

Salem State University

The Graduate School

Department of English

Facing Trauma Through Art:  
Arab Women's War Narratives

A Thesis in English

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

April 2016

## Dedication

For the Scheherazades around the world.

## Acknowledgements

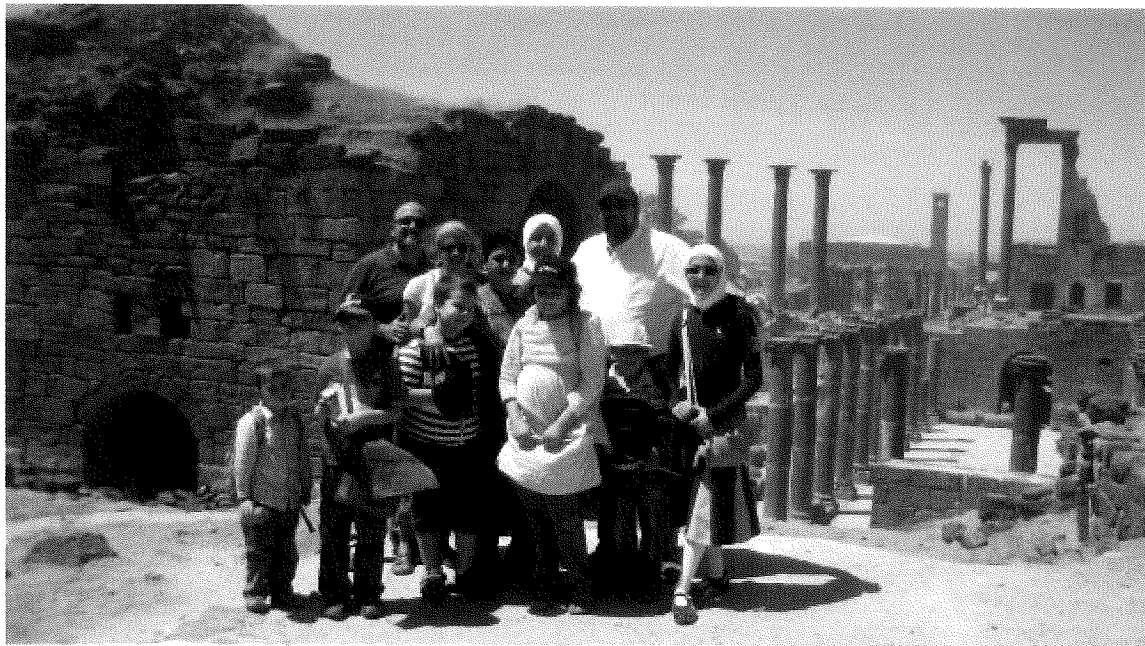
Stephenie Young has been a tireless advocate for and supporter of my work on this thesis. With her guidance, this has been an incredibly challenging and generative learning experience for me. Her sensitivity and commitment to rigor has pushed me to dive even deeper into the content and ethics of this thesis. I am extremely grateful for her wisdom, knowledge, and patience.

Lisa Mulman's guidance as a second reader has opened several new opportunities for research and exploration in my work. I appreciate her thoughtful and thorough feedback, as well as her gracious and generous encouragement of my work.

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## Straddling the Hemispheres: Approaching Wartime Narration by Arab Women



**The Hashem Family in Bosra, Syria.**

My position as the writer of this thesis is complex. I am a Syrian national with the last name Hashem, making me a member of the Hashemite clan. The Hashemites can trace our lineage, unbroken, back to the prophet Muhammad and my family in particular has several gilded and bound volumes formally documenting the connection. Growing up, my summers were spent in Damascus, Syria, with my Arabic-speaking cousins and my *abaya*-clad aunts. My childhood and adolescence were influenced by vibrant Arab girls and women who wore colorful scarves, danced wildly, and wielded their intellect and influence with care and skill. My grandmother, Hediat, is a published scholar, my cousin, Hiba, has her PhD from Cambridge University, and one of my aunts, Sahar, ran a large nonprofit organization to raise money for orphans in rural communities for many years. The Hashem women are activists, kind and passionate in their work.

Discordantly, I am also a member of the Oien family. The Oiens are from Norway and have congregated predominantly in Minnesota. I, along with the rest of my Oien kin, was raised in the United States speaking English, attending American high schools, and integrating into American pop culture. I was intentionally never allowed to learn Arabic in case I “slipped up,” in my father’s words, and confessed to my rigidly Muslim grandparents that my blonde, American mother was raising me as a Lutheran. My American childhood and adolescence are decorated with regular exposure to a very Western perception of Arab women. I read articles and heard news reports about the repressed Arab women who lacked the agency and power that Western women enjoyed. My friends and teachers often shook their head in sorrow at the tragic repression associated with the hijab, which the women in my Syrian family wore proudly and with great reverence. The Western perspective of Arab women proved to be irreconcilable with the one I had developed through my interactions with the Hashems.

These two contradictory constructions of Arab womanhood collectively establish the foundation on which I have built my research and my attempt to explore the agency and influence of modern Arab women on the world around them. In one regard, I read, research, and write as an Arab woman; I speak intentionally from the perspective of someone who has lived the experiences of an Arab girl growing up in a community of strong, Arab women. Simultaneously, however, my writing speaks for Arab women as a people group different from my own; I speak as an American, a Westerner who will never be able to fully inhabit the role of an Arab woman. The tension between these two identities generates both extreme intricacy and authentic insight in my research. My position as a woman writing with one foot in the Middle East and one in the United States is a major driving force in my desire to pursue this research.

My ability to inhabit both the position of an Arab woman as well as a white, Western woman works as an advantage in my attempt to understand instances of Arab feminist activism from a Western perspective. I am extremely familiar with the American understanding of what feminism and female agency look like because I myself understand femininity in this same way. I am also, however, very familiar with a distinctly Arab understanding of feminism. Arab women enacting change in their communities and within the context of their culture is familiar to me; I also understand female identity in this way. The process of asking my two internally inconsistent perceptions to interact with one another has guided my research in generative and challenging ways.

My goals in approaching the work of these women centers around my desire to bring meaning out of the two contradictory perspectives on Arab womanhood that coexist in my mind, experiences, and identity. What is taking place in the Western assessment of Arab female agency that colors it as less potent or prolific than Western female agency? What does Arab feminism look like from both perspectives? How can I leverage my ability to inhabit both perspectives to help bridge the gap between Western and Eastern feminists in ways that empower and promote the agency of women around the globe? I want to understand why two such dramatically contradictory perspectives on Arab women can coexist, and then to work towards breaking down the barriers between the perspectives to enable collaboration and community.

One of the factors that became most evident to me as I pursued the answers to these questions was the theme of homogenization that dominated the Western perspective of the world. Even while introducing my research thus far, I have been using the phrases, “Arab women” and “Middle East” as if they described a uniform group or set of identities. In reality, the dynamics of the Middle Eastern world is much more varied and complex than these reductionist labels

suggest. In an effort to deconstruct this perceived sameness, I have selected my nations of study for this project based on the current Western tendency to geographically homogenize the Middle East. The commonly used label of “Arab world” sweepingly covers an array of nations that differ dramatically from one another in language, geography, culture, religion, politics, economy, and a litany of other factors. In an effort to counteract this generalization, I have selected artists from the nations of Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria in order to explore some of the histories and dynamics unique to each. In analyzing artists and work coming out of these nations, my goal is to work towards a Western understanding of individuality and uniqueness for the Arab people and nations.

Arab women in particular have fallen victim to the Western world’s tendency to categorize and homogenize, being represented according to what Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said describes as “Orientalism,” which is a phenomenon in which the Western world applies their ideologies and misconceptions to a somewhat fictionalized and idealized version of the Middle Eastern world. The Western world has largely constructed an image of the Oriental women using a set of stereotyped characteristics and myths to build their understanding. The result has been a very uniform and generalizing concept of the veiled and tragically repressed Arab woman who lives under the heavy weight of male oppression. In her article, “Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?” Nawar Al-Hassan Golley captures this by reflecting, “for most Westerners, . . . the phrase ‘Arab woman’ conjures up heavily veiled, secluded women, whose lives consist of little more than their homes, their children and the other females in the ‘harem’” (522). A central goal of this thesis is to contribute to the dismantling of this minimizing and simplistic view of Arab women, replacing it with a more complex appreciation for the incredible diversity and individuality represented in the women of the Arab world.

This reductive and homogenizing depiction of Arab women also extends also to the realms of Arab feminism. The Western world views feminism largely as a Western phenomenon, often suggesting that their brand of feminism needs to be imported to the Arab world in order to liberate the mythologized Arab women. However, calls for women's rights in the Middle East can be found dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a product of a general movement to modernize Islamic culture and practices (Golley). Since that time, the Arab feminist movement has unfolded in ways that are reflective of the cultures, politics, economies, and histories of the respective regions in which it is developing. By calling attention to compositions by various modern-day women activists and artists in the Arab world, I hope to de-homogenize some of the diverse feminist influences that continue to develop and assert agency in our modern age. In undertaking this project, my hope is to individualize particular nations and women in ways that contribute to the dismantling of the Western tendency to consider Arab people and nations with generalizing assumptions.

It is with these goals in mind that I will explore the work of contemporary Arab women from several countries who are composing in a variety of modes to chronicle their experiences as a result of violent conflicts within their home nations. These women use literature, art, and photography to narrate and externalize their wartime traumas, often creating alternatives to the larger discourses dominating the violent conflicts in which they live or have lived. Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh uses her fiction to capture daily life for civilians who weathered the civil war that drew to a close almost three decades ago. Palestinian painter Majdal Nateel uses her art to depict the scenes of beauty and resilience she sees surviving amidst the landscape of a bloody war that has extended throughout generations. English teacher turned wartime photojournalist Nour Kelze puts her life on the line regularly in order to capture raw, vivid

images of daily life for the rebel fighters as they hold their ground against the regime's power in the ongoing Syrian civil war. These women assert their agency determinedly through their narratives, creating new potentials for healing and trauma recovery for both themselves as individuals and for their nations collectively. They are strong and bold, enforcing and enacting images of Arab female identity that match the perspectives I have witnessed as a Hashem woman.

I began my research on these women and their work by reading about and then interviewing each of them. My intent was to know how they saw their own work impacting change in the world around them and what steps they took to assert their influence within their communities and environments<sup>1</sup>. Through my reading and conversations with these women, a single theme kept appearing; all of them had created their work under the weight of larger discourses promoted by a stronger, outside source onto a less empowered group or individual. All three countries that these women come from, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, had fallen under a massive and influential narrative promoted by those in positions of power and influence. Based on interviews, the women of this study did not consider these narratives to reflect their experiences; rather, they perceived these narratives to suffocate and rewrite their experiences for the benefit of a higher power. Their desire to subvert or combat the workings of this larger narrative is a central theme in the compositions featured in this research.

In analyzing this repeating theme of an overpowering larger story, I relied on Jean-François Lyotard's concept of metanarrative. Lyotard explains a metanarrative as a larger discourse that is used to legitimize knowledge or beliefs within a certain people group. This dominating discourse can direct the way historical events, experiences, or cultural phenomena are understood. Lyotard stresses that, an established metanarrative creates a situation in which,

“justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth” (xxiv). The larger narrative becomes the standard by which facts and morality are defined and understood. And once a metanarrative has been established, it is almost impossible to eradicate.

The larger discourses in my nations of study function very much as metanarratives, directing and shaping collective thought and opinion. One of the ways to undermine a metanarrative, however, is to promote a counternarrative, which can interact with the larger narrative by giving an alternate interpretation or rendition of events. This alternative proceeds to create opportunities for divergent thoughts and opinions within the context of the metanarrative. The metanarrative itself remains a powerful influence; however, the counternarrative creates challenges for the metanarrative to address, respond to, or ignore. The idea of a counternarrative acting to combat a larger discourse arose repeatedly as I analyzed the compositions created by women that had survived violence and war in the Arab world. The women in this study courageously narrate their wartime experiences in part as a reaction to the overall lack of representation they saw in the nation’s larger wartime accounts and in part as a desire to assert the influence that was being marginalized by the larger narrative. Their compositions strengthen and construct counternarratives that act to subvert national metanarratives.

By using their work to initiate or perpetuate counternarratives within their nations, these women carve out spaces for agency and narration for themselves and for their communities. The opportunities for narration of individual experiences created by the development of counternarratives simultaneously open up new options for trauma recovery. In addition, the women interviewed for this study all expressed their motivation to compose as stemming from deep wounds and atrocities that haunted them from their experiences in war. The process of composing and sharing their memories with a larger community resulted in new possibilities for

healing from trauma. In creating room for narration of individual experiences, these women also generate opportunity for victims of wartime traumas to externalize their memories in order to promote healing.

I also found that the ways in which these women responded to and described their wartime experiences largely parallel work done on trauma recovery by Cathy Caruth and psychologists Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. The bulk of my discussion on trauma healing as seen in the works featured in this study is based on the intersection between their works. In her groundbreaking work on trauma theory, *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth defines trauma as a wound that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (4). Caruth’s understanding of traumatic events as creating memories that then go on to involuntarily replay in the victims’ lives, entrapping and plaguing the victims, is critical to my understanding of how the women in this study are experiencing the memories of the atrocities they have lived through. In order to heal from these traumas and their compulsive repetitions, Felman and Laub in their work *Crises of Witnessing* posit that the trauma must be confronted and externalized for the victim to gain a sense of ownership over it. Laub explains that, “to undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process – a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event – has to be set in motion” (69). Their work suggests that the act of testifying to the traumatic event is a powerful means for overcoming psychological and emotional trauma. Accordingly, I read the work of the women in this study as their testimonies and as important pieces of their respective trauma recovery processes.

Throughout the process of analyzing how these women’s works function as testimonies to traumatic memories within the context of an oppressive metanarrative, I relied on several

theorists that have conducted their work around Holocaust studies, including Felman and Laub. Despite the many differences between the Holocaust and the conflicts this thesis examines, I have found many of the Holocaust-specific theories and ideas to be extremely helpful in approaching the work selected for this study. My decision to apply theorists' work centering around conflicts different from ones featured in this study capitalizes on Michael Rothberg's idea of multidirectional memory, which suggests that specific discourses and threads of study can develop around regional conflicts. According to Rothberg, the different theories specific to these regional discourses are often interpreted as competitive as opposed to collaborative so that, when these different histories and areas of study come into contact with one another, they are seen to detract from one another in what Rothberg refers to as competitive memory. As an alternative to competitive memory, Rothberg promotes the idea of multidirectional memory, proposing that these different histories can interact with one another in productive and dynamic ways that should be encouraged and facilitated. He argues that approaching memory with this perspective allows, "complex acts of solidarity in which historical memory serves as a medium for the creation of new communal and political identities" (11). According to the concepts behind multidirectional memory, the schools of thought and study that develop out of distinct regional conflicts can contribute to one another in ways that are mutually beneficial and generative. In employing theorists focusing on regional conflicts different from my own, I am hoping to encourage and contribute to memory discourses that are specific to the regions featured in this thesis. Perhaps the discourses that develop around these nations might one day be used to complicate and approach other regional conflicts. Although Rothberg is not explicitly mentioned anywhere in my thesis, his ideas underpin and inform much of my work.

Another classic trauma theorist that I rely on in my work as I approach these women's accounts of their traumatic experiences is the psychiatrist Judith Herman and her three stages of recovery as outlined in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*. Herman proposes that, in the wake of a trauma, the victim must progress through certain phases in his or her experience with that trauma in order to undergo recovery and healing. These stages include the establishment of a safe place, a time for remembrance and mourning, and the reconnection with the victim's environment (155). The pattern for healing Herman lays out guides the ways in which I approach several of the artists in this thesis.

Chapter one of this thesis will focus on Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh's narration of the Lebanese civil war through her 1980 novel, *The Story of Zahra (Hikayat Zahra)*. Using Judith Herman's three stages of trauma recovery to analyze the novel, this chapter will explore al-Shaykh's use of her fictional main character Zahra to narrate her personal journey with the traumatic experiences she suffered during the civil war. Herman's stages can be used to meaningfully trace the trauma recovery processes of both the fictional Zahra and her author, calling attention to the similarities between the two. Because the physical conflict associated with the Lebanese civil war has concluded, chapter one also observes how al-Shaykh's testimony works to shape the postwar culture of Lebanon as the nation slowly rebuilds from the conflict. The civil war itself has been over for over 25 years now; however, navigating the traumas suffered during the war has been a tangible burden on al-Shaykh and the Lebanese people as a whole since the war's conclusion.

Moving from a conflict that has been resolved at least in an external sense for over two decades to one that has no resolution, chapter two addresses traumas suffered during the longstanding and ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Majdal Nateel is a painter living in

Palestine who uses her visual art to process traumas resulting from violent interactions between her nation and the nation of Israel. Her 2014 portrait series, *If I Wasn't There*, is motivated specifically by her experiences with children who were victims of violence and trauma in the 2014 Gaza war. Borrowing from Alison Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory, which explores the idea of an individual taking on traumas from the experiences of another person, this chapter investigates the ways in which Nateel's portrait series reflects a set of prosthetic traumas that she takes on from the children with whom she worked in the aftermath of the 2014 war. In recognition of the legacy associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, chapter two also explores Nateel's work by drawing from Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, analyzing the ways in which Nateel's inherited generational traumas impact her current work and the way her work functions as a means to process traumatic memories. The complexities of processing trauma in a conflict with a history like that of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict pose a unique challenge for Nateel as she endeavors to work for healing in the midst of ongoing violence.

The final conflict to be addressed in this thesis is one that continues to develop even as I write these words. Chapter three will investigate the on-going Syrian civil war as a nascent conflict, unfolding with little to no precedent or history and seemingly limitless brutality. In the midst of this ever-shifting political landscape, photojournalist Nour Kelze has dedicated herself to documenting the conflict in the hopes of narrating what she believes to be the collective traumatizing of the Syrian population. Employing Judith Butler's ideas on the significance of framing in war photography, chapter three will explore Kelze's use of photography to narrate her experiences as a member of the collective of Syrian civilians. In interviews, Kelze demonstrates an understanding that healing from trauma is not possible in the current state of affairs, as violence escalates in her nation; however, she does express a desire to assert a narrative that

represents the civilian experience in the hopes that, at some point, trauma recovery becomes a real option for the people of Syria.

This thesis will discuss how al-Shaykh, Nateel, and Kelze narrate their traumatic wartime experiences through their creative compositions, creating spaces for healing and recovery. In approaching their work as testimonies to trauma, I will argue that the uniqueness of the testimonies produced by women from these different nations is integral to the effectiveness of those testimonies in promoting individual and collective trauma healing. This thesis also works to promote respectful and meaningful witnessing from the perspective of a Western observer. In order for these works of testimony to function, they require a witness. In order to effectively bear witness to the atrocities depicted in these narratives, it is necessary to overcome the Western world's tendency to homogenize the Middle East and to recognize the personal details of each individual's experience. My hope is for this thesis to function as and to encourage outside acts of witness to the tragedies and devastation suffered by these women.

My ultimate goal for this study is to write something that I can hand to both my American and my Syrian family and friends. I am writing for my American family and friends to help them understand how they can come alongside women in countries frequently misunderstood and misrepresented. After reading my work, my hope would be that they, from their positions of influence and privilege, would be able to approach testimonies from the Arab world with a marginally deeper appreciation for a composer's individuality, culture, and difference. I hope that they would be able to meaningfully inhabit the role of a witness to those testimonies, promoting real recovery and healing. I am also writing for my Syrian family to demonstrate an honest effort to understand and to hear their testimonies of loss and heartbreak. My claim is not to empathize with their suffering or with their pain; however, my hope would be

that they would see in my work a genuine longing to hear their personal stories and to do whatever is in my ability to empower them with the agency to influence change in those stories. My goals are human connection and interaction between these two halves of my life and our world.

## I. Narrating Trauma through Fiction: Storytelling to Survive Lebanon's Civil War

“When my voice is no longer heard and my eyes are unable to see, then, I say, nothing remains but absence and my world breaks down.” – Hoda Barakat, “I Write Against My Hand”

With these words, Lebanese author Hoda Barakat (1952-) is reflecting on her time spent writing in the midst of the civil war that ravaged her home nation of Lebanon between the years of 1975-1990 (Faqr, *House* 41). When the fighting in Beirut ignited, Barakat stubbornly refused to flee the city; instead, she wrote the entirety of her novel, *Stone of Laughter (Hajar al-Dahik*, 1990), in a basement apartment under constant fire from the various parties vying for power (Faqr, “Introduction” v). This intimate connection and proximity to the conflict gave her ample opportunity to observe the war and its repercussions and the traumas suffered by Barakat during the war are significantly featured in her novel. As can be seen reflected in her statement above, Barakat’s drive to narrate and confront these traumatic experiences is extremely powerful.

The civil war Barakat writes about, however, is one that resists simple narration because of the immense complexity and confusion that surrounds it to this day. The city of Beirut and the nation of Lebanon as a whole were caught up in the current of the conflict as the fragmented political, religious, and social parties of the time battled for control of the country. Countless factions, domestic and international, vied for power during the course of the war, each bitterly denouncing the other while presenting their own, politically motivated accounts of events. Mirroring the convoluted sociopolitical dynamics in and surrounding Lebanon at the time of the conflict, the specifics of the civil war are difficult to identify, making reconstruction of wartime events challenging both during and after the fighting.

Accordingly, voices of agenda-driven military, religious, social, and political leaders who were working to further their influence controlled the narratives chronicling the war. The vast

majority of public civil war narratives came from those in power who were endeavoring to present their own causes as the only true solution to Lebanon's problems. The result of this trend was a discourse surrounding the war that focused almost exclusively on politics, power, and lofty ideologies and that overwhelmingly minimized or omitted the tangible experiences of many Lebanese civilians living through the daily reality of the conflict.

It is not surprising to say that many of the voices contributing to this master war narrative were violent, polarizing, and one-sided in nature. Political voices like those of Walid Jumblatt (1949-)<sup>2</sup>, leader of the Lebanese Druze community, and Elie Hobeika (1956-2002)<sup>3</sup>, commander of the Lebanese Phalangist<sup>4</sup> militia during the civil war, filled the news headlines throughout the war with their experiences in the fighting, tending to focus on biased views that often vehemently incriminated opposing parties. After the war, Lebanese ex-militiaman Robert Maroun Hatem, known as "The Cobra," published his 1999 memoir detailing his experiences as a militiaman in the Phalangist party during the conflict. His writing tells the highly romanticized tale of a tough and reckless younger version of himself, dwelling on causes and sacred duty and condemning the "Christian leaders and warlords" (93). The polemic voices of such individuals in positions of military and economic power flooded the public ear with their renditions of wartime events.

It was in the middle of the civil war's burgeoning metanarrative of violence and partisan politics that several women authors in Lebanon, including Hoda Barakat, felt the desire to share their own experiences and stories. Without any kind of formal organization, individual women from all over Lebanon began to resist this larger discourse and insist that their voices be heard. Their stories began to collectively create an alternative series of war narratives featuring daily

life, survival, and the reality of Lebanese wartime experiences existing behind the lofty and ideological goals of individual parties.

Writing by these female authors presented such a unique series of perspectives on the Lebanese civil war that Arab literature critic and scholar, Miriam Cooke, has named the women “The Beirut Decentrists”<sup>5</sup> (*Voices* 3). According to Cooke, The Decentrists are a group of women who lived at least a portion of their lives in Beirut and were driven by the violence of the Lebanese civil war and a sense of misrepresentation in the larger civil war discourse to narrate their firsthand wartime experiences against the backdrop of the highly politicized and polemic wartime metanarrative. Arab-American literature scholar, Carol Fadda-Conrey describes the Decentrists as women whose “chief contribution has been to create a marginal, though disorganized voice in the face of the master war narrative” (8). By courageously sharing their personal experiences and traumas during the Lebanese civil war, the Beirut Decentrists carved out an alternative to the wartime metanarrative where they would be able to reconstruct and process their traumas in ways that facilitated genuine healing for themselves and their communities.

The Decentrists are comprised of a group of women who are all connected to the Lebanese civil war in different ways. While Hoda Barakat was born and raised in Lebanon, Ghada al-Samman (1942-) was born in Syria, but moved to Lebanon in 1964 where she completed her bachelor’s degree in Lebanon’s prestigious American University of Beirut (Aghacy 187; Cooke, *Voices* 5). She later moved to London to pursue a career in theater; however, her time in Beirut and the brutal civil war made such an impact on her that she composed her novels *Beirut 75* (*Bairut 75*, 1975) and *Beirut Nightmares* (*Kawabis Bairut*, 1976) to chronicle and process her experiences (Cooke, *Voices* 5). Another Decentrist author, Emily

Nasrallah (1938-), was born and raised in a rural village in Southern Lebanon (5). With funding from a distant relative, Nasrallah went on to attend the American University of Beirut and remain in Beirut working as a writer. When the wartime destruction demolished the building storing all her unpublished manuscripts, Nasrallah made up her mind to weather the remainder of the fighting from within the capital city, refusing to abandon Beirut (5). During the war, she wrote several short stories, including *Woman in 17 Stories* (*Al-mara fi 17 qissa*, 1983), and two novels, *Those Memories* (*Tilka al-dhikrayat*, 1980) and *Flight Against Time* (*Al-iqla aks al-zaman*, 1981) (5). Barakat, al-Samman, and Nasrallah are a small sampling of the Beirut Decentrist women who experienced trauma as a result of Beirut's civil war and chose to narrate that trauma through their fiction<sup>6</sup>, creating alternatives to the power-driven wartime metanarrative.

This chapter explores the work of one particular Decentrist author, Hanan al-Shaykh (1945-), through her novel, *The Story of Zahra* (*Hikayat Zahra*, 1980) (Cooke, *Voices* 6). Born to an extremely conservative family in Beirut, al-Shaykh lived in the midst of the fighting for the first seven months of the war before fleeing the violence to live abroad, never to reside in Lebanon again (6). Her time in Lebanon during the war affected her profoundly and her novel delves into many of the issues surrounding her memories of the conflict. Subverting the highly politicized discourse surrounding the Lebanese civil war, al-Shaykh narrates her traumatic personal experiences through the voice of the fictional protagonist in her novel, creating the potential for trauma recovery for both herself and her community.

## **ii. The War**

The civil war that drove al-Shaykh to narrate her experiences and memories was a particularly complex one. The task of reconstructing traumatic wartime accounts is difficult in

any context; however, the Lebanese civil war resisted this reconstruction with unusually high levels of chaos, confusion, and political unrest.

The Lebanese civil war erupted on April 13th, 1975, with a violent ambush against the Lebanese Maronite<sup>7</sup> Christians, called Phalangists, by an unidentified group of guerrilla gunmen who were believed to be Palestinian (Hiro 31). Tensions between Phalangists and Palestinians had been mounting dangerously since it was discovered in 1970 that the Palestinian Liberation Organization<sup>8</sup> had been using the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon to establish armed posts and wage bloody attacks on Israel (11). The increasing military strength of the Palestinian refugees and the Maronite Christians' warming relations with Palestine's enemy, Israel, had been progressively creating problems between the two groups in the years leading up to the start of the war (13-4). The April 13<sup>th</sup> ambush triggered nationwide, multiparty tensions that had been accumulating for years. This spark was the first in a wildfire of fierce, but only vaguely understood conflicts that would collectively comprise the civil war that went on to ravage Lebanon between the years of 1975 to 1990.

This war was marked by a unique lack of clarity and level of savagery. Years of retroactive analysis have led to the conclusion that the war had no clear cause, defined parties, designated war fronts, or specified enemy (Cooke, *Women Write War* 3). In fact, the war is often referred to as *al-ahdas*, or "the events," as the conflict is more accurately characterized as a series of interrelated and overlapping clashes as opposed to a single, cohesive conflict (Larkin 617).

The roots of the individual conflicts that collectively fueled the war were diverse and deep-seated, involving economic, religious, political, civil, and international concerns. For instance, the rapidly growing population of Palestinian refugees fleeing the West Bank in the

wake of the Six Day War<sup>9</sup> was placing economic pressure on the small country of Lebanon (Cooke *Women Write War* 4; Hiro 10). In addition, various religious communities including the Druze, the Sunni and Shi'a Lebanese Muslims, and the Maronite and Greek Orthodox Christians had been wrestling for stronger political influence and representation, escalating tension and discontent in public and governmental arenas (Cooke *Women Write War* 4; Hiro 5).

Various nonreligious political parties, including the relatively secular Palestinian refugee groups who continued to mount attacks on Israel from Lebanon, also vied for power and support for their cause in Lebanon, further complicating the situation (Cooke, *Women Write War* 4). Other nonreligious political parties involved in the struggle for power included the Communist Party, the Arab Baath Socialist Party, the Arab Nationalist Movement, and a variety of parties with mixed, often unrelated causes (Cooke, *Women Write War* 4; Hiro 12). Many of these nonreligious parties had ties to causes and parties outside of Lebanon, involving surrounding nations in domestic Lebanese politics. Following Lebanon's collapse into war, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and several Western nations<sup>10</sup> all participated in the conflict in varying capacities (Cooke, *Women Write War* 8; Hiro 43, 90, 216-217). These separately charged, but interacting aspects of the Lebanese civil war converged upon one another to create, "sixteen years of nightmare and violent chaos" (Hiro 217).

The unregulated and disorienting nature of the Lebanese civil war has resulted, not only in a lack of understanding about who was battling against whom, but also in a general lack of consensus concerning the details of the war, such as when it began or ended and how many casualties there were. Reported numbers for lives lost range anywhere from 100,000 (Faqr, "Introduction" v) to 150,000 (Haugbolle, "Militia Man" 120). The count for those kidnapped or disappeared remains untallied.

There is also much contention as to the war's end date (Haugbolle "Public" 192). The most commonly recognized end of the Lebanese civil war takes place in 1990, when the defeat of the Lebanese Army Commander, General Aoun, was immediately followed by the Syrian Army's seizure of East Beirut. This is the date referenced by most major news outlets including BBC, the *New York Times*, and *The Economist*. As an expert in Middle Eastern studies with a specialization in the Lebanese civil war, Miriam Cooke considers the civil war to have ended in 1982, which is when the Israelis invaded Lebanon and joined the conflict, signaling an "end of their internal war, their civil conflict" (*War's Other Voices* 12). Despite the clarity that an end date of 1990 offers, Cooke's observation that the war transitioned from a civil one that ended in 1982 to an international one that ended in 1990 has the potential to more accurately reflect the complex nature and dynamics of the conflict. The impossibility of clearly differentiating between these two conflicts identified by Cooke, the domestic and the international, and their respective issues gives some indication of the real intricacy characterizing this chapter in Lebanese history.

Regardless of labeling, there is general agreement that the bulk of the fighting in Lebanon came to an end in 1990. Despite this, Middle East scholar Sune Haugbolle has observed that "the disarmament of the militias, the stabilization of the economy, and the restoration of the battered state institutions took years to achieve" ("Public" 192). As a result, the Lebanese lived under the confusion and terror of wartime far past any established end dates for the conflict, prompting a third end date to the war proposed by Arab literature scholar, Elise Salem Manganaro, who offers 1991 as the true end date for the conflict (113).

It was in the midst of this intense chaos and violence that Beirut Decentrist Hanan al-Shaykh lived through the traumatic experiences that would go on to inform her later literary works. She was born in Lebanon in 1945, the year that Lebanon gained full independence from

France, and lived through Lebanon's brief, first civil war in 1958<sup>11</sup> (Cooke, *Voice* 6; Hiro 1). Given her long history with her home nation, al-Shaykh was deeply impacted when the civil war of 1975 erupted while she was living and writing in Beirut. Despite her desire to work as a journalist in Lebanon, after seven months of weathering the fighting from within Beirut, al-Shaykh decided that her voice would never be heard above the conflict's din and left for Kuwait "in disgust and with no sense of guilt" (Abdo 217; Cooke, *Voices* 6). From the safety of London, where she later settled, she was able to write her war novel, *Story of Zahra*, and confront some of the trauma she suffered during her time in the Lebanon.

### iii. *The Story of Zahra*

Al-Shaykh's 1980 novel, *Story of Zahra*, is a particularly visceral and realistic depiction of the life of a woman in Lebanon during the time surrounding the civil war. The story unfolds as a nonlinear narrative, peppered with flashbacks, and is told mostly through the first person perspective of the abused, largely repressed, and emotionally unstable Muslim woman, Zahra, navigating life in Beirut before and during the Lebanese civil war. At two different points in the novel, Zahra's uncle and then her husband fill the role of the narrator, speaking for Zahra and portraying her life through their eyes for those segments of the book. By following Zahra's life through her own eyes, but also through the eyes of two of the men in her life, al-Shaykh creates a very dark image for the reader of how life unfolded in the midst of Lebanon's most turbulent times.

Zahra is a physically unattractive girl with a "pock-marked face" who is born into pre-war Beirut, where she lives under the oppressive, patriarchal regime of her father and the manipulative lies and extramarital affairs of her mother (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 25). Early in life, Zahra is verbally, physically, and sexually manipulated and abused by the men in her life,

including her father, a cousin, and a male coworker. Leaving her turbulent home life and the married coworker who continually manipulates her behind, she flees Beirut to live with her politically exiled uncle in Africa<sup>12</sup>.

Here too, however, she suffers emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of both her uncle and her uncle's friend. Her uncle, Hashem, objectifies and idealizes her Lebanese upbringing, saying of her time with him in Africa, "I never imagined that... my feelings for Zahra would reach the pitch they did... I felt I wanted to touch her hands and her face and the hem of her dress. Through her I hoped to absorb all my life, both here and in Lebanon" (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 69). The intensity with which Hashem misses his homeland and sense of Lebanese identity causes him to latch on to Zahra as the emblem of the life he has always wanted, smothering her with a desire that quickly turns physical. He silently begs of her, "Let me hold you in my arms. Let me rest as your hand smooths my hair and you whisper to me: 'Uncle, don't be afraid'" (71). Hashem's intense attention is unexpectedly and undesirably forced upon Zahra.

In order to escape her uncle's consuming affection, Zahra abruptly agrees to marry her uncle's friend, Majed, who proposed hastily upon their first meeting. This marriage fulfills Majed's twin dreams of "marrying the daughter of an illustrious family" and being "the owner of a woman's body that I [he] could make love to whenever I [he] wished" (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 83). Zahra finds herself moving from one environment of suffocating objectification and repression to another; she says of her new husband, "I felt the trap snap shut" (107). With her marriage to Majed, Zahra's situation drifts further and further out of her own control.

Both her interactions with her uncle and her new husband result in increasingly frequent episodes of anxiety and depression, which Zahra calls "nervous fits" (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 126). She begins to lock herself in the bathroom for long spells, protesting in her own mind, "Leave

me alone in this bathroom! It allows me to disappear in time and space; it cuts me off from all human relations” (97). She also begins to suffer from frequent flashbacks, which is where the reader becomes aware of the multiple instances of sexual abuse she suffered as a child. In the wake of a series of panic attacks and mental breakdowns, Zahra returns to Beirut in order to escape her life in Africa.

Zahra returns, however, to find a Beirut in the throes of civil war. Her days in Beirut are punctuated by “the noises of the bombs and the bullets which penetrate everything” (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 123). Unexpectedly, the chaos of the civil war creates the first environment in which Zahra is able to find some measure of peace and agency. In a world that has lost any semblance of control and rational order, Zahra feels at home in the disorder. She reflects, “When I heard that the battles raged fiercely and every front was an inferno, I felt calm” (125). The violent tumult around her allows her to relax. It is in this environment that Zahra is finally able to release some of her tension and recover some stability in her life.

### **iii. Zahra’s Stages of Recovery**

Over the course of the novel, Zahra works courageously to confront her traumatic experiences and reclaim a sense of control over her life, struggling to climb out of the chaos of her trauma and abuse. Her journey can be understood more deeply when read through Judith Herman’s stages of trauma recovery. According to Herman’s theory, the progression that any trauma victim must undergo as they work towards healing and recovery can be roughly summarized in three stages: the establishment of a safe space, a time for remembrance and mourning, and the reconnection with their environment in order to begin moving forward (155). She acknowledges that trauma recovery is always complex and individualized; however, she proposes these phases as “an attempt to impose simplicity and order on a process that is

inherently turbulent and complex” (155). Herman also points out that, despite what her three, ordered steps might suggest, trauma recovery does not follow “a straightforward linear sequence,” but rather a process that is “oscillating and dialectical in nature” (155). This means that a traumatized individual may find themselves approaching these steps in an alternative order, existing between steps, or repeatedly returning to seemingly “completed” steps throughout the process. In Herman’s words, the idea behind the model of successful trauma recovery is the possibility of recognizing “a gradual shift from unpredictable danger to reliable safety, from dissociated trauma to acknowledged memory, and from stigmatized isolation to restored social connection” (155). Using Herman’s model for trauma recovery, the events in Zahra’s storyline can be understood as her struggle to cope with her traumatic experiences.

The first point in Zahra’s story in which she feels any sense of healing or control over the traumatic events in her life takes place when, overcome by her struggles with emotional and mental instability, she leaves her husband in Africa and returns to live with her family in Beirut. Upon her arrival in Beirut at war, Zahra immediately submerges herself in the chaos of the conflict by embracing the wartime lifestyle. Living in her apartment amidst of the shelling and warfare, Zahra says, “Here I am totally relaxed. I see no one. I speak as little as possible” (al-Shakh, *Zahra* 124). When her mother can’t sleep through the night because of the gunfire, Zahra is surprised, saying, “the moment night falls I sleep soundly” (124). The disorder of daily life in Beirut allows her to feel at home in her own personal and internal disorder, creating a space where she can begin the process of recovering from her traumas.

It is in this chaos that Zahra finally creates what Judith Herman identifies as the first necessary step in recovery from trauma: establishment of a safe space or “refuge” (155, 162). According to Herman’s theory, reconstruction of and healing from a trauma cannot begin until

this crucial first step has been accomplished. Ironically, for Zahra, her safe space is found in the eye of a raging war. Herman stresses that a trauma victim's "safe refuge" will look different for different survivors; some individuals need to remain secluded in their homes while some cannot go home at all (162). A traumatized individual's refuge will depend greatly on the nature of that victim's traumatic experience. Zahra's unique discovery of a safe space in the middle of a violent conflict speaks to the fact that her traumas take place in traditionally peaceful spheres. She is molested by family members in her home or by coworkers at her place of work. In other words, spaces that are generally considered safe become spaces of emotional and sexual violence for Zahra. Accordingly, the chaos and violence of war actually come to act as a haven for Zahra as she flees the normalcy that has been the source of so much of her trauma.

Once Zahra manages to find this place of stability and security for herself in the middle of the civil war, she becomes, as Herman's process predicts, increasingly able to confront some of the traumas she had suffered and continues to suffer from, such as the multiple instances of sexual abuse from her childhood and the persistent, involuntary flashbacks they induce. This allows her to move into Herman's second stage of trauma recovery: "remembrance and mourning" (155). Herman suggests that the next step in addressing a traumatic experience is to face the task of reconstructing the reality of the experience and facing the tragedy that accompanies it. In Herman's understanding of the reconstruction process, the trauma survivor must not only confront the facts of the story, but also his or her own response to and understanding of the trauma. The survivor must "include the traumatic imagery and bodily sensations" in order to adequately construct the reality of the trauma (177). Upon settling into a sense of stability from her position in the midst of the war, Zahra is in a better position to undertake this task.

Zahra begins to look back as much as she is able on some of the anxieties and traumas she experienced before the war, ruminating on her time in Africa as “the shaft of a deep well down which I had hidden my threadbare secret” (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 126). She acknowledges to herself that she “had come back [from Africa] no more than half a human being” (126). She sees the coworker who raped her while alone on a bus one afternoon, but does not panic or lapse into a flashback; instead, she steels herself and refuses to panic (126). Despite the fact that she is unable to directly confront many of her traumatic memories, her ability to reflect obliquely on them and acknowledge their existences begins to release her from their hold. She manages to consider the magnitude of her past traumas to some degree, comparing them to the violence and chaos of her experiences in the current conflict, saying “I sat on, punishing myself ... for all the misery which I had thought was misery before the war, and the pain which I had thought was pain before the war” (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 134). Although Zahra finds personal peace in the war, she also recognizes the misery and pain that the war inflicts on the people of Beirut. Her sense of stability within the war does not reflect a lack of concern for the suffering of her fellow Lebanese; rather, it captures a newfound ability to participate in the wider suffering and confront her own pain and victimization. From her position of safety and stability, Zahra finds herself able to remember some of her past trauma, allowing herself to acknowledge its toll on her life.

The ability to face her traumatic memories in some capacity without lapsing into nervous fits allows her to confront those memories and continue with the second phase of Herman’s recovery process. Cooke characterizes Zahra’s time in the second phase of Herman’s recovery process by saying, “She could take another look at that [her] suffering, uncolored by flashback and hallucination, and by naming it, end it” (56). By reaching a point in which she feels sufficiently safe and able to confront her traumatic memories, she begins to lay claim to some of

her own traumas, creating a space for her own healing. Although she never accomplishes the complete memory reconstruction that Herman describes, which would involve the confrontation of “traumatic imagery and bodily sensations,” Zahra does gain the ability to reflect on her traumatic memories without losing her grip on reality (177).

Having achieved a certain ability to face her traumatic history, Zahra is then faced with Herman’s final stage of trauma recovery. Herman holds that once a trauma victim manages to come to terms with their traumatic past, they then must undertake “the task of creating a future” (196). A traumatic event, in Herman’s understanding, detaches and fundamentally alters relationships that the victim has with her environment. The final stage of recovery from a traumatic history requires that the traumatized individual reconnect with her surroundings and “engage more actively with the world” (197). Zahra’s sense of inclusion in Beirut’s wartime happenings allows her to open herself up to her surroundings and become aware of the environment around her in a way that opens the possibility of reconnection and recovery.

Whereas before Zahra began her process of trauma healing, she had been trapped entirely inside of her own mind and experiences, the traumatic nature of war feels natural to Zahra, allowing her to tentatively initiate interaction with the people, places, and events outside of herself. The tension and turmoil that dominate life in Beirut during the war unexpectedly provide Zahra with a sense of communal belonging and safety. With the oppressive social order and cultural expectations crumbling around her in wartime pandemonium, she is able to allow herself to relax (al, Shaykh, *Zahra* 124). The city’s shared wartime fear and confusion allows her to overcome her crippling sense of detachment from the world around her. For example, when she hears over the radio that the fighting has intensified, Zahra says:

I felt a sense of relief. I stopped wondering what would become of me. I knew that I was at home, just as everyone else was at home and taking refuge, no matter who they were. Even the beautiful women we saw in the society pages of the magazines were in the same fix, hiding in some corner of their elegant homes, hearing what I heard, thinking what I thought. (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 125)

The shared experience of being at war gives Zahra the sense of being a part of her surroundings, helping her begin the process of reconnecting with the people around her.

As part of her reconnection process, she actively confronts her older brother, Ahmad, to oppose his involvement in the fighting. Ahmad has always held the place of the favored male sibling in Zahra's life. "Meat continued to be for Ahmad. Eggs were for Ahmad. Fresh tomatoes were for Ahmad. So were the fattest olives" (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 25). Ahmad was incapable of doing wrong in the family; Zahra never crossed him. However, as she attains a new ability to interact independently with the world around her, she gathers herself enough to challenge Ahmad's role in what she views as a senseless war. She even commits to "develop some control over my [her] nerves so that I [she] can ask Ahmad why he has become involved with this war which I do [she does] not understand" (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 131). Her resolve to address her own trauma in order to be able to interact more influentially with the people in her life demonstrates an unprecedented level of participation in her environment.

Further strengthening her connections with the world around her, Zahra volunteers to help the wounded at the local hospital. Although her anxiety prevents her from continuing to volunteer beyond a few days, her time in the hospital connects her with external reality in a new way. Leaving the hospital, Zahra reflects, "Those who speak of war in platitudes have never seen war. Those who have only seen wars and hospitals in movies have seen nothing of truth" (al-

Shayh, *Zahra* 135). Her confrontation with the reality of the world of war in which she is living creates a poignant awareness of the pain and suffering of those around her; she even goes so far as to speculate that her understanding of reality is greater than those who have not seen what she has seen. Zahra's ability to recover in some degree from her traumas enables her to connect with her environment in profound and tangible ways.

Zahra's experiences reconnecting with her environment exemplify what Herman identifies as characteristics of the third stage of recovery. Herman holds that "Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery" (197). The third stage of trauma recovery is marked by the victim's return to a sense of empowerment and reconnection with the world around him or her. Zahra's sense of empowerment grows as she begins to interact more significantly with the people and institutions around her, suggesting that she is moving towards a recovery from her past traumas.

The height of Zahra's newfound ability to connect with and influence change in the world around her occurs when she initiates a sexual relationship with a nameless sniper stationed atop a nearby building (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 157). Zahra disrobes in front of him and, afterwards, reflects on the interaction by saying "I had got him to look at me as a man would look at a woman in peacetime" (159). Snipers constitute a great fear of Zahra's during the war. Their random and anonymous nature is seen frequently across Decentrist writing to reflect the larger chaos and irrationality of the Lebanese war and Zahra's perception of the sniper in al-Shaykh's novel reflects this trend. Zahra brazenly begins her interaction with him in an effort to distract him with her nudity, even momentarily, in the hopes of saving innocent lives; however, their relationship quickly becomes one of intense sexuality (157).

In her newfound connection with the sniper, Zahra feels physical pleasure in her sexual interaction with a man for the first time in her life. Their intimacy quickly escalates. The previously mute Zahra reaches a point where she feels comfortable voicing her sexual needs to him, saying, “and when I asked for more he gave me more” (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 152). She visits him daily and begins to envision a life with him after the war, dreaming of marriage and introducing their families to one another (173). He tells her stories from his childhood and gives her a name to call him by, Sami, thus personalizing and humanizing the nameless terror of the sniper (175, 184). Their relationship develops into one of the most intimate relationships Zahra has experienced, demonstrating her burgeoning capacity to recognize and interface with a world outside of herself, which significantly indicates her continued progress towards trauma recovery according to Herman’s three-step process.

Zahra’s journey to recovery is, however, cut tragically short. As her sexual relationship with Sami intensifies, Zahra finds herself four months pregnant and unable to abort the child. This unexpected discovery triggers a nervous breakdown for Zahra and her tenuous grasp on reality begins to crumble. Upon hearing the news from her doctor, her mind flashes back to her initial rape, her rapist’s reaction to Zahra’s resulting pregnancy, and her father’s beatings (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 202). She only manages to regain a sense of mental stability when she imagines that Sami the sniper might encourage her to go through with the pregnancy and decide to marry her.

Sami does not, however, react in the way that Zahra had hoped. Immediately assuming that she will abort the child, Sami offers her money to cover to the cost of the abortion. His reaction provokes another episode for Zahra and she detaches from reality, thinking, “Everything else, all other shapes, seem to dissolve” (al-Shaykh, *Zahra* 205). Sami the sniper is terrified at

the onset of her episode and, in a frantic effort to calm her, emphatically assures her that they will be married, saying, “Very well, Zahra. Please listen to me. Please. Sure we’ll get married, but please stop acting like this. I beg you” (208). This returns Zahra to reality and revives her awareness of the sniper and the potential of the child in her womb. In this fragile calm, she leaves the sniper’s perch and returns home, dreaming of their life together. Zahra is lost in her thoughts when she realizes that she is on the ground, drowning in pain and blood. The sniper has shot her on her way home. As she lies dying, Zahra thinks, “Although I try, I can hear no sound from my own voice” (214). Zahra dies trying unsuccessfully to construct and share her own traumas, as she has spent the majority of her life fighting and ultimately failing to do. Because of this, she is unable to complete Herman’s model for trauma recovery.

Despite the seeming tragedy of Zahra’s life and death, her character can be seen to have achieved some degree of trauma recovery according to Herman’s three-step process. Having successfully established a place of security and safety for herself as well as having been able to, in some capacity, confront and acknowledge her traumatic memories, she progresses well into Herman’s third and final stage of recovery. Zahra overcomes her experiences sufficiently to be able to build relationships with the people and world around her. By tracing Zahra’s process with her traumatic memories using Herman’s model for trauma recovery, Zahra’s struggles with her experiences can be said to be largely successful, despite their violent and untimely end.

#### **iv. The Story of Hanan**

Al-Shaykh also views her protagonist in a much more resilient light than the novel’s conclusion would suggest. In a 2003 interview in London, she acknowledges that the character of Zahra is largely unsuccessful in her attempts to tell her story and heal from her traumas, which is tragic; however, al-Shaykh says of Zahra, “she also tried her best within her limits. She was, I

think, stronger than others within her limits” (Schlote). al-Shaykh considers Zahra’s ability to achieve some degree of healing from her traumas as a testament to her courage and strength.

This hopeful assessment of Zahra’s tale suggests that the author shares a connection with her fictional character’s struggle and perhaps can even see her own experiences as a young woman in Beirut in Zahra’s life. The character of Zahra represents a woman who was weighed down by her culture and her nation’s violence, but doggedly strove to create a life and agency for herself. By expressing her identification of Zahra’s courage and determination under these circumstances, al-Shaykh offers the potential that the fictional Zahra is able to speak to some of the author's own very personal and real experiences with civil war trauma.

If Zahra’s fictional story can act as al-Shaykh’s means of reconstructing and confronting her wartime traumas, it also simultaneously constitutes what Herman would refer to as the second stage in al-Shaykh’s trauma recovery process. Through her novel, al-Shaykh is remembering and mourning the hurt and loss she suffered during the war. Notably, she did not begin to write *The Story of Zahra* until after she had been living safely outside of Lebanon for approximately 5 years. Once she settled in London, al-Shaykh was able to begin her trauma recovery process according to Herman’s model; she established a place of stability and security. From this place of safety, she was able to progress into Herman’s second stage of recovery, which, for al-Shaykh, was the writing of her novel.

The potential for trauma healing through her fiction is something that al-Shaykh appears to be conscious of. In the same London interview, she has said, “I feel at home most when I sit and write. And at the beginning, you know, you usually concentrate on certain feelings you feel about things and then slowly, slowly, you start importing or inhabiting the soul of the characters” (Schlote). Based on this statement, al-Shaykh is demonstrating an awareness of her own ability

to narrate and process very real personal memories through the interface of her fictional characters. In a 2014 interview with Lebanese online magazine *The Daily Star*, al-Shaykh has said, “I feel anchored when I write. When I don’t write I feel something is missing... Sometimes I wonder, ‘Do I write to live, or do I live to write?’ I don’t know. I have no answer” (Stoughton). She identifies that her personal survival depends in some way on her writing, which suggests that she is using her fiction in order to overcome her traumas. When read as al-Shaykh’s testimony to and reconstruction of her traumatic experiences with the Lebanese civil war, *The Story of Zahra* becomes an incredibly personal tale of struggle and resilience<sup>13</sup>.

Al-Shaykh’s biographical story begins with her birth in a very conservative district of Beirut in 1945, where she was raised by a strict, Shiite family (Abdo 217; Cooke, *Voices* 6). Her primary education took place in a local Muslim school; however, al-Shaykh soon convinced her family to send her to the Ahliya school, which was much more progressive in its approach to education and social issues (6). Upon leaving primary school for her new education, al-Shaykh became acutely aware of the repressive environment in which she had lived up to that point (6). In an effort to combat this repression in all its forms, al-Shaykh became very politically active, writing articles for local newspapers and distancing herself from anything that she felt hindered her autonomy (6).

Continuing her quest for independence, in 1963, al-Shaykh struck out on her own to attend the American College for Girls in Cairo, where she studied for four years and completed her first novel, *Intihar rajul mayyit* (*The Suicide of a Dead Man* 1967)<sup>14</sup> (Cooke, *Voices* 6). Following her education, she returned to Beirut to work in journalism and promote feminine agency (6). When the civil war broke out, al-Shaykh remained in Beirut for only seven months before determining to leave “in disgust and with no sense of guilt” (6). She felt that there had

been a total breakdown of communication in Lebanon and that, as a Lebanese woman, she could contribute much more to the Arab world from abroad. Other than brief visits to see family, al-Shaykh never lived in Lebanon again (6).

Much of al-Shaykh's struggle living in Lebanon leading up to and during the civil war bears a striking resemblance to the experiences that the fictional Zahra undergoes. Zahra, like al-Shaykh, is raised in a conservative environment in which she feels limited and suffocated by forces more powerful than her. Zahra, also similarly to al-Shaykh, rages against her oppressive environment; however, both women are unable to have success in their attempts to free themselves within the confines of the city of Beirut. For both women, despite their best efforts, dialogue and self-expression seemed stifled and impossible.

When the civil war reaches a fevered pitch, al-Shaykh and Zahra both surrender to the apparently insurmountable obstacles to self-expression and freedom in Lebanon at the time. Zahra loses her voice, mental stability, and ultimately her life to the wartime chaos and violence. al-Shaykh makes the decision to live and write in exile, coming to the conclusion that her voice will only be truly heard from a position outside of Lebanon (Cooke, *Voices* 6). Although there are crucial differences in the ways Zahra and al-Shaykh are overcome by the violence, both women experience a sense of defeat at the hands of the civil war's overwhelming tendency to silence expression and prevent healing. Al-Shaykh's traumatic history with the Lebanese civil war can be seen largely mirrored in her writing of Zahra's fictional tale. She is able to employ the character of Zahra as an instrument to explore and assert her own roles and experiences within the Lebanese civil war, working her way through Herman's second step in the recovery process: remembrance and mourning (155).

#### v. Al-Shaykh's Third Stage of Trauma Recovery

Al-Shaykh's act of narrating her personal traumas through the fictional story of her character Zahra demonstrates her ability to remember and mourn her wartime experiences, constituting the second phase in Herman's recovery process. She did not write her novel narrating these experiences until she had established a safe residence in London away from the war, constituting the first phase in Herman's recovery process. The question that remains is whether al-Shaykh's novel continued to mirror her personal progression through Herman's three-step process to trauma recovery.

Herman's third step in the process would require al-Shaykh to reconnect and engage with her surroundings. Although *The Story of Zahra* chronicles al-Shaykh's individual experiences with the traumatic civil war, it also connects al-Shaykh with the Lebanese community by creating an important model for healing for the survivors of the Lebanese civil war, particularly women. This novel, along with much Decentrist writing, is able to operate in interaction with Lebanon's metanarrative of politicized and violent rhetoric, creating an alternative narrative that values the significance of individual experience and the nuances of daily life over lofty ideologies and bids for power. The alternative discourse generated and perpetuated by al-Shaykh's novel, as well as the bulk of Decentrist writing, offers the space and opportunity for other individuals to reconstruct and confront their traumatic memories in ways that may facilitate recovery and even growth. The novel's work to connect al-Shaykh's healing process with the processes of countless other Lebanese civil war survivors can potentially constitute Herman's third stage in the trauma recovery process.

*The Story of Zahra's* ability to subvert the national metanarrative has become even more relevant in the face of the new discourse that has come to dominate Lebanon's collective

memory of the civil war in the years following the conflict: a metanarrative of silence. In the wake of the civil war, partisan tensions and bitter rivalries smoldered so intensely that the Lebanese people were unable to agree on a single account of what had happened in the fighting without reigniting dormant feuds and conflicts. In response to this impasse, the nation entered into what Sune Haugbolle refers to as a “state-sponsored... collective amnesia,” where the civil war is rarely addressed, documented, or acknowledged in any way (“Militia Man” 121).

The silence surrounding the civil war accounts extends so far as to be omitted from school history books, which simply end in 1946, two years after Lebanon gained independence and well before the war began (Wood; *The Economist*). A mandate to compile a national account of the civil war was part of the Taif agreement, the signing of which in 1989 was instrumental in ending the civil war; however, no consensus can be reached as to what this account should include (Muhanna; *The Economist*). As a result, an atmosphere of silence and unresolved trauma hangs over the nation with regards to their relatively recent civil war.

It is in light of this metanarrative of silence that al-Shaykh’s novel again works to create an alternative discourse. The graphic and visceral depictions of daily life on the ground during the Lebanese civil war that al-Shaykh and so many of the Decentrist writers create help to reconstruct and preserve memories that the national discourse strives to forget. In Barakat’s quote from the opening of this chapter, she references the crumbling of her own memories and the absence that persists when she remains silent and does not share her wartime experiences. In the face of the threat of this absence of memories and discussion, *The Story of Zahra* and other Decentrist works persist in reminding the Lebanese people what it was like to go out for groceries under the terror of rooftop snipers or to explore sexuality and new life in a world riddled with death and violence. In this way, al-Shaykh’s personal experiences keep pieces of the

war from disappearing from collective memory, further strengthening her agency in the world around her according to the patterns of an individual in Herman's third stage of recovery.

Reading al-Shaykh's novel in the context of contemporary society thus helps to combat Lebanon's collective inability to reconstruct and confront painful civil war memories, contributing to a solution to the Lebanese people's collective trauma. Fadda-Conrey asserts that, "The necessary survival of any society depends on its confronting any hurdles that incapacitate its sense of collectivity and/or diminish its communal consciousness" (7). The refusal to address wartime traumas has the potential to fundamentally undermine Lebanon's unity and identity as a nation. Many of the Decentrists, including al-Shaykh, are aware of this danger and intentionally write to discourage this kind of disintegration. Cooke writes that, "The writers are aware of the danger of escape that will allow the war to continue indefinitely" (*War's Other Voices* 60). al-Shaykh not only writes to end her own traumas, but to end Lebanon's trauma and the effects of a brutal civil war.

## II. Images of Hope: Using Visual Art to Navigate Trauma in Palestine’s Legacy of Despair



Cartoon by Omayya Joha (*Iran Cartoon*)

The word “Gaza” is written across the palm of the desperate hand reaching up from the grave towards the caricatured Arab and American onlookers who passively, even delightedly, watch as the Israeli character shovels dirt into the open grave. This cartoon is one of many drawn by Omayya Joha, a prominent and widely popular female cartoonist who draws scathingly controversial work for Palestinian newspapers and digital publications<sup>15</sup>. One of very few female cartoonists in the Arab world, Joha was born in the Gaza strip in 1972 and has used her cartoons to remain active in Palestinian politics since 1997, becoming the first female political cartoonist in the Arab world to draw for a daily newspaper<sup>16</sup> (*Eventide*). A unifying thread running through Joha’s work, as seen in the image above, is the searing theme of hopelessness that so often characterizes attitudes towards the Palestinian conflict. Joha’s condemning cartoons have earned her recognition and awards<sup>17</sup> throughout the Arab world, suggesting that the profound futility and despair underlying her work connects deeply with her readers and the Palestinian and Arab community (*Eventide; All 4 Palestine*).

The tendency to create work that draws on and reinforces the sense of hopelessness hanging over the Palestinian conflict is often seen in contemporary Palestinian art. Much of the work created by Palestinian artists such as Joha narrates and confronts individual and collective

traumas resulting from connections to, or involvement with, the Palestinian conflict (Ankori 17). For artists who work to process their traumatic memories through the artistic narration of their experiences, however, the metanarrative of hopelessness dominating the Palestinian legacy can be overwhelming. For example, when characterizing the current state of the Palestinian conflict, writer and scholar Fouad Moughrabi says, “There is no light at the end of the tunnel” (“From Palestine: Generation After Generation”). Journalist Daoud Kuttab’s article, “Palestinians Yearn for a Ray of Hope,” attributes the “escalating violence in Palestine” to “many long-standing, festering issues, but mostly, it’s the outcome of a total absence of hope.” For artists working to confront their traumas under the weight of both the conflict’s age-old legacy and fresh, ongoing violence, the wider hopelessness of Palestine perceived as a problem that will never be solved can seem inescapable.

Some Palestinian artists, however, have determinedly refused to surrender to the pressure of the larger Palestinian narrative of despair. These artists pursue a more optimistic image of what Palestine could be if things were different. They explore a potential world in which they were not born into a conflict dominated by a decades old metanarrative of hopelessness. These



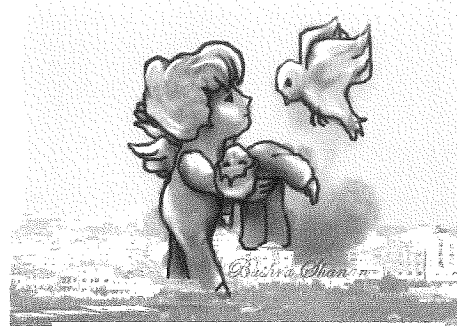
Image by Nidaa Badwan (*New York Times*)

artists include women like Nidaa Badwan (1987-), a photographer currently living in Gaza, who found her ability to create work and express her experiences so stifled in Palestine that she retreated into total

solitude inside her 3 x 3 meter bedroom for over a year (Leduc; Rudoren; Badwan). From her self-imposed isolation, Badwan began to construct an imaginary, private world in which she was free to lead the life she wanted; that life was colorful,

safe, and marked by creative expression (Badwan). She crafted an alternative Palestine, the possibility of a Palestine as it could be. Another of these is the graphic artist Bushra Shanan (1989-) from the West Bank who digitally alters

photographs of the destruction in Palestine to subvert the narrative of despair (Bailey). Shanan's goal is to reinvent images of Palestinian death and wreckage by



**Image by Bushra Shanan (*Middle East Monitor*)**

transforming them into pieces of art that commemorate or inspire hope (Dwaik). In confronting and processing their

traumatic experiences through their art, these women do not follow the current of the Palestinian narrative of hopelessness; instead, they work to create an alternative narrative and find recovery from their traumas through that creation.

Keeping all of this in mind, this chapter examines the Palestinian dialectic of hopelessness and possibility through the work of one particular painter, Majdal Nateel, who, through her art, imagines a world in which the approximate 500 Palestinian children<sup>18</sup> killed in the recent 2014 Israeli offensive against Gaza had survived (BBC News; Gaze Press Release). In an effort to cope with the trauma of a conflict in which so many innocent lives were lost, Nateel processes her experiences through a portrait series commemorating the young casualties. Joining the artists constructing narratives outside of the Palestinian metanarrative of futility, Nateel processes her traumatic memories by exploring an alternative Palestine in which these children had been elsewhere during the fighting and went on to lead happy, creative futures.

The traumatic memories that Nateel addresses through her series are a product of both what might be called “vertical trauma,” trauma resulting from generational and inherited memories of a brutalized Palestine, and “horizontal trauma,” which she experiences as a result of

memories taken on from the suffering Palestinian children. In referring to some traumas as vertical, I am indicating traumatic events that take place over the course of a chronological timeline; they are traumas that have been suffered throughout generations and are passed down to subsequent generations. For Nateel, her vertical trauma is inherited from her Palestinian ancestors. I am using the term horizontal traumas, however, to describe traumatizing events that take place within a particular time frame and act upon the victim in that same time frame; Nateel's horizontal traumas involve the events of the 2014 war in Gaza. Both kinds of trauma have a cumulative effect in that they inform and impact one another to create the trauma that Nateel actually experiences. This cumulative trauma prompts Nateel to create art to process her experiences by envisioning a more optimistic Palestine in which these traumas are no longer a dominant component of daily life.

## **ii. The Palestinian-Israeli Legacy**

To better understand the work that Nateel produces, it has to be considered within the political and historical context in which it was created. Traumas suffered by Palestinian artists, Nateel included, may explicitly address current events; however, these traumatic current events can never be separated from the legacy of conflict and violence that gave rise to those events. In order to truly understand the narratives that Nateel constructs with her portrait series, it is profoundly important and necessary to approach her work with at least a basic knowledge of the conflict's history.

The modern issues between Palestine and Israel began in 1917, when Britain took control of Palestine from the Ottoman Empire and, through the Balfour Declaration, established the land as "a national home for the Jewish people" (Balfour). This declaration specifies, "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities in

Palestine” (Balfour). With the Balfour Declaration in place and Palestine under British rule, the Jewish people began to settle alongside the Palestinians, causing general unease in the region.

Britain retained control over Palestine until 1948, with Jews and Arabs cautiously sharing the territory and navigating mounting tensions between the two people groups. In 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) submitted a proposal to avoid future conflicts by separating the British-governed Palestine into Arab and Jewish states; however, the Palestinians rejected the proposal’s suggested partition borders based on the belief that the UN’s proposed delineations did not reflect the distribution of currently settled Jews or Arabs. Following the failure of this UN proposal, Jewish leaders proclaimed the entire area as the state of Israel in 1948, effectively ending British rule. British troops withdrew from the region and widespread fighting broke out as approximately 700,000 Palestinians fled or were forced from their original homes and land by the newly asserted Israeli state. With this declaration of Israel’s statehood and the expulsion of Palestinian civilians from their homes, the conflict that would go on to rage for the next half a century officially ignited (American Documentary).

Israel’s declaration of statehood and creation of large bodies of Palestinian refugees escalated tensions within and surrounding the newly established state. In an effort to diffuse this, UN Resolution 194 was passed stating that Palestinian refugees should be allowed to return to their homes or, should they not wish to return, compensated by the state of Israel for their losses (Asser). This resolution, however, was never successfully executed. Accordingly, groups of displaced refugees placed a heavy strain on the surrounding Arab nations. In an attempt to address this, the West Bank and Gaza were established as Arab territories within Israel’s borders, but under the control of the surrounding Arab nations, including Jordan and Egypt (American Documentary). Many Palestinian refugee communities were formed in these territories, where

they remain to this day. As the Palestinians' sense of injustice mounted, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed in 1964 with the mission of representing the Palestinian people in their quest to resist Israel's imposed statehood and assert Palestinian nationalism (American Documentary). Opposition between Israeli and Palestinian ideals, goals, and forces continued to crystallize as the conflict grew more intense and complicated.

Over the next four decades, the international community worked to find a solution for the Israelis and the Palestinians as violent exchanges between the two groups continued. In 1967, Israel launched the Six Day War, which the Palestinians refer to as *al-Naksah* or "the setback" (American Documentary). During this war, Israel captured territory from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and began establishing settlements in those captured territories (Abdullah). Israeli occupations of the West Bank and Gaza, where many Palestinian refugees had resettled, meant that most Palestinian civilians lived under restrictive Israeli supervision. Starting in 1987, Palestinians resisted Israel's presence in these territories with large protests called *intifadas* or "uprisings" (Nassar xi). Shortly following the start of the *intifadas*, in 1988, the Islamist group *Hamas* was formed to oppose Israel and reject negotiations; this group, whose name translates roughly into the word "zeal," is responsible for several suicide bombings and rocket launchings against the state of Israel (Nassar 182). Smaller-scale skirmishes took place regularly, including Palestinian gunmen killing 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich and a Jewish settler killing 29 Palestinians in the West Bank in 1994 (American Documentary). Throughout seemingly endless failed negotiations, the bloody altercations and violent relations between Israel and Palestine dragged on.

It was in this legacy of violence and failed attempts at peace that Majdal Nateel's life began. Born in 1987 in Saudi Arabia to Palestinian parents, the family moved to Gaza in 1994,

where Nateel has lived ever since, marrying and raising her two daughters in the midst of the conflict (Nateel). She and her family have lived through numerous altercations between Israel and Palestine, including Operation Defensive Shield in 2002<sup>19</sup>, the Gaza Wars from 2008-2009<sup>20</sup> and 2014<sup>21</sup>, and ongoing attacks and bombings on both sides. Thus, Nateel's work as an artist has been largely shaped by her life lived under the shadow of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's age-old legacy.

In her own words, one of the more traumatic conflicts for Nateel was the recent 2014 war between Gaza and Israel, referred to by Israel as "Operation Protective Edge." This 50-day war consisted of an offensive operation launched by Israel in Gaza as a declared response to *Hamas'* fired rockets into Israel. Israel's offensive lasted from July 8 to August 26, killing over 2,100 Palestinians, the vast majority of which were civilians (BBC News; Defense). The UN estimates that approximately 495 of those killed were children, although exact numbers are not known<sup>1</sup> (BBC News). The United Kingdom-based humanitarian organization, Save the Children states that over 1,500 children were made orphans and that "all of Gaza's children, who make up half of the 1.8 million population, need some form of psychosocial support." A press release from the nonprofit organization "Gaze on Gaza" reports that the conflict left approximately 300,000 children suffering emotionally and psychologically. The 2014 conflict in Gaza had devastating repercussions for civilians, but particularly young children, which Nateel found to be particularly traumatizing.

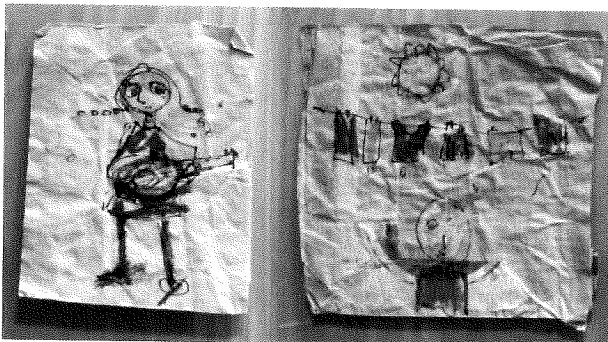
As a mother, Nateel was deeply impacted by this "war waged on Gaza's children" (Defense). In my interview with her, she explained that her experiences with her own children allowed her to empathize more intensely with many of the children who were impacted by the 2014 war. Following the ceasefire, Nateel, while in the later stages of pregnancy with her third

child, volunteered to help with UN-funded psychological intervention sessions for children who survived the devastation (Gaze Press Release; Rodenas). Her time with these children made an indelible mark on her experience with the 2014 conflict, connecting her with their suffering and trauma in a uniquely personal way (Nateel). Nateel reflected in our conversation that, “During and after the war I was in the last months of my pregnancy, so I was even more connected to the children.” Although neither Nateel nor her family suffered physical injuries during the 2014 war in Gaza, the conflict and its aftermath had a strong impact on Nateel and motivated her to process her traumatic experiences through her portrait series, *If I Wasn’t There* (2014).

Nateel’s series, *If I Wasn’t There*, deals specifically with the children who were killed in the 2014 war in Gaza; however, the experiences that she is narrating from her time in the 2014 war cannot be removed from the larger context in which they took place. In attempting to process her traumatic experiences through her art, Nateel was faced with the difficult task of identifying and externalizing her personal traumas resulting from both a specific event, the 2014 Gaza conflict, as well as a historical legacy of bloodshed and tension.

### iii. “If I Wasn’t There”: Narrating Postmemory Trauma

Nateel’s resultant portrait series is a collection of over 400 small drawings, each representing a single Palestinian child who did not survive Gaza’s 2014 war (Gaze Press Release). The drawings are intended to be displayed together in a single exhibit that requires the viewer to draw close in order to distinguish the individual children. Upon studying each portrait,



Drawings by Majdal Nateel (Gaze on Gaza, “On 08 July”)

the viewer is invited to consider the fate of the children and where each might be now if they hadn’t been caught in the midst of the fighting. Each portrait completes the

sentence, “If I wasn’t there....” Some of Nateel’s portraits finish this sentence with the silent “If I wasn’t there, I would be learning to play the *oud*<sup>22</sup>” or “If I wasn’t there, I would be helping mother hang the laundry.” Nateel explains that her drawings depict the “lost dreams of the children who died in the 2014 Gaza war” (Clark and Masters). Each image explores a child’s life that could have unfolded in a different Palestine.

Nateel’s decision to create this series speaks to her desire to confront traumas suffered in 2014 as well as the traumatic memories she has inherited as a Palestinian. With respect to her inherited, national traumas, Nateel’s drive to create this portrait series originated long before the 2014 conflict that the work explicitly deals with. The trauma that she confronts in the drawings is, at least in part, one that she inherited as a child strictly by virtue of being born into the Palestinian legacy of conflict and hopelessness. Events and images that took place before she was even born create a collective trauma for the people of Palestine; as a Palestinian herself, Nateel is a victim of this collective, historical trauma.

The historical trauma into which Nateel is born can be better understood through what literary critic Marianne Hirsch refers to as “postmemory,” or the present impact of traumatic events survived and shared by a prior generation (“Generation” 346). Hirsch explains postmemory as “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before” (“Generation” 347). Essentially, she asserts that the descendants of those who have directly experienced extreme trauma can so intensely connect with the memories of the prior generation that they take those experiences on as their own, suffering the traumatic effects of events that took place before they were even born. By inheriting these memories, a later generation can be profoundly shaped by experiences that they never actually had, resulting in postmemory trauma.

Hirsch's theory was written with the children of Holocaust survivors in mind; however, her ideas can be very generative when used to understand Palestinian generational trauma. Countless conflicts, massacres, and bombings that took place before the current generation of Palestinians' lifetimes form the underpinnings for a legacy of trauma that has intensely impacted the prior generations, enabling them to share in that trauma after the fact through passed down stories and memories. The postmemory trauma suffered by the current generation of Palestinians is not based on "recall, but... [on] imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch "Home"). In suffering from generational traumas, Palestinians in the current generation are not recalling their lived experiences with a particular traumatic event or series of events. Rather, they are imaginatively creating personalized and inherited traumas based on narratives and memories shared by older generations of Palestinians who lived through the events themselves. Through an imaginative investment in memories from events that took place in the past, Palestinians are able to inherit the trauma from their parents' lived experiences.

According to Hirsch's idea of postmemory, the trauma that Nateel suffers from is based on Palestine's historical legacy, which began and unfolded long before she was born. As Hirsch suggests often happens with victims of postmemory traumas, Nateel grew up immersed in the traumatic narrative of the Palestinian conflict, which played an immense role in much of her ancestors' lives and identities. Her parents and grandparents likewise were born into this decades-old conflict; the generational inheritance for Palestinians has been passed down since the 1920s. Despite the fact that Nateel did not directly experience each individually traumatic incident throughout the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she inherited the collective trauma that has been transmitted throughout generations nonetheless.

Because of the heritage of traumatic national memory into which she was born, when Nateel uses her art to process trauma, she cannot only draw on her lived experiences; she must also address trauma resulting from her postmemory. Nateel's inherited traumas cannot be isolated from her lived traumas; the two are inextricably intertwined, each informing the other. It seems that it would be impossible for her to confront her traumatic memories of a lived event without considering the impact of her inherited traumatic memories.

Thus, the necessity of acknowledging her postmemory when creating her work is something that Nateel is very conscious of. For example, when she was interviewed regarding what messages she hoped her art would convey, she responded saying, "With each work, new ideas come to mind, but I always remember the famous Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish's poem 'On This Land'<sup>23</sup>" (Saftawi). The poet Darwish (1942-2008) was born in a part of Palestine that is now Israeli territory (Bamia). His poetry, such as "*Ala Hadihil Ard*" ("On this Land") or "*Halat Hisar*" ("A State of Seige" 2002), generally addresses the age-old Palestinian crisis of identity and craving for independence. Perhaps confronting his own postmemory traumas, Darwish frequently wrote about the multiple seizures of Ramallah and the overwhelming sense of Palestinian loss (Bamia). Nateel's point of referencing Darwish's work as her own inspiration suggests an awareness of the constant presence of her postmemory trauma throughout her work.

The legacy traumas that both Darwish and Nateel have experienced can be identified in their artistic works. The poem by Darwish that Nateel references specifically, "On This Land," is an ode to the land of Palestine and the Palestinian people's right to love and live in the land freely. Darwish compares the land to a lover with whom he deserves to spend his life with. It ends with the lines, "My lady, I deserve you. Because you are my lady, I deserve to be alive" (Darwish). This refrain captures the decades-old heritage of love for the Palestinian land and a

desire to live safely on that land. It also hints at the Palestinian's collective sense of injustice; Darwish repeats the heirloom generational sentiment asserting that he *deserves* to live happily in the land that he loves. His poem does not address any particular conflict so much as it addresses the legacy of Palestine's loss and abrupt dissolution in 1948. By invoking Darwish's poem as a major source of inspiration in all of her work, Nateel demonstrates the degree to which the events that precede the 2014 war in Gaza as well as her own lived memories impact her choices as an artist.

Nateel's choice of materials for her project further illustrates how her postmemory impacts her art. Interestingly, she chose to draw her portraits on wrinkled and torn scraps of cement bags; cement from those bags was originally meant to repair and rebuild buildings destroyed by the 2014 Gaza war (Channel 4 UK; Gaze Press Release; Rodenas). In the wake of the destruction caused by the 50-day war, the Palestinian civilians were provided with aid in the form of limited cement supplies intended to help them cope with the approximate 17,200 destroyed homes and 244 damaged school buildings (BBC News). An important component of helping the traumatized children of Palestine recover from their experiences is to provide them with safe homes and a return to their regular education programs, all of which the new cement could help facilitate. It was on the scraps of these cement bags intended to heal and rebuild Gaza's infrastructure that Nateel drew her series. Her use of the cement bag scraps echoes the strong generational desire that exists among Palestinians to restore Palestine to its memorialized former independence and beauty.

Sadly, the number of cement bags provided to repair the damage was inadequate. The destruction and subsequent need in Gaza was so great that the cement bags were consumed almost immediately with most of the wreckage still remaining (Channel 4 UK; Gaze, "08 July").

Survivors of the 2014 conflict were unable to rebuild most of the wrecked buildings. This again echoes the reality that Palestine, as a nation, cannot be restored with the available resources, a reality which has constituted a largely traumatic situation for generations of Palestinians.

Although this interpretation of Nateel's use of the cement scraps could be characterized as fatalistic and falling in step with the Palestinian metanarrative of hopelessness, the cement bags also contribute a sense of hopefulness to Nateel's series. While the cement bags provided were insufficient to rebuild, Nateel was able to construct something beautiful out of them nonetheless (Gaze, "08 July"). She repurposed the "fragments of the bags used to deliver limited supplies of cement to families whose homes were bombarded" into a memorial that offers beautiful childhoods to those casualties who never had the chance to experience them (Gaze Press Release). Nateel's use of the seemingly useless scraps speaks hope into a nation living under an international narrative of despair.

Also working to subvert Palestine's fatalistic metanarrative, it is important to note that the bags Nateel drew on were, as mentioned, originally used to carry cement. Cement is normally a material that is meant to hold pieces together and in the case of Gaza, to reinforce its buildings and make them solid, strong, and permanent (Gaze Press Release; Rodenas). While the bags no longer store the cement, they now carry something else that may have a similar cementing effect. The bags now carry Nateel's portraits, acting as individual visions of hopefulness and a refusal to surrender to Palestine's despairing metanarrative. Nateel says of her decision to use the cement bag scraps, "I think that... we should talk about building humans, not places." The bags on which Nateel draws point to an aspect of Palestinian life that can and should be repaired. Her portraits live on those cement bag scraps, representing the potential for Palestine to hold together and rebuild in both tangible and intangible ways in the face of their lineage of conflict.

Also demonstrating her need to process her postmemory trauma, Nateel's portrait series noticeably excludes all signs of warfare. Presumably, if the children who she is commemorating had survived the 2014 war, their lives would still have been marked in some way by the conflict zone in which they lived. But Nateel's images portray children who not only survive the 2014 Gaza war, but who live beyond the legacy of national trauma into which they were born. The imaginary lives that she constructs for these children are free of any signs of either lived or generational trauma. By choosing to not only reinvent the children's loss of life, but also their inability to escape their generational trauma, Nateel is revealing that the traumas she suffers from are due at least in part to the fact that the postmemory into which Palestinian children, including herself as a child, are born prevents them from ever living trauma-free.

#### **iv. "If I Wasn't There": Narrating Prosthetic Trauma**

While implicitly and indirectly addressing the traumatic history of Palestine, Nateel's series deals explicitly with the 2014 war in Gaza. She creates a portrait for each, individual child lost in that conflict, wanting the loss of each life to be counted; she speaks for the children who cannot speak because they did not survive the fighting. Interestingly, however, Nateel did not die in the 2014 conflict, nor did any of her children. The question I explore in this portion of my chapter is: If she is using this series to process her traumatic experiences, whose memories is she narrating with her portraits?

Despite her lack of immediate, personal experience with the loss of a child's life in the 2014 war, Nateel feels very strongly connected to the children who suffered during the fighting, possibly to the point where she has taken on their experiences as her own. In our interview, Nateel explained that in the 2014 war, "the things that personally affected me the most strongly were the stories that I heard from the children." Based on her strong ethnic and cultural ties to

those children who did lose their lives, it seems that Nateel establishes a shared identity with them that allows her to effectively take on their memories, and subsequently their traumas, as her own. By working with the surviving children in UN psychological intervention sessions, she solidified that shared identity as suffering Palestinians and her ability to share in their trauma (Gaze Press Release).

Yet what kind of traumatic memories are we seeing her in art as a result of this contact with the trauma of others? Nateel's ability to remember experiences and suffer trauma based on events that she did not actually live might be better understood if it is read through Alison Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory. This theory holds that memories can be shared by their "rightful owners," those who actually experienced the remembered events, with someone who then adopts those memories as their own (28). Prosthetic memories, then, are memories that are taken on by an individual who has not lived the experiences captured in those memories.

Landsberg's use of the word "prosthetic" comes from the word "prosthesis" which originates from the Greek root *prostithenai*, which means, "to add to"; it also describes "an artificial device that is used to replace or augment a ... part of the body" (Merriam Webster). Both definitions of this word are connected to Landsberg's theory; a prosthetic memory is artificially grafted into the lived experiences of an individual who was not actually present during the making of that memory. Lee Bernstein explains Landsberg's theory by saying, "Like a prosthetic limb on an amputee, these.... memories are not 'organic' products of lived experiences. Yet, also like prostheses, they are carried around with us and become part of our lived experience" (551). The prosthetic memories can be so fully taken on from their "rightful owners," that the new owner of the artificial memories will go on to live their life wholly as if they had lived and experienced the events being remembered.

Nateel is not a “rightful owner” of the memories of the murdered children; those war memories rightfully belong to the children themselves. Despite this, she takes on their memories and is subsequently traumatized by their impact on her. The memories that Nateel has of a child’s suffering and death in the violence of the 2014 Gaza war are not products of her lived experiences; however, to some extent she has assumed these memories as her own, part of collective memory of the Palestinian culture which she is part of, and is attempting to process the accompanying trauma through her portrait series.

In working to process the trauma she has taken on, Nateel creates her portrait series, which essentially becomes a set of new prosthetic memories. She constructs the memories of the children’s lives that could have been. Her work creates a body of memories that were never lived and therefore could never be “rightfully” owned by anyone because her work is about the absence of lived memories. Her work is about the memories that will never be lived and the silencing of the children who would have lived and shared those memories. The images she creates are manufactured narratives about a potential scenario other than the one that took place. By constructing and confronting these artificial, prosthetic memories, Nateel works towards addressing the trauma she has taken on from the lived memories of Palestinian children.

Addressing the trauma of prosthetic memories taken on from children killed in the 2014 war largely shapes and directs the style of Nateel’s work. As she is processing what are actually children’s memories by creating her set of new, theoretical memories, Nateel literally assumes the artistic “voices” of children telling the stories of what they would be doing had they not been killed. Nateel said, “I am dedicating my artistic tools to talk on behalf of children who lost their voices simply because they were here, or there...” (Gaze, “08 July”). In an effort to speak for the children who were silenced by the war, she drew her series in the style that a young child might

draw, featuring simple, two-dimensional images, stick figures, and jagged, unpolished lines. For



Drawings by Majdal Nateel (Middle East Eye)

those that know her work, this not Nateel's usual style. Her other work is much more sophisticated and elaborate, as in her series *The Impact of Light and Glass* (Saftawi). In this series, Nateel's images are complex, rich with detail and depth, and constructed with smooth, intentional brush strokes. Her

paintings often make use of palettes of

vibrant colors that she blends and contrasts

skillfully. For her *If I Wasn't There* portraits, however, she uses predominantly primary or neon colors that are often scribbled on top of one another without any blending or transitions. Nateel says of this process, "When I draw it [the portraits], I try to think like a child. What do I want to see?" (Channel 4 UK). The childish style is a specific affect that she employs in order to create these prosthetic memories as a child would experience and recreate their lived memories.

Nateel also chose to design the portraits using the raw materials that a child might use. In our interview, she explained that she usually creates her art using acrylic paints, watercolors, or ink for sketching. For this portrait series, however, she decided to use pastels that she purchased in the local market (Nateel). She indicated that these pastels are what her own children and many other children she has worked with in her community use to create drawings at home or in school (Nateel). This choice suggests her desire to tell these stories from the perspective and with the voice of a child. Nateel inhabits a child-like identity when painting by using children's tools to

create an array of prosthetic memories that were never lived and exist tragically without the children who should “rightfully own” them.

Nateel demonstrates that she is aware of the fact that she is not the “rightful owner” of the traumatic memories she has taken on from the surviving children or of the theoretical, prosthetic memories she draws in her series, “If I Wasn’t There” (Hirsch 28). She connects the memories her series features to the displaced children she worked with in the aftermath of the 2014 war by saying, “Ideas of my drawings came from the stories I heard from children” (Middle East Monitor). At the same time, although Nateel did not live the theoretical memories that she has constructed, the memories depicted in the portraits do in a way belong to Nateel, who has taken them on as prosthetic memories and has undertaken the task of narrating the events that resulted in a glaring absence of the children who should have lived these memories. Ultimately, her portrait series is about the absence of the children who should “rightfully own” the stories in her work; however, in the absence of these children, she agrees to act as the owner of these memories that should have been so that she can tell the story of her personal trauma and the larger trauma of her people.

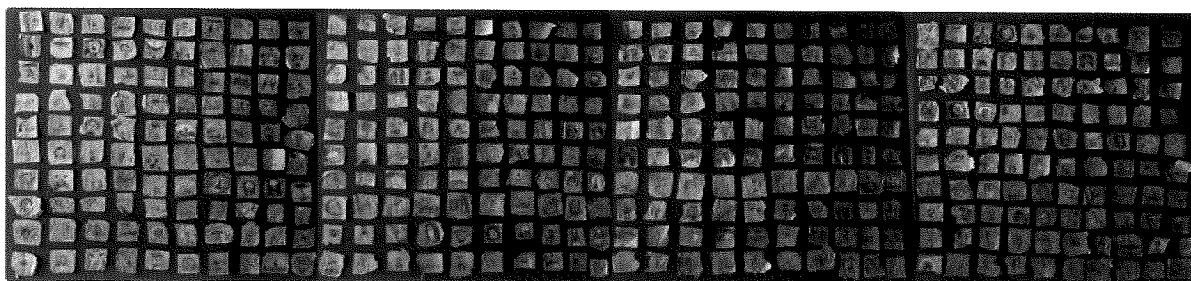
#### **v. The Fate of Ownerless Memories**

Nateel has constructed a set of memories that will never be lived and will therefore never be “rightfully owned” by anyone, yet the question remains: what will happen to these memories? Regardless of who does or does not live or own them, they now exist, focusing on an extremely violent and traumatic event in Palestine’s increasingly dismal history.

As the creator of these theoretical, prosthetic memories, Nateel hopes to share them and the potential for trauma recovery they can bring with the world. Making her portraits accessible to the larger global community is important to her, yet it has been challenging for several

reasons. After creating her portrait series and holding smaller showings within Gaza, she made several attempts to make her work available internationally (Gaze Press Release). She explains that it “was part of a dream to display my [her] work in a global gallery” (Middle East Monitor). However, after six failed attempts to obtain a permit to leave Gaza and transport her work abroad, Nateel realized that she would not be able to promote her work from outside of Gaza’s prison-like borders (Channel 4 UK). Fortunately, UK journalist Jon Snow took an interest in her series after meeting her while on a visit to Gaza to report on the Israeli blockade (Clark and Masters). In speaking with Nateel, he learned of her difficulties and volunteered to secretly carry 400 of her paintings out of Palestine with him in his suitcase (Clark and Masters). Once back in the UK with the successfully smuggled portrait series, Snow was able to arrange for her work to be displayed at the P21 Gallery in London museum during the month of August 2015, where Nateel’s portraits became available on a more international basis (P21).

By sharing her work with the other Palestinians and with the world, Nateel is designing a roadmap for healing from individual trauma, but also for the existential pain of Palestine’s collective trauma. Despite the fact that each child in Nateel’s series is given an individual portrait, the pieces are still always shown together, in a single, collective display. This display decision stresses her understanding of the Palestinian trauma as a collective one in addition to a personal one. Nateel’s work not only addresses the reality of traumas suffered at the individual level, but also confronts Palestine’s larger traumas as a nation.



Drawings by Majdal Nateel (Gaze on Gaza, "08 July")

Suffering from both postmemory traumas as well her own personal traumas, Nateel has created her series, *If I Wasn't There*, to insightfully and meaningfully confront the point at which her vertical trauma (her inherited memories) and horizontal trauma (her prosthetic memories) intersect with one another. Nateel's generational traumas can be explained as vertical by virtue of their unfolding over the course of time and being passed down through generations. These vertical traumas are an integral part of her Palestinian legacy. Her lived and experienced traumas can be described as horizontal in that they take place within a given time period and connect Nateel to other individuals within that same time period. Her prosthetic memories and their accompanying traumas all act within the same generation in which they occurred. These vertical and horizontal traumas interact with one another, creating the cumulative trauma that prompts Nateel to create her portrait series.

From birth, Nateel was the unwilling recipient of a historical legacy of trauma experienced by generations that preceded her, comprising her vertical traumas. The weight of this larger history and inheritance helped shape and inform the perspective from which Nateel experienced the conflicts that unfolded during her lifetime. When she faced new, horizontal trauma in her era, she was already actively living as a product of trauma from events that predated her. Her series attempts to capture the intersection of these horizontal and vertical traumas as they converge on a single point in time, which was the 2014 Gaza war.

We can see in Nateel's portrait series how her vertical and horizontal traumas have a compounding effect on one another. Her work tackles the multilayered trauma that she has experienced. The voices of the children in her portraits explicitly work to address her prosthetic memories of the 2014 Gaza war; but those voices cannot be extricated from the heritage of trauma that she has inherited from the decades of conflict dominating the region. The interplay of both these traumas inform her artistic work. Although she cannot escape the conflict she is born into, it seems that she can begin the process of facing and recovering from her traumas through her work. By narrating her experiences with both postmemory trauma and trauma associated with her prosthetic memories, Nateel is externalizing the traumatizing events. This externalization and confrontation with the reality of her traumas is what allows the recovery process to take root.

Most notably, Nateel undergoes this process of trauma recovery without submitting to the Palestinian metanarrative of hopelessness, although she and her work are always in conversation with it. While the international community and many Palestinians themselves work within the bounds set by this larger discourse of failure and despair, Nateel along with a small cohort of brave artists continue to create the potential for a hopeful, healed Palestine. Her series, "If I Wasn't There," narrates her wartime experiences by constructing a new, alternative narrative of life and survival for the people of Palestine.

Edward Said writes of Palestine, "The fact of the matter is that today Palestine does not exist, except as a memory, or, more importantly as an idea, a political and human experience, and an act of sustained popular will" (qtd. in Makdisi 443). With this understanding of Palestine as an ideological construct, Nateel's work to create a more optimistic vision of what Palestine could be acts as one of the more influential means for rebuilding her nation. Perhaps by envisioning a

Palestine free from both the collective and the individual traumas of the age-old conflict, Nateel and other artists like her can inspire the world to pursue a more positive concept of Palestinian despite the looming legacy of futility. Perhaps by creating an alternative narrative of hope and determined possibility for Palestine, these artists can begin to inspire a change in attitude and approach with regards to the future of Palestine.

### III. Shaping Syria's Civil War Narrative through Photography

"It is the story of those I photograph. The Syrian people." – Nour Kelze



Photo by Nour Kelze (McEvers)

When asked what story she wants her photographs to tell, the 28-year-old Syrian, Nour Kelze, answers with the words above. And it seems that the Syrian people may need photographers like her more now than ever. The humanitarian atrocities suffered in Syria since the start of the ongoing civil war in March of 2011 have left hundreds of thousands dead and countless more traumatized (Rodgers). Despite the conflict's prolific bloodshed and wartime atrocities, hard facts about the reality on the ground in Syria remain difficult to come by due in large part to the extreme risk posed to journalists and photographers. Since the war's outset, the government, as well as various militant groups, has demonstrated extreme hostility towards reporters (Brown). The immunity traditionally afforded photographers inside of war zones has not applied to Syria's civil war, elevating Kelze's work to a critical importance.

A former English teacher, Kelze started out haphazardly taking photos of the conflict on her cell phone (McEvers). The war's abrupt, unanticipated, and intense onset ignited a strong urge in Kelze to document and share the elements of the war that she felt were not being recorded or were being actively concealed by the government (Kelze). Using her phone's

camera, she spontaneously and fearlessly joined the rebel fighters on the front lines, capturing the moments she felt were being lost or forgotten by her nation and the world. In 2012, a well-known Reuters photographer, Goran Tomasevic, came across Kelze and her cell phone photography while in Syria (McEvers). Impressed by her drive and raw ability, he spent one week training her on the use of professional cameras and then left her with a few of his cameras (McEvers). Kelze has been photographing scenes from within Syria ever since.

Kelze's work is particularly significant in that she is one of the few photojournalists working in Syria who is Syrian. Goran Tomasevic, Nicole Tung, Jerome Sessini, Lynsey Addario, and Laurent Van Der Stockt have all published powerful photographs from within Syria; however, none of these photographers are Syrian (Brown). Thus, one might say that, as a member of the Syrian people undergoing the traumatic conflict *and* a photographer of that conflict, Kelze occupies the unique position of being able to speak both for and as the Syrian people.

Interestingly, Kelze verbalizes her position within the Syrian people's group identity as an important part of her drive to narrate the war through her photography. She never expresses her goals as a photographer by stressing her own individual or personal traumas; rather, she refers to her sense of connection with the Syrian people and her need to narrate on behalf of the group she identifies with. She regularly makes statements such as, "Somebody has to see all this. Somebody has to know what this monster is doing to us," relying on wording that identifies her as a member of the Syrian people (VanDyke). Kelze's expression of her trauma is collective more often than it is individual.

Kelze's representation of her own traumatic experiences suggests that her goals for her photographs center on the narration of a cultural, collective trauma as opposed to a personal,

individual one. Offering an alternative to the traditional association of trauma with individual experience, Jeffrey Alexander describes the phenomenon of a “cultural trauma” as taking place “when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever, and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (307). Unlike individual traumas, which work uniquely in the lives of the affected victims, a cultural trauma impacts the collective identity of a group of people in a way that unites them under a single identity; in this case, that group of people is the Syrian civilians.

In light of the suffering that the people of Syria are undergoing, a collective identity has developed that allows the Syrian civilians to be traumatized as a cultural whole. Ron Eyerman adds to Alexander’s idea of cultural trauma by saying that the concept of a cultural trauma allows us to “account for the emergence of new collective identities in times of social crisis” (304). The traumatized Syrian civilians are actively forming a new collective identity as the violence and chaos unfolds around them. Nour Kelze identifies strongly as part of this traumatized Syrian collective. Although, at the times in which many of her photos were taken, she herself had not been physically injured in the war, the injuries dealt to the Syrian people as a whole impact her personally and poignantly. Her reaction is reflected in Alexander’s statements that “members of collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others” (307). Kelze’s understanding identification with the Syrian collective allows her to share in the sufferings and consequential traumas of her fellow Syrians.

Kelze also expresses that she feels a drive to share the collective traumas of her people in order to subvert and correct the wartime narrative being constructed by the Syrian regime, which she believes to be falsely concealing the reality of civilian suffering. In one of my interviews

with her by email, Kelze expressed that, “at the start of the Revolution, it was necessary to tell the other part of the story not staged by the regime’s media channels. What the regime broadcasted was not the truth, as I was witness to some of the events in ... the city of Aleppo, my home town.” Struck by the discrepancies that she saw between the regime’s narrative and her lived experiences, Kelze was galvanized to do something to disrupt the power of the national narrative that was being formed by the reigning powers in Syria. She explains this further by saying that she, “first wanted to show what was happening in rebel held areas to the locals who believed the regime’s media. And then I [she] wanted to show people abroad what was happening to Syrians.” In sum, one of Kelze’s central goals is to contribute to a wartime narrative that presents an alternative to the narratives being shaped by those in political power in Syria.

With this in mind, this chapter will explore Kelze’s use of photography as a means to document and raise awareness for the collective traumas from which she and the Syrian people jointly suffer. Her desire to construct a narrative that exists outside of the regime’s narrative reflects a need to chronicle and assert Syrian people’s experiences with the war in a way that creates potential spaces for trauma recovery both now and in the future. In order to analyze how Kelze’s photographs work to narrate these traumatic experiences, I will be considering Judith Butler’s understanding of the camera’s ability to frame the loss of life as either grievable or not. Butler holds that “the image itself is really part of the waging of war” (xi). According to Butler’s theories, the way a photograph frames a wartime scene participates in the larger process of determining what aspects of the reality depicted will be foregrounded, focused on, or omitted from public memory. In this way, images of war are capable of enacting tangible changes on the way a war is understood and reacted to. Accordingly, Kelze’s photographs have the potential to

document and narrate the realities of the Syrian civil war in ways that shape and define what will eventually be accepted historical accounts of the conflict.

In order to understand the role Kelze's images play in waging the war, I will approach select photographs from her work and ask a question that theorist W.J.T. Mitchell suggests we ask of all pictures; I will be asking some of Kelze's pictures what they, as photographs, want ("Really" 71). In granting Kelze's photographs the kind of "personhood" that Mitchell makes the case for, he believes that we can more profoundly understand the ways in which her photographs work on their viewers ("Really" 72). By investigating the intent of Kelze's photographs, this paper will explore how the photographs work to frame and counteract the regime's narrative of the war in ways that allow for healing and trauma recovery for the collective Syrian people.

Both Butler and Mitchell stress the agency and influence that photographs have over their viewers and the world around them. In this chapter, I will use these two theorists as tools to understand how Kelze's photographs in particular work to achieve her goals. For Kelze, these photographs are a means to an end; they are a mechanism she can use to realize her personal desire, which is to assert what she perceives to be the civilian experience in the Syrian civil war. By analyzing the intent of her photographs, we are able to more insightfully assess Kelze's intent and how her images work to accomplish it.

## **ii. The War**

The civil war that Kelze documents is unfolding as I write this; however, the roots of its origins run deeply and complexly through Syria's history. The current Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, inherited his position from his late father, Hafez al-Assad, who ruled Syria strictly and with harsh, unapologetic violence (MacFarquhar). New York Times journalist Neil MacFarquhar says of the elder al-Assad's reign, "When the choice came down to spilling blood or preserving

his hold on power, there was really no question.” The elder al-Assad always opted for bloodshed. This history of violent leadership planted the seeds for a longstanding mistrust of the government in Syria on the part of the civilians.

When the elder al-Assad died in 2000, his son, Bashar, succeeded him in a power handoff that was heavily facilitated by regime loyalists, including the ruling Ba’th<sup>24</sup> party and the Alawite<sup>25</sup> sect (BBC News). After an amendment to the Syrian constitution was made to remove any obstacles to his presidency, the younger al-Assad was elected with a highly suspect 97% of the allegedly democratic vote (BBC News). He ruled with relative peace and prosperity for the first decade of his presidency; however, in 2011, the Arab Spring began (Abdullah). The Arab Spring is the name used to describe the series of pro-democracy uprising that took place across several different Arab nations, including Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya (Abdullah). These protests and uprisings had different impacts within the individual nations in which they occurred; however, they caught the attention of the Syrian people, prompting them to question the possibility of challenging their longstanding regime leadership. The discontent civilians began to demonstrate their displeasure with some of the regime’s behaviors and policies through peaceful demonstrations.

While the theories as to how the war in Syria actually began are diverse and numerous, the first act of violence took place in March of 2011 in the southern city of Deraa, where regime security forces fired live rounds into a crowd of peaceful protesters, killing dozens (Gilsinan, Thompson). The protesters had gathered to nonviolently demonstrate opposition to the alleged arrest and torture of teenagers who had painted anti-regime sentiments on a public wall (Rodgers, Gilsinan). This violence triggered a rash of protests against the regime across the nation. The government responded to these protests with more violence, only exacerbating the

public's frustration and outrage, which had been building below the surface for decades. By July of the same year, hundreds of thousands of civilian protesters were turning out to oppose Bashar al-Assad's regime in public rallies (Rodgers).

As the instances of violence at the multiplying, anti-government protests escalated, it became increasingly difficult for the Syrian people to determine the specifics of what was happening. Reports as to who initiated or perpetrated the violence were vague and regularly contradictory, and interviews with Syrian civilians living in Damascus during this time indicate that regime news stations often reported rebels as initiating the violence. However, eyewitness participants in the protests claimed that regime forces had fired the first shots<sup>26</sup> (B. Hashem; S. Hashem). Regime authorities announced that the protests were minimal and perpetrated by foreign-backed forces as part of an "external conspiracy" to undermine the Syrian government, but specifics about the supposedly international plot were never presented (BBC News). The Syrian people's ability to stay informed on what was happening in their own nation was severely limited.

Over the next year, the country descended into full-fledged civil war, with the loosely unified rebel front opposing the Syrian regime. By 2012, fighting had moved from the rural outskirts of the nation into major cities including Damascus and Aleppo (Rodgers). By June of 2013, UN figures numbered the death count at approximately 90,000 individuals; by 2015, that number had increased to 250,000 (Rodgers). The dynamics of the conflict quickly grew complicated as other regional and world powers became involved and the jihadist Islamic State (ISIS) came into power (Rodgers, Thompson). Syria's infrastructure and stability crumbled as war swept the nation.

In 2013, reports of chemical warfare began circulating. Western experts claimed that the regime was the only possible source of these weapons; however, government news outlets reported that rebel forces had initiated the use of chemical weapons (Rodgers). Outside reports have also suggested that ISIS has been using homemade chemical weapons, but that has yet to be confirmed (Rodgers). Sahar Hashem, who is my aunt and who lived in Damascus until 2014 and who maintains regular contact with individuals in the medical community on the ground in Syria has said, “when mothers bring their kids in to the doctors, the doctors say this is chemical. Their injuries are chemical. And the children were injured by blasts fired from Assad’s security men. The news says it is the rebels, but we all know that isn’t true.” The mainstream news outlets continued to project an image of the war that vilified the rebels and strengthened the regime’s cause.

It is in this widespread confusion and atmosphere of misinformation that Kelze has chosen to document what she believes to be an honest account of the Syrian people. As she asserts in an interview, “somebody has to know what this monster is doing to us... I’m making sure that somebody is going to know. All the people in the world are going to see this” (VanDyke). Outraged by the regime’s ability to project an image of the civilian situation and cause that manipulates the truth, Kelze is determined to make whatever truth she can access available to both the Syrian people and to the global community<sup>27</sup>.

### **iii. Framing the Syrian Civil War**

Kelze’s goal of subverting the regime’s wartime narrative using her photographs involves the complex rhetorical task of framing the subjects of her images. Whom and what she chooses to focus on or omit, the background or foreground of her photos, all carry significance in the development of her account of the events she tries to capture in her work. In order to understand

the ways in which her photographs contribute to the larger wartime narrative, it is necessary to account for the ways in which she frames her subjects.

Butler's *Frames of War* considers the complexities of framing scenes of war in photographs and how those photographs go on to tell the story of the war depicted. She reflects on the ways in which a photograph can "recruit... [a viewer] into ... a certain framing of reality, both its constriction and its interpretation" (xii). The way a photograph captures people and things determines how the stories of those people and things are interpreted and circulated. The photographs play a significant role in how what is considered to be the reality of a war is constructed. Specifically, how a photograph frames the details and specifics of war can impact who or what is considered worthy of grief and what is simply an expected casualty of violence.

Within the context of photography, to frame something refers to the setting of visual limits within an image, determining what is seen and what is not seen by the viewer. Judith Butler, however, points out that the idea of "framing" in the English language can also refer to the setting up of evidence that ultimately proves the guilt of an individual or a criminal (8). The connotation is almost always negative; however, the implication is that the situation is manipulated in such a way as to have all responsibility for wrongdoing associated with the individual being framed. In both cases, she asserts that the frame "implicitly guides the interpretation" of the onlooker or viewer (8). When this idea is applied to photography, it calls attention to the ways in which the framing of a photograph impacts and directs the viewer's experience and conclusions derived from the image.

This reinforces her assertion that the framing of a photograph has its own, critical role in determining the overall meaning of an image. Butler reflects that, "the frame tends to function... as an editorial embellishment of the image" (8). Although not the first to say this in the history of

critical theory about photography, Butler is suggesting that the subjects that a camera's frame includes, excludes, or recognizes are all reflections of a particular perspective. The framing of a photograph, then, can be a tool for implicitly guiding the viewer's interpretations of and conclusions about the event depicted.

When examining how photographs of wartime in particular function as means of wartime narration, Butler holds that a camera is capable of framing a violent event in ways that casts human life in various levels of worth or value (x). She believes that "cameras work as instruments of war, ... [in that] they both frame and form the human and non-human target along with a field of collateral damage" (x). The framing of a photograph can either "recognize" human lives or "cast [them] as instruments, blockades, targets and shields" (4, x). The differentiation between these two depictions is what determines when a loss of life should be grieved and when a loss of life should be devalued and dismissed. A photograph as a representation of war carries with it the capacity to impact the ways in which viewers understand the mechanics and intricacies of a conflict, particular the loss of human life.

Kelze's efforts to contribute to the developing wartime narrative in Syria and consequently confront her cultural traumas depend heavily on her photographs' abilities to frame conflict details for her viewers. Many of her photos are attempts to elicit a response from her viewers, begging them to "recognize" the lives of the Syrian civilians that the regime would otherwise cast as what Butler refer to as "collateral damage" (Butler 4, x). This appeal to her viewers is an important component of her trauma recovery process, as the viewers take on the roles of witnesses to her testimony. In constructing a narrative that runs counter to the one promoted by the Assad regime, Kelze's photos frame the conflict in ways that promote her personal goals for the developing Syrian wartime narrative.

In order to better understand what kinds of responses Kelze's photos might elicit from their viewers, W.J.T Mitchell's idea of the "personhood of pictures" becomes extremely useful ("Really" 72). Photo critic Mitchell approaches pictures as though they were living things, placing the locus of action on the pictures themselves as opposed to the pictures' viewers or subjects. He does this, simply, by asking pictures what they want, treating them as though they were capable of independent action and desire. Mitchell acknowledges that asking pictures what they want will not necessarily eliminate the traditional tools of visual analysis, including the interpretation of signs or rhetoric. However, Mitchell's approach grants pictures an agency of their own. He treats the pictures as though they were a disenfranchised population "to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak" ("Really" 74). The picture's speech, however, would still require a translator, which is where the role of the viewer comes into play again. Kelze's photographs, when asked, do have desires of their own and can have the agency to promote those desires if approached by the proper translator.

By following Mitchell's model of asking the photos what they want, we are better able to understand the intent and desires of Kelze's photographs. This process helps us uncover Kelze's intent and desires for her images. This is a necessary step in order to analyze how the photographs work to empower Kelze to impact the still emerging narrative chronicling the Syrian war. Understanding how and what her pictures frame is a crucial component of defining how they work to impact the solidifying wartime narrative and to address the collective cultural trauma from which both she and the Syrian people are suffering.

Kelze's photographs can read as very intimate and personal accounts of the war, even though they depict scenes from the Syrian civilian's collective traumas. Butler expresses that "the relation between the photographer and the photographed takes place by virtue of the frame"

(82). The framing in Kelze's pictures is a very intentional and personal choice that reflects her individual experiences as a part of a cultural trauma.



Photo by Nour Kelze (McEvers) 1

War photographer James Nachtwey echoes this sentiment by saying, "I don't believe there's any such thing as objective reality. It's only reality as experience it" (Frei). Accordingly, when reading Kelze's war photographs, in addition to understanding her vision for the Syrian people's

collective war narrative, we will also be experiencing her own personal perspective and experience as she navigates her reality within the traumatic conflict.

#### iv. What do Kelze's Photographs Want?

With an underlying goal of analyzing Kelze's goals and intents for her photojournalistic narration of the Syrian civil war, I will now ask a small selection of Kelze's photos the question that Mitchell suggests. This section will give Kelze's photos the opportunity to take on the agency of a living thing and, with us as their viewers and translators, express their desires.

The first of Kelze's photographs to answer this question appeared in Burch's *Chicago Tribune* article in 2013. The image depicts a young boy with a protestor's headband shouting with a look of determination on his face as he stands before a defaced poster of Bashar al-Assad



Photo by Nour Kelze (Burch)

with a shoe hanging beside it. The framing of the photograph places the face of the young protestor directly alongside Assad's face in the poster, challenging the viewer to consider whose freedom, rights, and liberty are worth more. No other protestors are included in this image's

more. No other protestors are included in this image's moment between the enraged future generation and the bloody-handed despot; the photograph limits the number of faces the viewer is called on to recognize to these two. The framing of Kelze's picture elevates a single, nameless boy from collateral damage to a life that would be grieved if lost. So what, if anything, does this photograph want?

Upon first inquiry, one might suggest that what this photograph wants is clear: to protest the idea that Assad is respected or loved by his people. A boy, innocent in his youth and wearing the mark of the revolution, shouts while the grotesquely graffiti-marked presidential poster looks on. The shoe beside Assad's face suggests to the viewer to compare the way Assad treats his people to the way one crushes an insect with one's shoe or perhaps to consider the lack of respect this protest rally holds for their president. To the Syrian viewers, it is common knowledge that the image of the shoe would be a clear call to solidarity with the rebel fighters according to a well-known, cultural gesture symbolizing disrespect for the regime. The black paint smeared across Assad's face calls the viewer to acknowledge the hate the rebels feel towards him. Despite the grim backdrop, the young protestor looks fierce and invigorated, perhaps willing the viewer to have faith in the revolution. When asked, the photograph can succinctly tell what it wants, which is to challenge the viewer's understanding of the Syrian people's view of Assad.

On closer inspection, however, this picture might want more than the viewer's momentary consideration of injustice or regime shortcomings. Mitchell suggests that sometimes, when really pursuing what a picture wants, "we need to ask what the picture wants in terms of lack" ("Really" 77). Mitchell is suggesting that, by calling attention to what may be noticeably absent in a photograph, we may be able to more insightfully perceive what it is that the photograph wants. In asking this question of Kelze's photograph of the young boy in front of

Assad's poster from the *Chicago Tribune*, it is helpful to contrast it with *The Telegraph's* 2012 photograph from AFP pictures of a pro-regime rally with a crowd holding the image of Assad. Pictures like this one are plentiful and commonly distributed by media channels in Syria (B. Hashem; S. Hashem). A Syrian viewer would be very familiar with the image and it is possible that a global viewer would be as well. This picture from *The Telegraph* reveals even more profoundly what Kelze's *Tribune* picture wants by revealing what it lacks.

Using the image of the pro-regime rally, the features absent from Kelze's image of the boy and the Assad poster take on new meaning, deepening our ability to understand the desires of Kelze's image. The Syrian flags, so abundant in the second picture, are absent from Kelze's photograph; her photograph does not want the Syrian national identity to be associated with the scene that is unfolding. The smiling adults shown in *The Telegraph's* photograph, with motherly women in the foreground, ask the viewer to connect the regime's message with family, stability, and maturity. Kelze's photograph depicts only one face: the face of a child ready to fight. This picture is asking the viewer if he or she is uncomfortable with the look of war on the face of a child. Her photograph assumes the viewer has seen the smiling faces on or holding Assad's posters and it challenges the viewer to confront a different wartime face: the face of a child at war. Finally, the clean, polished look of presidential goodwill on Assad's face is entirely absent from Kelze's photograph, replaced by the defaced poster. Black paint drops across Assad's eyes, turning his look of concern and reflection into a menacing sneer. Her photograph seems to want much more than to sway the viewer's perspective on the regime's influence; it wants to open the viewer's eyes to the suffering of a people and that people's corresponding estimation of the regime they perceive to be the cause of their suffering. The photograph wants the viewer to question the war and what role human suffering will play in it, making its desires evident

through a lack of features and symbols commonly seen in regime-promoted images of the conflict.

The framing of this regime-promoted image also differs dramatically from Kelze's image. Where Kelze's *Tribune* image places the face of Assad alongside the face of a protesting child, this *Telegraph* image focuses on Assad's presidential face while a sea of homogenized citizens swarm behind him. There are too many pro-regime rally attendees to even fit within the camera's view; the picture's framing suggests an infinite number of supporters. The identities of the supporters in the *Telegraph*'s image are not prioritized, especially when compared to Kelze's very human representation of a young boy standing before the hated power of the regime. The framing of Kelze's *Tribune* image is able to reflect her own frustration with the government's dehumanization of Syrian people. In following Mitchell's model of asking the image what it wants, we are able to get a clear sense of what Kelze wants, which focuses on a desire to undermine the dehumanization of the Syrian people.

Dehumanization and human suffering also occupies a role in the desires of another one of Kelze's photographs. In 2015, the following photograph ran in Lebanon's news outlet, *The Daily Star*. The picture depicts two young boys playing in the snow-covered rubble. The framing of this image is zoomed out far enough to show a wide shot of the cold and frozen devastation with two, small boys attempting to play. The size of the boys in the frame stresses their vulnerability and risk when placed in the center of a scene of rubble and destruction. The image communicates a desire for the lives of these two boys to be central to our understanding of the conflict. The photograph's framing also includes them in the landscape of destruction, calling on viewers to recognize that the destruction of Syrian infrastructure means the loss of youth and childhood for

these two boys. When asked what it wants, Kelze's photograph can be read as highlighting the importance and humanity of the individual lives of the two boys pictured.

Mitchell claims that a picture can "send ... incompatible messages about its desire" and Kelze's image can be read as doing just that ("Really" 81). Admittedly, the image portrays barrenness; no plant life is growing in the grey scenery. However, it is winter and snow is on the ground, which suggests that the photograph wants the viewer to recognize the possibility of spring and life lying dormant under the cold stillness. Although there is nothing green growing, the boys themselves are growing, natural and resilient among the rubble. Despite this image being largely a shot of rubble and destruction, the boys are also playing innocently and safely in the quiet wreckage. The picture wants the viewer to remember that not everything is dead; young children still grow and play in the damaged pieces of the city. Despite the many messages from the regime announcing that the rebel cause has no hope for success, this picture wants the viewer to consider what could grow if the snow were to melt and spring were to arrive. In the coexistence of the picture's seemingly irreconcilable messages, there is the picture's challenge to the viewer to recognize the hope in the rubble of the Syrian nation.

The *Daily Star* picture of the children in the wreckage calls the Syrian and the global community together over the fate of these two boys and the children of Syria that they represent. By housing seemingly conflicting messages that capture both the destruction and the resilience of the Syrian people, the photograph demonstrates a desire to promote the humanity of the civilians suffering in the conflict. In recognizing the tragedy and unfairness of the war for the children, the photograph joins with Kelze in her goal of subverting the regime's dogmatic message that dehumanizes the rebel army.

By following Mitchell's model of asking Kelze's photographs what it is that they want, we are able to delve deeply into the complex meanings and desires that these pictures carry, particularly with regards to their framing. Mitchell's idea of granting "personhood" to these pictures allows us to understand how they work, which sheds light on Kelze's goals for those pictures. The answers that these images give when asked what it is they desire are often indicative of Kelze's own personal desires. Her pictures want to write a certain kind of narrative about the Syrian war that runs against the powerful, regime-promoted narrative. This coincides with Kelze's desires. Kelze, identifying as part of a traumatized Syrian collective, hopes to tell the story of that collective in ways that shape and impact the developing narrative coming out of the ongoing conflict.

#### **iv. A Future with a Past**

When discussing the process a collective undergoes in response to a cultural trauma, Eyerman explains that "a cultural trauma must be understood, explained and made coherent through public reflection and discourse" (304). This process, which Alexander calls "a meaning struggle" or "a trauma process," generally takes place over time and in the aftermath of a cultural trauma (qtd. in Eyerman 304). In contrast to this model, the Syrian civil war is ongoing; it does not have a past yet. The war itself is very much still in the present, unfolding as I write this. So, while Kelze and her photography, in the context of the larger Syrian collective, can work to understand the traumatic happenings of the civil war or to initiate public reflection and discourse on those happenings, she and the Syrian collective will struggle to complete their "trauma process" (Alexander qtd. in Eyerman 304). The process cannot continue to completion until the ongoing traumas cease and the violence comes to an end.

This inability to fully process a traumatic experience before the experience is over is to be expected; however, Kelze's photography and the agency it exerts over its viewers does not only serve to address the traumas that she and the Syrian people suffer from in the present. Her photography and the discourse it encourages will go on to shape the narrative of the war in its aftermath. She is creating an archive of events she currently feels are important. Aleida Assmann defines an archive as "the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past" (335). In the future at some point, this war will be a past event. In that theoretical future, Kelze's memory preservation and construction of an archive that promotes an alternative narrative to the regime's will allow the Syrian collective to more readily and thoroughly confront their traumas, which will have occurred squarely in the past.

Jaques Derrida asserts that the real meaning and function of an archive can only be known once the archive's content is firmly in the past. As time passes, the way an archive impacts interpretation of a past event develops and materializes. Derrida expresses that "the archivization produces as much as it record the event" (17). Kelze's work will heavily influence the conversations that surround the nation's recovery and rebuilding in the aftermath of the war, hopefully allowing the civilian population greater agency in the dynamics following the war's conclusion. Until that future time, Kelze and her developing, photographic archive continue to use their agency to create spaces and potentials for Syrian citizens who have been traumatized by the assault on their nation and national identity to process their traumas and begin to heal.

The Syrian people have undergone and continue to actively undergo a cultural trauma; in response, a collective identity as a body of traumatized victims of the violent conflict has formed. Kelze identifies strongly with this traumatized group and feels an intense need to narrate her experiences as a part of this collective. Using her photography, Kelze documents and shares

her account of the Syrian civil war as a member of the Syrian civilian population. She does this largely in an effort to assert her own voice and, by extension, the voices of the Syrian people as the narrative that defines the Syrian civil war develops and emerges.

When we follow Butler and Mitchell's models of considering the agency that Kelze's images have on their viewers, we begin to delve into the ways her photos affect change on the developing wartime narrative in Syria. By asking her photographs what they want, we are gaining insight into what Kelze's intents are. Kelze views her intents as reflective of the Syrian people's collective goals. In this way, this chapter explores the ways in which Kelze uses her images to make an impact on the larger wartime narrative on behalf of the Syrian people. Perhaps someday, when the Syrian civil war has a past to reflect on, Kelze's photographs and the archives they create will assert the experiences of the civilian population during this traumatic conflict.

## **Epilogue:**

After having approached work by these three women, the role that falls to us as the readers of these novels, portraits, and images, and of any composition testifying to traumas, is to witness that testimony responsibly. Susan Sontag reflects that, “being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience” (17). Our lives in a globalized world undergoing widespread injustice and atrocities will inevitably involve the experience of being confronted with accounts of lived traumas. The way we handle that experience, however, plays an important role in the trauma recovery process of those who are victims of the calamities. Felman and Laub explain that the necessary role of a witness to trauma testimony is to “become the enabler of the testimony” (58). So we, as viewers, are faced with the question of how to best enable the testimonies of others by being respectful and tactful witnesses.

This task has weighed heavily on me as I have attempted to speak on behalf of the women attempting to narrate their experiences with violence and war. I acknowledge that I occupy a social location of privilege, which can be dangerous. Linda Alcoff calls attention to the fact that, “the practice of privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for” (7). When investigating how these women act under the oppression of a metanarrative that does not reflect their experiences, it is imperative that I do not inadvertently begin to press on them a narrative of my own making.

Alcoff does go on to point out that the issue is not as simple as dismissing my research based on the fact that I myself am speaking from a position of power. Privilege is accompanied by a political and social responsibility. Additionally, I simultaneously inhabit two, seemingly discordant groups. As a Syrian national, I speak from an oppressed people group. As an American living safely in the United States, I speak from a position of social power for the

oppressed Arab nations. Attempting to tease these two identities apart is impossible and unproductive; in sharing these women's experiences with the traumas undergone in their home nations, I speak both for and from the Arab people.

As I represent their stories, however, I have made a concerted effort to keep my social and cultural location in mind. Alcoff asserts that "the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise" (29). I, along with any witness or advocate in my position, am responsible for keeping this thought at the forefront of my work. As I navigate the intricacies of witnessing trauma testimony and discussing and distributing those testimonies in equitable and just ways, I am consistently checking myself. I am regularly asking Alcoff's suggested litmus test question: "will it enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples?" (29). My immediate goal with this work is to empower women to shape the metanarratives under which they labor. My larger goal is to explore and promote new and critical methods for approaching the testimonies of oppressed people groups and advocating on their behalf. Ultimately, my goal, along with anyone else who wishes to serve as a meaningful and just witness to testimonies to atrocity, is to enable the empowerment of those who have been named victims.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> My intent behind interviewing the women personally was to avoid the coopting of their story. I did not want to take their narratives from them and make them into something that I found interesting. My goal was to help them share their own testimonies.

<sup>2</sup> Walid Jumblatt is the son of Kamal Jumblatt (1917-1977). Kamal Jumblatt led the Druze Progressive Socialist Party before handing power to his son, Walid Jumblatt.

<sup>3</sup> Elie Hobeika was a militia commander in the Lebanese army who was named as one of the men responsible for the Sabra and Shatila massacres in 1982. He was renowned as a brutal fighter who regularly terrorized and killed civilians. Because of his military success, he rose in power in the Lebanese Christian Phalangist group, even serving as the bodyguard to the President Bashir Gemayel.

<sup>4</sup> The Phalangists are a right-wing, Lebanese political party comprised of Maronite Christians who are politically and financially backed by Israel. During the civil war, the Phalange party was the most powerful of the Christian parties and was heavily involved in the fighting.

<sup>5</sup> Other Decentrist authors include Emily Nasrallah (1931-), who is best known for her 1962 novel *Tuyur Aylul (The September Birds)*, Daisy al-Amir (1935-), who is included as a Decentrist based on her 1994 novel, *The Waiting List: an Iraqi Woman's Tales of Alienation*, Ghada al-Samman (1942-), whose 1977 novel *Kawabis Bayrut (Beirut Nightmares)* is an important Decentrist work, Laila Usairan (1936-), who is best known for her 1968 novel *Asafir al-Fajr (Birds of Dawn)*, Claire Gebeyli (1930-), whose 1982 compilation of poetry titled *Acte de Présence* is based on her time in Beirut during the civil war, Etel Adnan (1925-), who is best known for her 1978 novel, *Sitt Marie Rose*, Huda Naamani (1930-), whose publications include *To You* (1970) and *My Fingers...Not* (1971), and Evelyne Accad (1943-), whose 1990 work, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*, takes an important critical look at gendered writing in the Arab world.

<sup>6</sup> Most, but not all, Decentrist writing is fictional. Some authors do also explore nonfiction and literary theory. Evelyne Accad's books, *Veil of Shame: the Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World* (1978) and *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (1990), are both nonfiction.

<sup>7</sup> Maronite Christians are the followers of Saint Maron, who was born in the fourth century. They rose to political and economic power under St. John Maron (685-707) and were often persecuted due to their nontraditional Christian beliefs. This persecution led them to flee to modern day Lebanon, where they remain in relative comfort and political influence.

<sup>8</sup> The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) is a political-administrative entity established in 1964 to govern, organize, and liberate the Palestinian people. Their professed goal is to free Palestine from Israeli influence through armed resistance.

<sup>9</sup> The Six Day War took place from June 5-10 in 1967 and was the third of the Arab-Israeli wars. This war brought massive death tolls for the Arab countries which fought against Israel and also increased animosity between the Palestinians and Israelis. The conflict resulted in hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees and brought over one million Palestinians under Israeli rule.

<sup>10</sup> In 1982, the United Nations organized a Multi-National Force (MNF) to assist in the conflict. This force was comprised of British, American, French, and Italian troops (Hiro 90).

<sup>11</sup> Also referred to as the 1958 Lebanon Crisis, this conflict took place when Lebanese president, Camille Chamoun, manipulated the Lebanese political system to secure a second term for himself as president. This caused several widely popular political leaders to lose their chance at

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being elected to the position and created significant friction between the government and the people of Lebanon. The tensions erupted on May 12, prompting Chamoun to request international military aid. The United States intervened, much to the extreme outrage of several Lebanese political parties, and, on July 31<sup>st</sup>, the conflict was resolved with all parties accepting General Fuad Chehab as the new president. Between 1,400 and 4,000 Lebanese died in this brief conflict (Hiro 7-8)

<sup>12</sup> The novel does not specify where in Africa Zahra goes.

<sup>13</sup> The fictional Zahra's experiences do not necessarily have to mirror al-Shaykh's lived, personal experiences for the novel to act as a testimony to al-Shaykh's time in the war. The fictional reconstruction of images or ideas from the war could be read as al-Shaykh's indirect reconstructions of images or ideas from her time in the war without any of the novel's plot points mirroring events in her own life.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Shaykh was 19 years old and in Cairo when she wrote this novel. In it, a middle-aged man believes firmly that men must control women. He falls in love with a young girl who desires to be an independent artist. Ultimately, the young girl leads the man into impotence and death. al-Shaykh is not proud of this novel and does not feel it reflects the reality that she strives for in her work (al-Shaykh "Shahrazad").

<sup>15</sup> Eventide; Reinhart; *Bint Jbeil*; *Arutz Sheva*; *All 4 Palestine*

<sup>16</sup> I was unable to find the name of the paper.

<sup>17</sup> Joha has won Arab journalism award for best caricature drawing in 2001 and the Palestinian Creative Women Society's Creative Woman Award in 2008 (*All 4 Palestine*).

<sup>18</sup> The number of children who were killed as casualties in the 2014 conflict in Gaza is only estimated. The UN records show that at least 495 children were killed; however, the exact number is unknown (BBC). The nonprofit organization on Gaza holds that more than 500 children were killed (Gaze Press Release). A report by the nonprofit organization Defense for Children International – Palestine establishes that 547 Palestinian children were killed (Defense).

<sup>19</sup> In 2002, the Israeli Army launched a massive military assault against Palestinian civilians called Operation Defensive Shield. This assault lasted 45 days, killed 220 people, and injured and arrested thousands (Hamzeh). The assault was launched in response to terrorist attacks coming out of Palestine.

<sup>20</sup> The 2008-2009 conflict between Israel and Gaza has been referred to as Operation Cast Lead. The conflict lasted from the 27<sup>th</sup> of December in 2008 to the 18<sup>th</sup> of January in 2009, leaving around 1,391 Palestinians dead. 759 of these dead were civilians. Approximately 10 Israelis died, 3 of who were civilians (BBC).

<sup>21</sup> The 2014 conflict in Gaza was called Operation Protective Edge. At least 2,104 Palestinians died, including 1,462 civilians. Of these civilians, an estimated 495 were children. 72 Israeli's died in the conflict, 6 of which were civilians (BBC).

<sup>23</sup> I have been unable to locate the year in which Darwish wrote this poem.

<sup>24</sup> The Ba'th party is an Arab political party that promotes the ideal of a single, unified Arab nation that abides by the tenets of socialism. The party was founded in 1943 in Damascus, Syria, where they have been in political power since 1963. (Abdullah "Ba'th Party")

<sup>25</sup> The Alawites are a minority sect of Shi'ite Muslims, most of whom live in Syria. Many other sects of Islam consider Alawites to be heretics and deviants. (Abdullah, "Alawite: Shi'ite Sect")

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<sup>26</sup>I have not been able to find any sources to corroborate these testimonies.

<sup>27</sup> A major influence in Kelze's drive to narrate this conflict is also the Assad regime's 1982 attack on the Syrian city of Hama, in which an overwhelming absence of information and documentation continues to plague the Syrian people and the international community. The attack took place over February of 1982, killing an estimated 10,000 to 40,000 people ("1982" McEvers). Kelze has said "back in the '80s, when we were in a similar situation, nobody had any idea about what was going on in Homs and in Hama" ("Photographer" McEvers). The Assad regime violently repressed any documentation or recounting of the violence; the resulting lack of information from this conflict motivates Kelze to document the current one.

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