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Sensory reverberations: rethinking the temporal and experiential boundaries of war ethnography

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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; encountering

A multi sensorial narrative 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, p. 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. I focus on the auditory and olfactory experiences in addition to the textual and intellectualized investigation of the fieldwork experience, with the intention of producing more nuanced accounts that would be 'more faithful to the realities of the field—accounts which will then be more, rather than less, scientific' (Stoller, 1989, p. 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.

Exercising 'critical self-awareness' (Kanafani & Sawaf, 2017) of my own experiences allows me to bridge the disconnect between 'living-in' and 'encountering' violence (see Moghnieh, 2017). Living through war or protracted conflict by necessity involves repeated encounters with violence and a

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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. Indeed, that lived-in experience is a cumulative one, and its impact varies as its subjects go through different life stages. It is also intergenerational, for the violence one lives through today is neither separate from the experiences of one's own parents nor can its possibility be dismissed when thinking of one's children.

This article is largely auto-ethnographic (Ellis *et al.,* 2011). It serves as an attempt to locate the accumulated and embodied experiences affecting my reading of the fieldsite in times of crisis. My reflections are constructed around a series of ethnographic vignettes that discuss the sensory experience of war and its intersection with the temporal. I use the personal and sensory to explore the long-term nature of the lived experience of war in order to understand the experiences of my research participants. 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. War marks us in many ways. Specific encounters or events of war might shape the imprints they leave, be they the loss of a loved one, the destruction of a home, displacement or even life-giving experiences like compassion and solidarity. 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 & Skurski, 1991, p. 289). Yet, they have shared facets that transcend national and political boundaries. For example, my experiences resonate with colleagues from Serbia or Ireland who have 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.

Subsequently, what I am claiming is that reflection on my own experience of living in war over many years, coupled with attention to the auditory and olfactory side of that experience, allows me to unpack the cumulative, collective, sensory nature of living in war more broadly. I engage in that reflection not only as a way of describing my positionality as an ethnographer, the 'who' of fieldwork, but also as a reflection of the 'what,' 'when' and 'how' of fieldwork, as described by Kanafani and Sawaf (2017). In this case, the 'what' of fieldwork relates to the overbearing conditions of the field at times of political crisis and growing antagonism and to the subject matter of war and violence. The 'when' involves understanding living-in war over an extended period, an issue that contests the temporal boundaries of fieldwork. As I argue below, three temporalities co-exist during every encounter with direct violence, as the present moment is enmeshed with memories of past experiences of war and with concerns about the possibility of its re-emergence in the future. In this sense, I ask when can we claim that fieldwork has begun, when personal memories of the ethnographer are part of the fieldwork experience? The 'how' of fieldwork and its extended temporality thus emphasize the sensory and embodied dimensions of the fieldwork. Methodologically, this means rendering sensory experiences more explicit and examining their cultural and shared dimensions analytically. I follow here what Hage calls 'ethnographic vacillation' (2010). Building on the tension inherent in participant observation, and highlighting his own emotional investment in the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, Hage discusses the need to safeguard emotions in their savage state, while at the same time subjecting them to the analytical order. To achieve this, he proposes ethnographic vacillation: 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,* on the other (ibid). I suggest we 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 find 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 (2009, pp. 57–58). Anthropologists have 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, 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 war. 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, p. 1). This is in part why I predominantly use the term 'war' rather than 'violence' or 'conflict'. While a vast literature on the anthropology of violence exists, the term 'violence' falls short in describing the all-encompassing collective and protracted nature of war. Violence is repeatedly used as a blanket term for a wide array of experiences and thus needs to be further refined as 'protracted', 'structural' or 'overt.' Moreover, its usage is often attached to a colonial discourse that presents it as characteristic of backwardness. My unease with the term 'violence' mainly stems from the observation that my informants have rarely ever used it in talking about their own experiences of war. On the other hand, the Arabic word for war, 'ḥarb'—or 'al-ḥarb' (the war)—is a familiar daily term that encapsulates the experience of violence and conflict and their protracted everyday nature.

My focus lies on the auditory and olfactory because they triggered the reflection on, and remembering of, my personal experiences of war. Visual methods have always had their place in anthropology; the auditory has had its place 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 & 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. Whether through images of destruction and dead bodies or sanitized images of state-sponsored violence, our daily exposure of media constructions and projections of war taints our experience of 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' (1994, p. 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 mobilizing 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.

This is one of the 'ordinary' Saturday nights of this turbulent time in Beirut. I am at home waiting to listen to the televised speech by the rising political leader. Less than 100 m 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.

The politico-sectarian allegiance of my neighbourhood is not clearly defined; we, the residents, expect bullets to be fired not only when Hariri speaks, but also when his political opponent, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah, appears on TV. 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 fifteen-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.

After suffering this auditory agony for more than fifteen minutes, one of my neighbours shouts at the exultant young men from her balcony: 'Do you not have any manners; don't you know that there are people who would be troubled by the firing?' The young men take this as an opportunity to further establish their authority by asserting their masculinity: 'Do you not have any men who could come and talk to us? Is it only women who speak in your household?' Those firing the bullets win, as the single young woman retreats to her empty house.

I go out after the speech ends, and return later that night to find the same group of men, who are in their early twenties, standing at one of the corners as is the habit of young men in Beirut who have little else to do. Yet, this time I feel their dominance and the threat of their presence. Over a few months, they have transformed from the familiar young kids of the neighbourhood to its menace. They have succeeded in putting the neighbourhood under their control, using the threat of weapons even when they were not using them; they dominate the place by displaying violence and masculinity. Much of their power is achieved through the production of noise, just as a police car gains power through the sound of its sirens.

The memory of war gives potency to their intimidating gunfire, despite local people's implicit knowledge that none of the neighbours in particular is a direct target. The fear people live with is not one of the bullets themselves, or of the threat of being subjected to violence right then and there. Rather, their fear is of the growing power of those trigger-happy young men on the streets and the possibility that the country would descend into chaos, again.

The account above is based on field notes written in 2008 while I was doing my doctoral field research in Beirut in the years 2008–10. 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 Nejmeh 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 (1975–90) 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. 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. The meaning that I ascribed to what I had heard was the threat of an imminent war and the possibility of daily life becoming constrained by the whims of young men in arms. I not only knew that the sounds of shooting were the manifestations of the battle of control over the urban space of Beirut, but also felt the fear of the implications of one party or another taking control over the spaces I lived in. 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' (2003, p. 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 argue, is evoked by auditory experience and its interpretation, which is shaped by my memory—and those of many friends from a similar war generation—of the war and the emotions attached to it. 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. One friend wondered if a few years from now, 14 February 2005—the date when Hariri was assassinated—would be marked as the date when the next war started. Another 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.[1]

Hermez discusses a similar process of anticipation of war in Lebanon around the same period 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 (2012, p. 330). As such, 'war remains constantly present as a structuring force in social life' through the process of talking about it, 'imagining it; sensing it; being tense and frustrated by it; feeling despair, resignation, fear, and hope by it' (ibid). Indeed, war is a structuring force in social life, though I believe that there is a 'learnt' aspect to anticipation that builds on some form of 'expert' knowledge accumulated by those who live through war and allows for a reading of the cues in the context they live in. The memory of the war evoked anticipation of war explicitly after the 2005 assassination of Rafic Hariri and following such cues as the gunshots described in the vignette, which forced the remembering of the Civil War.

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 recognized 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 knew, for example, that only once the war had ended and the winner was known would the date of the start of the Civil War be decided upon. We knew of the possibilities of the fragmentation of our urban space and its impact on our daily lives. We listened to and followed the ever-escalating political discourses and accusations by different political groups about arming their supporters and building militias. We 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? Who intervened the last time the youth in the neighbourhood quarrelled, and how? How many security personnel were stationed on which corner and how did they relate to the local residents? 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. On my way to the bathroom one night, I imagined that the tank that I had been seeing on my street corner was now stationed between the bedroom and bathroom doors. Another friend told me of her father's horror at seeing the sons of an infamous wartime fighter strolling down the street that their father had once terrorized, which stresses again the coexistence of the past with the present. This kind of fear was invoked by our accumulated knowledge of living through war and by our sensory experiences. Sensitivity to these experiences and the reaction towards them allows for a more sophisticated understanding of the lived experience of war and violence. In this case, it opens up an exploration of the longer-term endurance of the experience of living through war, beyond encountering it as a mere event or episode in an individual's life. Participant observation thus acquires a different temporal scope, extending well beyond taking part in the here and now to encompass the sharing of memories as well as future expectations and concerns.

Bull and Back argue that 'it may be that within the registers of aural culture that memories are carried' (2003, p. 13). In the case of Lebanon, that register of aural culture extends beyond music and song to a soundscape of bombs, bullets and chaos. Indeed, the sounds of bullets and bombs were, to a large extent, the soundtrack of my childhood. When replayed, a soundtrack that had accompanied the lived experience of war readily evokes it. 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 & Back, 2003, p. 9). Experimenting with this idea, I played a recording of gunshots to several friends on different occasion and asked what it was that they heard. 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. Here, the same sound, the same auditory experience, was assigned a different meaning. Those who experienced war attached different interpretive registers to the sounds of war 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.

The difference between interpretive and descriptive listening resembles the difference in modes of listening between the blind and sighted that I witnessed in training workshops with blind people on improving their auditory skills in the absence of vision. During exercises where a group of blind and blindfolded but sighted individuals were asked to describe the sounds they were hearing, sighted individuals gave descriptive accounts: 'I hear the sound of a lighter.' Blind people on the other hand gave interpretive ones, responding, 'I hear somebody lighting a cigarette,' if they were sitting outdoors, or 'I hear the sound of turning on the stove,' if they were in the kitchen. For blind people, this interpretation was an acquired skill that they had honed themselves. As a volunteer with an organization of the blind in the 1990s, I often walked in the city with fellow university students who were blind. Some were able to estimate accurately the height of a building or the location of a parking lot, for example, by interpreting the echoes that reverberated in the constructed space around them.[2] They listened to the space we both navigated in a more nuanced and learned way.

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 & Back, 2003, p. 3), is a skill that anthropologists can learn to hone and that is often closely related to the what and how of fieldwork. Pink (2015) provides a good overview and guide to the researcher's practice of sensory ethnography. Whether or not we have that embodied knowledge of war, in order to fully understand the experience of war, we need to take note—figuratively and literally—of sensory perceptions as part of our ethnographic practice. We might ask as a first step: What is it I am hearing? What does it tell me about the space? How is it heard by and interpreted by myself and other research participants? What feelings does it evoke in me and in others and why?[3]

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.[4] *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 that 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 1100 deaths, 4000 injuries, and the temporary displacement of over one million Lebanese, and left huge destruction behind it (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 that were covering the war.

In a conversation with a research participant during my doctoral fieldwork, and as he was talking about his options if a new war were to start—or 'to return' (*tirjaʿ*), as he described it—I asked him what war he was concerned might 'return', to which he answered: 'The usual (*al-ʿadiyya*, also translated as habitual, normal or ordinary) war, not the war with Israel.' The Lebanese Civil War had become part of the ordinary and the everyday for such a long period that it was not exceptional or different from the mundane ways of living. The various wars with Israel, which punctuated and agitated the 'ordinary' wars of the Lebanese, however, were of a different nature. These were short bursts of intense violence, much of it descending from the sky. They were a condensed dose of horror that completely reconfigured your life, but only for a short period. That is, until you had to deal with the aftermath. I do not mean to say that wars with Israel were 'unusual'. They had occurred many times and were part of the ebb and flow of the experience of violence and conflict that many in Lebanon and the region grew up with. Yet, the wars with Israel had a different soundtrack. No firing shots were heard, only the sound of aeroplanes surveying and bombing, and the loud explosion of missiles. In between, there was the unusual silence of the absence of everyday sounds.[5] These sounds unfurled a process of 'rememory', a term coined by novelist Toni Morrison in her book *Beloved* (1987), for remembering something that one had forgotten one knew. In the case of Sethe, Morrison's protagonist, rememory is also activated by a sensory experience, which speaks again to the privileged role of the sensory in evoking memory.

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. The dull noise of F-16 airplanes built in the US, the rattling sound of gun-pallets. The motoric sound of unmanned drones, photographing every corner from above at night. Some of the rockets, whose names I did not know, looked like shooting stars, small lights falling down in a curvy bow, then crashing with massive force. When you saw them above you, you would start to run instinctively to protect yourself. But to where?

> 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 – translated by Al-Zubaidi)

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. I was rather agonizing over the possibility of a war that I remembered returning. This was fear of a death and destruction I knew, that I had lived in during several occasions.

Stoller argues that 'cultural memories are embedded in the smells, sounds, and sights' (Stoller, 1997, p. 65). He asserts that 'the body is a major repository of cultural memories' (Stoller, 1997, p. 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, she 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, p. 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. In her diary, Layla 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, p. 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. Bendix argues that 'unlike eyes, ears cannot be closed to stop the incessant exposure to sounds' and this characteristic of the auditory experience can be argued to impose the sharedness of sound, and arguably smell too (2000, p. 40).[6]

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: there is imminent danger, one is scared and so is everyone in the plane. Brought together by these feelings of insecurity, the passengers 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 on the bodies of those who lived in war and through encounters with violence. 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 & 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 the researcher's *analysis* in the practice of 'ethnographic vacillation' between participation/emotions and observation/analysis, as proposed by Hage (2010) earlier. The period of relative calm in the 1990s, when violent clashes were not the order of the day, created some distance for those of us who grew up in Lebanon, and I believe that distance allowed a more perceptive reflection on war when it reoccurred.

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. I am experiencing this war differently, with intentionality, as an adult and as a person with the accumulated experience of war. 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 (2007) chooses the title, *Merely a Smell,* for his short black and white film produced about the 2006 July War. Without speech, the film accentuates the sounds of drones and the scream of a child as the audience watches men trying to unearth bodies from beneath the rubble, wearing masks to shield them from the smell of the cadavers. 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 had 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, and though I had heard many stories of death and seen many places I loved devastated, 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 Srifa, 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. This smell of death has another set of meanings attached to it in adulthood, meanings 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). Today, 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 materialize 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 these experiences as well as their sharedness among research participants.

I also described how the experience of war is cumulative, at once individual and collective and intergenerational. As a researcher, I study war and know through a reflection of my sensory experiences that, for those of us who lived in it, war is carried within us. It has etched its marks on our souls and bodies as 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

1. See, for example, Abi Samra's film, *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) 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.
2. Such skills often require specialized training to improve a blind person's mobility. Training for blind children incorporates a variety of auditory skills including auditory discrimination, that is, identifying a sound we hear (Barclay 2012).
3. My own training as a visual anthropologist and my experiments with filmmaking helped me increase my awareness of sound and reflect on its meaning. In one instance in my field research, for example, I recorded the voices of players shouting to each other while competing for the national cup. The sound that echoed in an empty stadium without being overwhelmed by the cheers and chants conveyed the absence of the fans in a more profound way than the sight of empty stadiums. Such an exercise is not a fundamental change to the practice of participant observation, but it can provide a minimum active sensory participation and reflection on the sensory.
4. 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 Arabic-speaker when pronounced in French.
5. In recurring visits to the south of Lebanon after the 2006 war, I took note of changing audioscapes. Days after the end of the Israeli incursion, the quietness of village squares was as eerie as the sounds of the bombs had been, before the sounds of construction soon dominated.
6. 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 although sound creates connections, commuters regularly use headphones as a way of creating solitude (see Bull 2000); the autoplay function of videos on a Facebook timeline also 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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Muzna Al-Masri received a PhD in Anthropology from Goldsmiths, University of London. Based on fieldwork in Beirut with members and fans of Nejmeh, Lebanon's most popular football club, her thesis examines the relationship between political elites and their constituencies, and the formation of an emerging form of entrepreneurial elite in post-war Lebanon. As a postdoctoral fellow supported by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences and affiliated with the Centre for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies at the American University of Beirut, she is in the process of turning her doctoral thesis into a book manuscript. She is also a researcher and consultant for several UN and international organizations, implementing conflict analysis and examining linkages between social cohesion and humanitarian intervention.

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