-to-face. As with the auditory experience, my experience of smell is not free from my past-accumulated experiences of living-in war. I had smelled death before as a child, when it enveloped the city of Beirut after the Sabra and Chatila massacres of 1982. I had smelled it also just 24 hours before the incident described in the vignette, when I visited

the site of a recent bombing in the village of Srifra, where bodies had not yet been recovered from under the rubble. In searching for the smell of a dead body, I was engaging war not as a victim, the way I mostly experienced it as a child, but as an adult navigating her way through it.

Still, a child smelling death is not just different from an adult smelling death. After having experienced it as a child has, this smell of death has another set of meanings attached to it in adulthood, ones that are embedded in accumulated experiences of living through war, seeing adults – and role models – engage war and assuming that their knowledge has been passed on. Standing on the remains of my friend's house, I found myself expecting my own body to make use of this accumulated experience, and to discern whether a corpse lies under the rubble. My own expectation of myself appeared instinctive at the time, 'This is how I have seen it done – I think!' This assumed familiarity – the willingness to engage war and death with such parity – is a product of experiencing war at various stages of my life.

Nordstrom has long argued that violence 'isn't a passing phenomenon that momentarily challenges a stable system, leaving a scar but no lasting effects after it has passed. Violence becomes a determining fact in shaping reality as people will know it in the future' (2004, p. 226). Reflecting on my experience of searching through the rubble for the smell of a dead body and my conversation with my father brings to the surface how war shapes reality and the intergenerational nature of the way people experience war. My father's assertion that he has lived through one war with Israel for every decade of his life, and my expectation that I too might continue in his path to experience similar wars for decades to come, expands the temporal dimension of war beyond my own lifetime. War is part of the legacy – and burden – I have inherited from my parents. I have heard them speak of experiences of living in war and violence as milestones in my family's history and I grew up inhabiting a space where my own lived experience resembled theirs. I found myself wondering during the 2006 July War about my mother's age when she lived through the 1982 Israeli siege and invasion of Beirut, and comparing what I recalled of her then to who I was now (Al-Masri 2006). In today's troubled time, and as I continue to live in a space of protracted conflict, I am dismayed by the knowledge that I will pass this inheritance on to my children. In congratulating friends who had children in the past few years I, as many like me, extend a wish that the newborn will see better days. These are not the traditional Arabic compliments offered to new parents, for we might once have wished the babies good health or for them to enjoy their parents' love and prosperity as they grow



up. Instead, we now welcome them with the wish that the prospect of war, which we know to be real, will not materialise in their lifetime.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I analysed some of my auditory and olfactory experiences of living in war. Based on such analysis, I contested the temporal boundaries of the fieldwork experience, in as much as the boundaries of the lived experience of war are contested. If the sensory evokes knowledge of the experience of war retained in my memory, and if that knowledge allows for a deeper understanding of the texture of the lived experience of conflict and violence, then at what point in time should I claim that fieldwork truly began, particularly given that I am bound to invoke that remembered knowledge? More importantly, the fear of a looming war attaches the fieldwork experience to a time in the future. This fear, again, is not about personal safety but about possible fundamental changes in the spaces one inhabits and the prospects of life within them. For the researcher studying their own society, having at once lived through war in the past and being concerned about the possibility of its re-emergence in the future, three temporalities co-exist in every encounter with direct violence. The questioning of the temporal boundaries of fieldwork opens up another reflection on subject position. I argued that our reflective attention should take note not only of the relationships between the researcher and the 'researched' places, people and their cultures, but also the experiences that we are researching. Attention to the cumulative experience of living in war – be it one's own or another context – deepens a researcher's ability to discern war as a condition of living rather than an encountered event. In ethnographic practice, I advocated 'ethnographic vacillation' (Hage 2010) between the researcher's sensory experiences and their analysis of that experience and its sharedness among research participants.

I also described how the experience of war is cumulative, collective and intergenerational. As a researcher, I study war and know through a reflection of my sensory experiences that war for those of us who lived in it is carried within us and has etched its marks on our souls and bodies, and that it colours our future expectations and anxieties. I know that I have inherited it and fear the prospect of passing it on to my children and thus I am driven by a particular sense of urgency to demystify and understand it.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A longer version of this paper was published in *Contemporary Levant* 2 (1): 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2017.1322206>.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Abi Samra's film, (Abi Samra 2010) *We Were Communists* (2010), where in one scene, friends who were once fighters try to figure out where future demarcation lines will appear on Beirut's map. In a commentary, (Ghaddar 2008) Ghaddar (2008) asserts that fears of return to civil war – the indices for which are present – is justified, but argues that the Lebanese have learnt their lessons from the Civil War and are bound not to repeat it.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Pink's *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (Pink 2015) provides a good overview and guide to the researcher's practice of sensory ethnography.

<sup>4</sup> The sound of the drone was unfamiliar to most before the 2006 July War, when it gained its local nickname, *Imm [Umm] Kamel*. The name, which literally means 'the mother of Kamel,' plays on the way a woman in Lebanon is often called after the name of her eldest son and on the way the letters MK (possibly short for MikroKopter, an unmanned aerial vehicle) sound for an Arab-speaker when pronounced in French.

<sup>5</sup> Caution is necessary when discussing essential characteristics of sensory experiences, particularly with the constant technological developments forcing new ways of engaging the senses. For example, and though sound creates connections, commuters regularly use headphones in a way of creating solitude (Bull 2000), and the auto play function of videos on a Facebook timeline forces us to see, before we can close our eyes and along with thousands on social media, a visual representation that creates a collective of the viewers despite them never physically meeting.

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