

Writing about Violence

A Joint Reflection from Latin America and the Middle East

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Although we cannot pinpoint the exact origin of the idea to co-teach a comparative course on contemporary politics in the Middle East and Latin America, we remember well what followed from that initial decision in late 2015. First there was the excitement that accompanies an emergent sense of possibility. As we reviewed the literature while designing the course, we found numerous connections and continuities that allowed us to place Latin America and the Middle East in joint focus. But resonance and similarity were not the only promise, so we developed a syllabus that also explored the differences and disjunctures. We discussed the state's role in gendering, as people in the informal sector stake their claims to livelihoods in Egypt and the Dominican Republic. [1] We thought through the racially-contested geographies that characterize black women's fight against land grabs in Brazil and the negotiations and resistance against the building of the separation wall in Israel and Palestine. [2] We reflected on the oil modernities of Dubai and Venezuela [3] and discussed the aftermaths of the Pink Tide in Latin America and the Arab spring in the Middle East. [4]

Yet, as we pulled out these promising lines of connection we had to confront the realization that many of them were framed in experiences of violence. Suddenly, our syllabus began to read like a list of dystopic nightmares: devastated landscapes, persistent forms of gendered subjugation, ever-more exploitative labor regimes, voracious resource extraction and seemingly endless cycles of war. Our initial excitement turned into somber reflection.

With this realization, we entered the classroom with a sense of both anticipation and urgency. The class brought together students from diverse backgrounds and experiences, creating a rare opportunity for them to complement their skills and enter into rich dialogues as we thought through issues across the two regions. [5] The semester-long project assignment we designed produced exciting results as students made unexpected connections. Posters of their final projects pinned on our class walls displayed the generative potential of thinking comparatively: on political graffiti and street art in Cairo and Bogota, the state's role in Brazilian favelas and West Bank refugee camps, drug wars in Mexico and Afghanistan, the tactics of Zapatista and Kurdish women's resistance movements and diasporic influences in popular music in both regions, among other projects. In addition, this pedagogical experiment afforded the two of us a unique space where we could have South-South conversations, beyond the Eurocentric gaze, about places we call home.

As we eagerly learned from one another, we realized that both of us struggled in writing about violence, and that this difficulty had to do with our respective positions vis-à-vis our work and our relationships to the places and people of which we wrote. So, while the focus on violence initially cast a shadow on our syllabus, in the end it allowed us to engage in a critical self-reflection about our research and writing practices. If violence is pervasive in our field sites and homes, then violence is what we must wrestle with. This is the place from which we write.

Moved by the gravity of the situation in the places we call home, we are animated by the enduring hope that thinking together might yield further insights. This essay reflects on some of the challenges of writing about violence that is intimate. It reflects on the difficulty of interrogating the separation between victims and victimizers, experts and subjects, and times of violence and times of peace. Cárdenas describes her difficulty in writing against victimization. In particular, she discusses the political dangers of trying to focus not only on the loss and suffering of Afro-Colombian internally displaced people, but also on the possibilities afforded to some by the very experiences of the war. As a person who lived through the Lebanese civil war, Bou Akar reflects on the agonizing labor of writing about violence that is personal, and

the nagging fear that writing about such violence might conjure it yet again. While our respective positions differ, this joint reflection that emerged from our class conversations provided us with the opportunity to arrive at several insights, all of which are founded on a strong claim for the unique value of knowledge produced by those who are living in violence. [6] Together, we insist on the messiness of violence as we wrestle to represent it in its routine, day-to-day forms while bearing witness to both suffering and the loving labor that goes into creating worlds anew from the very debris of those sites of destruction.

From Latin America: On the Challenges of Writing Against Victimization

Earlier this year I published an article titled, “Thanks to My Forced Displacement.” [7] In it I narrate the life stories of several Afro-Colombians living on the outskirts of Bogotá as internally displaced people (IDPs). The stories I wrote about were as distressing as they were complex. They followed circuitous routes from place of origin to place of settlement. The people I wrote about were entangled in all kinds of alliances and affiliations within Colombia’s thorny political landscape. The outcomes of their difficult journeys were similarly varied. Some folks returned to their hometowns, some were displaced multiple times, and others settled permanently in Bogotá. Many families lost members through physical separation or death, while others grew or were formed while in displacement. Some folks fell through the cracks of the state’s humanitarian aid system and lost everything, while others managed to obtain degrees, secure jobs and become visible activists against all odds.

As I worked my way through these stories, I tried to recognize the relentless and multiple forms of violence that my interlocutors’ lives were enmeshed in—poverty, racism, crime—and to acknowledge the pain of their encounters with extreme forms of violence such as death threats, forced displacement and disappearances. But time and time again, I found it particularly challenging to tell stories that highlighted joy and agency. I would write a draft where the emphasis seemed almost triumphant and immediately deleted it, worried that I might be accused of underplaying their suffering, or worse yet, misread as celebrating misfortune.

When I received the comments from the article’s reviewers, I realized that my fears had been warranted. I was initially struck by the dissonance. Reader One raved, using words such as “elegant,” “theoretically risky” and “provocative” and recommended that the piece be published immediately. Reader Two raged, using words such as “astonishment,” “uneasiness” and “concern” when responding to my suggestion that IDPs were not only victims of violence. Reader Two suggested major revisions to correct the overall tone of the piece, which in their view gave “no sense of the suffering experienced by the displaced.” The problem, in Reader Two’s view, was not simply one of interpretation, but a deeply ethical one wherein emphasizing the positive aspects of some of my informants’ new lives was tantamount to denying the scale of tragedy that had befallen them and the millions of other victims of Colombia’s civil war—the longest-lasting conflict in the western hemisphere, which spanned more than five decades.

In a sense, the dissonance in the two readers’ reactions was in line with my own struggle in writing the article. I recalled revising the draft, first including descriptions of people’s victories—small and large—and then deleting them for fear that they may overshadow painful stories of loss. I belabored descriptions of my informants’ trajectories, relationships and associations in order to show the complexity of their politics without reducing them to either victims or victimizers. I was particularly called to task in rethinking the article’s title. As it stood, Reader Two’s concern was that by saying “thanks to” and describing some of the ways in which displacement had opened up new and interesting life paths for some IDPs, I was suggesting that the war was not so bad after all. Reader Two urged me to reconsider my translation of the phrase “*gracias a mi desplazamiento*,” suggesting that it might be indicative of causality—in other words, akin to “due to”—but not suggestive of gratefulness.

As I worked my way through the revisions, I struggled with each choice, taking the critique seriously and at the same time reaffirming my own convictions about the tricky politics of representing violence. In the end,

despite our seeming disagreement, Reader Two and I concurred that at stake was not theoretical elegance, but political expediency. In the end, what drove us both was the question of who stands to lose and gain—and what—from our representations of violence. With that clear objective in mind, I went to work on the revisions and here I share the main insights that I gained in the process.

In the current political moment, it is very important to carefully define what is meant by violence. This means challenging dominant definitions, which only recognize violence when it manifests itself in spectacular encounters, rather than in its quotidian and structural forms. These definitions routinely render victims invisible. In the Colombian case, for example, the state-sanctioned definition of violence identifies as victims only those who have experienced loss during the years demarcated by the civil war and by a specific set of victimizers—the army, the guerrillas or other armed groups. As it stands, this definition fails to show how the lives of many are enmeshed with and exacerbated by everyday forms of living in violence. Thus, despite having lived in violence her entire life, the current state-sanctioned definition of violence in Colombia cannot recognize Margarita—a black domestic worker from the rural Pacific who has always lived in extreme poverty and recently lost a son to street violence in Bogotá—as a victim. This inability to recognize all victims is because our tools to identify and name violence disregard structural forces such as poverty, patriarchy and racism and their deadly intersections with the geographies of war.

My purpose in showing the complex trajectories of people's lives was not to call into question the legitimacy of their status as IDPs or to minimize their suffering. To the contrary, my intention was to crack open the definition itself, to make room for a recognition of the multiple, *longue durée* systems and structures that enact exclusion, enable exploitation and inflict injuries on a daily basis. While I realize that there is a risk of glossing over the particularities of the suffering experienced by victims who have had spectacular encounters with armed actors, I stand by the urgency of expanding the scope of narrow definitions.

The second lesson I have learned is that representations that explore multiple uses of and responses to violence are urgently needed. Meeting this need involves treading the tricky ground of showing more than just victimization. This insight is something that I've gathered not from scholars but from my interlocutors themselves, who routinely emphasize their agency and celebrate their triumphs. Why then is it so difficult to consider the ways in which violence can be generative as well as destructive? Perhaps by doing so, the connections that are engendered and the possibilities that are conjured in the midst of loss could be brought into focus. And this focus could bring the worlds that are disappearing into the limelight while also offering an opportunity to harness the ones that are emerging for future political projects. For example, while it is important to continue to mourn for and denounce the loss of life and land that followed mass displacement in Colombia, is it not just as urgent to show and even celebrate the ways in which IDPs are creating new identities and crafting political projects in their places of arrival?<

Looking closely and intimately at the lives of people living in seemingly perpetual violence reveals more than destruction and rupture. With this perspective it is possible to see that violence—while traumatic and destructive—can also be transformative and productive. This is, of course, very treacherous ground. I am well aware of the risks of providing fodder for apologists of these multiple forms of violence and want to be vigilant in my duty to continue denouncing the suffering that they cause. But there are other risks inherent in letting violence-as-destruction exhaust its possible meanings and uses.

Last summer, when I was in Colombia I asked my friend Dora, from whom I borrowed the phrase “thanks to my displacement,” to reconsider her intention. I explained that different translations could be given to the phrase—causality versus gratefulness—and asked her to clarify what she meant, but she was steadfast in her position. Speaking first in the third person, she said: “Yes, we should not thank perpetrators, but we should recognize that if it hadn't been for that war, we wouldn't be here in Bogotá doing things that we never imagined doing, and we would have never discovered our leadership capabilities.” Then she shifted to a more personal register: “Thanks to my displacement, I met new people and learned new things. I didn't know I could sing, I hadn't met black leaders from other regions. I had no idea that I was a leader, but if I hadn't undergone that experience of violence, I wouldn't have taken advantage of my potential.” In the end, I believe that her words reveal that the choice between denouncing violence and celebrating the

possibilities that are often unexpectedly created during a moment of rupture is a false one. If the goal is truthfulness and hopefulness in the difficult work of representing violence, then both must be considered.

From the Middle East: Writing on Violence from Within

For the past ten years I have been ethnographically studying, and writing critically, about the contested geographies of Beirut after the end of the civil war (1975–1990). While Cárdenas discusses the process of writing with nuance to an academic audience about the closures and openings of Colombia’s war, here I reflect on the process of thinking and writing about violence in a place I call home. Ultimately, my work aims to expose the forms of violence that people endure in post-conflict geographies where the future is imagined to consist of war more than of peace. Throughout, however, I often found myself asking: what is my purpose and what are the ethics of writing academically about violence that has been so intimate to my life? My writings about war and displacement are personal and political.

Numerous dilemmas arise when thinking and writing about violence. In my experience, writing about violence in a place I call home (itself the landscape of many lost homes) revolves around the pain of excavating a personal history shaped by war, and the fear of reproducing violence through writing about it. My family and I were displaced several times during the Lebanese civil war. We lost many a home, each round of displacement erasing memories of spaces, which were later shelled and burned. One of my childhood homes still stands empty in a ruined building, a witness to a long-lost life and long-lost neighbors. While I write this reflection from New York, the violence of Beirut’s post-conflict geographies that continue to shape people’s lives in the city remain personal. They affect my family, friends and loved ones who make Beirut home. This process of writing on violence from within, therefore, involves learning how to walk the tightropes that define the contours of my scholarly, political and personal engagements with these sites. These tightropes make writing about violence from within powerfully illuminating because they give nuance to an understanding of conflict. At the same time, it is quite difficult to parse the personal from the political from the scholarly when one’s life is intertwined with these geographies.

In my book, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut’s Frontiers*, [8] I include an auto-ethnographic account of my family’s life in an apartment building in a southeastern periphery of Beirut. In 2009–2010, I was doing field research on the urbanization of Beirut’s southern peripheries. Just a year before, in May 2008, the area (and the rest of Beirut) had witnessed street battles that brought the city to the verge of another civil war. My family’s neighborhood was in constant flux as new buildings mushroomed in an unparalleled construction frenzy. With every new development, the meadows that separated our building from the Mediterranean Sea were filled with concrete buildings enclosed in curtain-covered balconies. Meanwhile, a contestation evolved surrounding the building construction taking place next door. One day we woke up to see that the building had been extended vertically beyond the legal height limit. While the neighbors were willing to ignore the additional floors, they were outraged by the developer’s plan to build over the neighborhood’s public shared amenities, blocking the sidewalk and encroaching on the shared cul-de-sac.

Experiencing the ensuing contestation first-hand prompted me to write about it. The intensity of the conflict made evident the political negotiations around construction in an area that is ruled by a honeycomb of competing factions. These factions were mostly war militias that transformed themselves after the end of the war into religious-political organizations that continue to rule the country. In Lebanon, the enforcement of the building law is uneven, only becoming relevant when illegal construction is contested. [9] Thus, challenging the illegal extensions of the building next door soon became a political process divided along sectarian lines. As parties became involved, the people who resisted the illegal construction—including my family—received threats. Eventually, the illegalities were removed, only because at that moment the political scale tipped in favor of the religious-political organization that supported removing them.

Witnessing the negotiations and threats as they unfolded from my family's living room, I was convinced that an auto-ethnographic account of this contestation could astutely illustrate the capillaries of power that have transformed Beirut's peripheries into frontiers of urban growth and sectarian violence. When I started jotting my account down on paper, however, I became anxious about describing these everyday forms of contestation without giving away details that would compromise the safety of my family in a place where sectarian violence is always anticipated. Making the difficult writing process worse was the worry that writing about this experience might one day cause yet another round of displacement for my family.

This worry is neither unfounded nor unrealistic. In May 2008, my family had to temporarily leave their apartment as battles raged in the streets. My family, like many Lebanese people, are well trained for such situations. They know exactly what to pack: passports, jewelry, religious texts, and important paperwork including title deeds and wills. In fact, many families have these bags packed, ready to leave at any moment. In 2008, they had to pass through militia checkpoints where the warring factions were checking people's IDs—actions reminiscent of the civil war when people were killed at checkpoints based on the religion stated on their IDs. The ghosts of such past experiences cast a large shadow every time violence erupts.

They also cast a shadow every time I wrote about the territorial contestations between the different religious-political organizations unfolding in Beirut's peripheries. Writing about violence and its anticipation involved writing and rewriting, writing and deleting, trying to figure out how to make the violence of urbanization visible, how to articulate people's suffering and dispossession while editing out the stories that could subject them to new rounds of displacement. The struggles surrounding how to write about violence from within without potentially subjecting my interlocutors to future violence consumed me.

Over the years, I came to realize that in the violence I study, there are no winners and losers, and the lines between aggressors and victims are blurry. The tables keep turning: one day an aggressor, another day a victim. As a result, I set out to write simultaneously from the different perspectives involved in the territorial conflict; this is a difficult task when writing about charged topics like land sales to Shi'a in formerly Druze or Christian areas, and in places where animosity along sectarian lines has reached its peak. My aim has not been to pin the violence and its aftermath on any specific actors but instead to examine how all of the actors use the tools of planning, housing and real estate markets to shape Beirut's contested geographies, focusing on how people's everyday lives suffer irrespective of their sectarian or political affiliations.

Another challenge revolves around the possibility that the process of excavating experiences of war reproduces new forms of violence. My interlocutors have recounted to me their experiences with war. Some of them still carry the scars on their amputated and disfigured bodies, others remain haunted by nightmares. Many lost loved ones, their pictures hanging on their living room walls. Others had to live in makeshift shelters for 30 years before they were able to find a permanent home again, while some have never been able to go back to their homes. People described their experiences as vividly as if they had just happened, an intensity that suggested that people, including my family, were reliving the pain of war by narrating it. I often struggled to determine whether this process of narration is cathartic or simply causes new iterations of violence.

This process of producing knowledge on violence from within is also shaped by the challenges of presenting such work in the public sphere, both "at home" and within the larger academic community. In 2010, the first time I presented my work in Beirut, I was overtaken with anxiety about how it was going to be received. There I was standing in front of a packed auditorium to speak about the territorial contestation between the Shi'i Hizballah and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party, a topic that everyone in the room had a strong opinion about. The country was still recovering from the 2008 battles between the two groups. Given my family's origin, I was nervous that someone in the audience would accuse me of being against Hizballah; or that I would be denounced for not being sympathetic enough to the plight of "my own people," a minority religious group. Speaking in a world shaped by dominant narratives of the war on terror, I had similar worries presenting my work in front of a US academic audience where many in the

audience know Hizballah by its Western label as a “terrorist organization.” However, writing from within Beirut involves discussing Hizballah as just another Lebanese actor representative of a large section of Lebanese citizens. It was quite challenging to undo exotic and reductionist portrayals in order to begin to have a conversation about people making lives in actual places. Evidently, writing about violence from within becomes a project that folds within it local and global anxieties about places that have been always labeled as “dangerous” but that are—with their histories of violence—a home to many.

South-South Encounters

As scholars of Latin America and the Middle East with deep personal stakes in the places we write about, our hope is that by looking one another in the eye, we might circumvent the Eurocentric gaze that usually accompanies studies of violence in the global South, and that we can move beyond the exoticization of violence and the reduction of subjects and places to being labeled as “dangerous.” In its place, we favor creating spaces to hold South-South exchanges about the mundane aspects of violence and the flourishing lives that people build every day in such places. To that end, this essay inverts the scholarly gaze from the North, by speaking back to it, questioning its assumptions, and illuminating its limits. We did this by making visible the intellectual and emotional labor that it takes to write about violence from within, and to remain truthful to our interlocutors while addressing audiences far removed from those settings.

It is important to reiterate that this South-South intellectual engagement started as a pedagogical exercise. The classroom provided us with an opportunity to carve out a space where our weekly conversations interrogated the knowledge produced about Latin America from the prism of the Middle East and vice-versa. This method proved productive for imagining different futures in a moment where the horizon of progressive politics seems to be foreclosing around the globe. Such pedagogical approaches are central to de-centering hegemonic knowledge production and generating different approaches to understanding the world. Like the rest of the efforts that make up this issue, we strongly believe that these kinds of experiences should be encouraged and become more common, not only for epistemological reasons, but to better respond to the political urgency of our historical moment.

Endnotes

[1] For example, we looked at Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), Steven Gregory, *The Devil Behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), and Farha Ghannam, “Mobility, Liminality, and Embodiment in Urban Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 38/4 (2011).

[2] Keisha-Khan Y. Perry, *Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (New York: Verso, 2007).

[3] Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai, The City as Corporation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[4] Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, “The Media Revolution,” *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). Fernando Coronil, “The Future in Question: History and Utopia in Latin America (1989–2010),” *Business as Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown*, eds. Calhoun et al. (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

[5] The class was held at Hampshire College with students joining from Smith College, Mount Holyoke College and Amherst College.

[6] Lamia Moghnieh, “‘The Violence We Live In’: Reading and Experiencing Violence in the Field,” *Contemporary Levant* 2/1 (2017).

[7] Roosbelinda Cárdenas, “‘Thanks to My Forced Displacement’: Blackness and the Politics of

Colombia's War Victims," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 13/1 (2018).

[8] Hiba Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

[9] Marieke Krijnen and Mona Fawaz, "Exception as the Rule: High-End Developments in Neoliberal Beirut," *Built Environment* 36/2 (2010).