



تسعينات نسوية  
إعداد: ورشة المعارف

**Knowledge Workshop**  
<https://www.alwarsha.org/>  
ISBN 978-9953-0-5459-9  
2021

Supported by Mama Cash and Norwegian People's Aid. The content of the publication is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the positions of the Norwegian People's Aid or of Mama Cash.

## **SENSE (UN)MAKING – A WOMAN’S ACCOUNT OF HER LIFE IN BEIRUT AFTER 1990**

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*Sense-making* and *sense-unmaking* dynamics can be found at work simultaneously in most hermeneutical processes. They coexist in tension, and, when analysed, can tell us something about the tactics we use, as subjects and as researchers, to negotiate and explore feelings of relatedness and unrelatedness. I analyse two different hermeneutical processes in this article in order to explore these sense-(un)making dynamics. The first one touches on the experiences of relatedness and unrelatedness of Alia\*, the woman I interviewed, and the way she makes sense – or not – of her experience as a dweller of Beirut in the 1990's. The second one relates to the epistemological implications of Alia's testimony, and the negotiation between sense-making and sense-unmaking at work in order for me to interpret her testimony. The present article thus focuses on the context of Beirut in the years 1990-1991, in the immediate aftermath of the regional and civil war that unfurled in Lebanon starting 1975.

### «INTERROGATING THE POST OF POST-CONFLICT»<sup>1</sup>

Beirut in the 1990's is indifferently characterized by the literature in urban sociology and political science as a "post-conflict" or "post-war" city (for « post-war », see Davie, 1993; Sawalha, 2011; for « post-conflict », see Bonte, 2017; Comaty, 2021 [forthcoming]; Hills, 2013). These categories have been put in perspective and criticized; notable examples include Pettigrew, 2013 in her study of Nepal's civil war or in the case of Lebanon, Bou Akar, 2018, who substituted the idea of Beirut being a « post-war » city to Beirut's urban fabric being shaped by a perpetual state of « war yet to come ». As Shneiderman and Snellinger, 2014, demonstrate, the main angle of criticism addressed to the post conflict category lies in the questioning of the « post » of « post-conflict », meaning, emphasizing that « the parameters framing conflict are themselves political » (Shneiderman and Snellinger, 2014). In the context of Beirut, this means establishing a distinction between a clear-cut historical periodization of a given "conflict", and its blurred extensions in the mental histories and geographies of its dwellers.

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<sup>1</sup> In the words of Shneiderman and Snellinger, 2014.

While the article's theoretical premise is aligned with the questioning of the post-conflict category, I will not discuss the category conceptually; nor will I ponder on the theoretical validity of this label. Rather, I will confront its epistemic implications on the perception of a Beirut woman, who, 30 years after the end of the war, remembers and tells the account of her life during 1990-1991. Such retrospective accounts of lived experiences, particularly of women in the 1990's decade, have yet to be developed in the context of Lebanon, and they seem to be long overdue. Alia was born in 1967, she was thus 23 years-old at the end of the Lebanese civil and regional war. Because the article is focused only on her testimony, by no means does it aim at establishing an exhaustive account of the experiences of women during the time. The choice of exploring in depth the testimony of one woman is intentional; it aims at helping to suspend, for a moment, any urge that could present itself of "making sense" of her experience by using it to generalize or conceptualize. Rather, her testimony will participate in answering the following questions: To what extent does the « post-conflict city » category translate in the lived and embodied urban experiences of Alia? What, in her particular trajectory, does she consider of importance when being asked about the years 1991 and 1992? What discourse does she mobilize to make sense, or not, of her experience? The article will answer by examining her singular experience of bodily occupation of space during the timeframe, and focuses on Alia's retrospective perception of her lived experiences at the time.

### **TIME-BORDERING AND BOUNDARY-MAKING**

Alia and I are related. In 1990, she lived in Zqaq-al Blat with her family. She shared her room with her 4 sisters while her 3 brothers slept in the living room. Alia divided her time between work at the Bank of Industry and Work<sup>2</sup> as an accountant and a secretary and her undergraduate studies at the Lebanese University. Alia married a Lebanese man in 1993 and they both left Beirut for France; at the time of 2020, she still lives in France. She

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<sup>2</sup> Also called Bank al Imna<sup>2</sup>, used to be located in the Concorde neighborhood.

continues to visit Lebanon several times a year and was there during summer 2006.

The first time I told her about this article's project, it was to ask her whether she knew women who had lived in Beirut in 1990 and who would be willing to talk to me about the period that followed « the civil and regional war in Lebanon ». After expressing her interest in being interviewed, she immediately asked me which war I was intending to focus on in particular, since there were several different wars with different sides fighting. This question of her mental time periodization came up several times during our discussion. She proceeded to explain me her perception of the period and her insistence on talking about wars in plural:

«Even if you search 'Lebanese war' on *Wikipedia*, they tell you that several wars occurred. I have quite a fragmented perception of the time. Us Lebanese use different words to qualify the wars, harb-el tahrir, harb el elgha2... These were in 1990, and before that, the civil war. For me, these were the toughest wars. But in my mind I see them as different experiences. We used to say « 3el2o », they got into fights. This is what I mean by several wars. »<sup>3</sup>

To my follow-up question « And do you consider that there were wars after 1990? » she answered: « After 1990 I think there were no longer wars. » When addressing her perception of the time, she used the expression « Us Lebanese, » clearly referring to the fact that I had not lived through the 1990 war experiences and drawing a border between those who had lived through it (« us ») and the others. The year 1990 is identified by many as the end date of the regional and civil war (Davie, 1993; Kastrissianakis, 2012); as such, I was expecting it might hold a strong symbolic meaning. However, Alia did not associate 1990 with the end of something (even though she explained me that things had « returned to normal » afterwards) but rather with Harb al-Tahrir, the offensive launched by Michel Aoun to fight for territory over the Syrian army. Throughout our discussion she used the euphemism « 3el2o » to designate the different wars; however, when referring to 1989-1990 and

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<sup>3</sup> All excerpts from our discussions are translated by me from French to English.

Harb al tahrir, she explicitly mentioned her memory of the bombshells falling.

### **BODILY SOCIOLOGY**

Alia mentioned the 1989-1990 clashes as being « the toughest war of all » for her. In her mind, the intensity of the clashes constituted the main event of 1990, not the end of the war. When referring to this period, she chose repeatedly to talk to me about « the sounds », even reproducing the sound with her mouth:

M: “Looking back, would you be able to describe how you feel about the first half of the 1990’s?”

A: For me it was really the sounds, the sounds of the shells, I still remember how they sounded. I still remember it. It was like that [she imitates the sound]. In 1990 it was the loudest, in terms of sound intensity. After that I was glad it was over, I no longer heard sounds after 1990 other than the bombings.

M: So the difference before and after was really in what you heard, not how you lived?

A: In how I lived but also what I heard. Before it was the Kalashnikovs, and then in 1990 the shells.

M: Was there a moment you knew the war was over?

A: I remember everything went back to normal, we were no longer afraid of shells. Frankly I never felt that I had needed anything during the war that I was able to obtain after, if you want to talk materially for example. Nothing changed before and after. I never felt like I was missing of anything. I didn’t feel that I was living any better materially after the war than I was during. It’s just the feeling of fear that changed.”

She stated that « the main consequences of the war on my life where the sounds and the fear; the main difference between during and after the war was the sounds ». Sounds and fear – one of these manifestations of the war is emotional and the other one phenomenological, both felt and held by the body. When I asked her what she liked to do on her free time during and after the war, she answered with a smile:

A: « I used to go shopping a lot! Barbir, and then when I started working at the Bank, I was able to aim higher, Hamra, Concorde. Also, I joined a gym for

three years in the 1990's. I had even become addicted to the feeling it gave me. »

A: « I used to walk so much to get around. I remember going to work by foot and arriving sweating so much that I was soaked ».

These fragments of Alia's daily life were focused on her bodily experience, and apart from the fear she mentioned only once, she never talked frontally about how she felt. <sup>4</sup>

She rather focused her impressions on her embodied experience and perception, the body being envisioned as « an organ of perception, of movement, of dramatization » (Cefai, 2003, p. 469). This echoed Wacquant's offering of a brief for « carnal sociology »; « a sociology not *of* the body (as social product) but *from* the body (as social spring and vector of knowledge) » (Wacquant, 2005). Wacquant urges to find ways to take « full epistemic advantage of the visceral nature of social life. » (ibid.) The accounts of Alia were indeed visceral; not because they were graphical, which they were not, but because she explicitly linked them to her bodily experience. I asked her a question about her perception of summer 2006 and its aftermath compared to what she had lived in the 1990. She answered immediately:

A: « No, you cannot compare 2006 to 1990, I lived them completely differently. In 2006 I was frightened all the time because I was a mother [she had her three children with her but her husband was in France]. The responsibility of having children changed everything. I was far from 'my country' if I can say so, France. During the 1990's I was single and did not have kids, I was very... reckless. Before 2006, it wasn't that I wasn't afraid but... I was very carefree of danger. For example, when everyone was going down 3al malja2 [a cave under some buildings used by inhabitants to protect themselves from bombshells], I would go up 8 floors without electricity to fetch objects, for the family or the neighbours. And I wasn't afraid of that.

M: Would you be able to pinpoint why you were not afraid at the time?

A: (after a long silence) For example when I was injured with my sister by a shrapnel from a shell, it was in senior year. We knew there was bombing in that area. But why did I go to an area so close to the bombing raids to see my girlfriend? [I have the impression that she is not asking me but rather wondering for herself]. You see what I mean? We knew there was bombing

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that we are related might explain this, or it might not.

and we went to see our girlfriend. Her name was Rola\*. It was in an area near the French embassy. Whereas when you compare to 2006 yes I was scared.

M: Do you think it was related only to your responsibility of having your children with you in 2006?

A: Yes, and also because I saw what it was... [she switched to arabic] Maybe because I had grown up or because I had matured. And then it was also because it was Israel. For us Israel is... it's... Israel. »

I felt surprised because my bias made me expect her to tell me that 1990 had been more difficult. Not only for her, 2006 had been much scarier, but she evoked the different geopolitical context only at the very end of her answers to explain her perception to me. She rather cited two other bodily experiences: being far from her husband and her maternal experience and responsibility of having three children with her. For her, the difference in geopolitical context lied in her perception of adversity: her tautology « Israel is... it's Israel » comes in contrast with her euphemistic « 3el2o » [they clashed] that she used to describe 1989 and 1990.

### **COMMUTING IN BEIRUT DURING THE 1990'S DECADE**

Bou Akar, 2018, evokes a “post-developmentalism” approach often undertaken when analysing Beirut. “In Beirut, and Lebanon in general, territories are now delineated into zones” she explains. Post-developmentalism stirs away from a comprehensive and holistic approach of territory, and by doing so, shifts “the global production of knowledge” to a “conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented” (Bou Akar, 2018, p. 169). This echoes Monroe, 2016, who explains that « today, more than twenty years after the end of Lebanon’s war, the neologism Beirutization still serves as a metaphor for the dissolution of community and the territorialisation of a space into warring parts. » (Monroe, 2016). To me, the prevalence of the post-developmentalism approach goes hand in hand with the absence of analysis on transport and shared transport when discussing Lebanon’s geography (for a more detailed account of this absence, see Tfaily, 2019). This was one of the reasons why I intentionally decided to focus my questions to Alia on transport after the war, as a way of examining not only



the fragmentations, but also the continuities that can arise in one's mental geography. I insist that when accounting for transport during and after the war, one should firmly turn away from a romanticized vision of shared transport as a mean of "stitching the fragmented city together". However, the study of transport during the 1990's can participate in going past a vision of Beirut that labels it a "fragmented city". In the 1990's, Alia walked a lot:

A: "From 1990 to 1992 colleagues who lived in Dahiye sometimes offered to take me from work at 2 p.m. to university. But most of the time I took a service or one service and a half, and I walked a little ... To get to work in the morning I usually walked since it was not very far. To return in the evening from university to home I definitely took a service, because I used to finish late, and I don't really like the night, taking a service at night. Sometimes I took two services, sometimes we got together with my friends to share the trips. It depended, it wasn't an established habit.

M: When you say you didn't like taking a service at night, what does that mean?

A: No no, the context in Lebanon, the war, things like that.

M: Why do you think it was more unpleasant for you at night?

A: It was because of the context. Like today, for example, they told us don't go out at night, there is a lot of looting, robberies, etc. Back then in the 1990's my university was in an unpopulated area. So even if you live in the safest country in the world, psychologically, if you are alone in the street it's scary.

M: When you refer to the context today, what exactly are you referring to?

A: Right now, yes, there are a lot of thefts in Beirut because people don't have any money.

M: How were the journeys on foot? Did you have room to walk?

A: (she smiles) Like today, you know.

M: You have compared to today's situation several time, do you feel you would you like to develop?

A: For example last month my aunt told me to come and get something from her house in the evening at 9 p.m in Raouche. I told her, 'I was advised not to go alone'. She told me 'yes you're right', and she sent her son. It has gotten to this point now. If you have a car, it's better. Back in the day, I didn't have a car.

M: Were there any places in Beirut you did not go to? Or went less to?

A: I'll tell you, I used to go out with people I knew, it was mostly in West Beirut in 1991 and 1992. But sometimes I would go to Ashrafieh to work at a bank there. It must be said that in the context of the war people minimized their commute time for safety, so they enrolled in the universities closest to their homes. For example, there were no people from Kesrouan who came to register at a university in Dahiye. You see what I mean? The goal was to be able to return home as quickly as possible if needed. There were Christian people in my college but they were those who lived close to the college. This situation was related to the context in the country, not to a desire of separation on our part! Like here in France, you study depending on where you live.

M: What about buses? Did you ever take them?

A: A few times when I was in college, and then one time in 2005 to go to Mazra3a.

M: But it was very anecdotal, right?

A: Yes, the wait time was too important. There weren't that many buses left after the war. The vans did not exist [they started in 1996]. I did almost everything on foot. Even when it was hot.

Even though Alia was talking about the years 1991 and 1992, she used the word “war” to designate the context two times. Her commutes are still vivid in her memory; when she was helping me map them out, she would use expressions such as “one service away”, “one service and a half away”, “two services away”. She shared with me a circular mental territorialisation where the distance that you can get to with 1000 Lebanese Pounds (the price of a service at the time) constitutes a mental measuring unit. It should also be noted that my question about the places in Beirut she did not go to was awkwardly asked, because it sounded charged with a preconceived vision of Beirut as a sectarian city. I regretted it because I felt it made Alia in a position where she had to justify herself for her socialization behaviour, which could be observed almost the same in many capital cities among young students. When I asked her if the war context influenced the way she thought of Beirut post-war in the 1990's, she answered:

A: I'm not going to lie, the East/West demarcation was very present in my head even after the war. It was present in all Lebanese heads. Today we still talk about Beirut al-char2iye / al-gharbiye, people ask you “which part are you from”?

M: Whenever you crossed the demarcation line after 1990 would you have in mind that you were crossing the line?

A: No, I didn't have it in mind. It's just that I would hardly go shopping in Ashrafieh, I didn't know the stores.

M: Yes, perfectly normal, it is simply because it was not your neighbourhood.

A: You can't see the dividing line. It is an imaginary line. I had in mind the two zones (East-West) but not the line in itself. Up until now I still don't know how far the line goes, how to locate it. I know that it is on the old Saida road but not more.

Alia's memories underline a contrast between her clear idea of two zones in Beirut during the 1990's, and the blurred demarcation line.

### MYTH-UNMAKING

Throughout some of Alia's answers, I got the impression that she was uncovering implicit discourses on the city, and that such discourses were so heavily charged that they forced her to position herself around them. This first became apparent when she was using the passive voice or neutral pronouns to cite the origins of what she was explaining to me, for example "they told us not to go out alone at night"; "they advised me against going out on my own last month". It also showed when I was not capable of asking the question of the places she went out to in a less charged way, and I made her feel as if she had to justify herself.

M: Do you remember what the city looked like in 1991 and 1992?

A: It looked like those movies I hate. The movies that we see on *YouTube*. All the films on Beirut show buildings with holes. However, there were a lot of buildings with no holes, the movies never show them, they like to show holes. But also a lot of the buildings had holes, especially on the old Sayda road, you know? They took a long time to repair them.

M: So you don't like these movies because you think they don't portray Beirut as it looked at the time? Or it is the contrary? Is it that do you find that they look like Beirut at the time and it reminds you of violent things and therefore you don't like those films?

A: (She seems to hesitate) They are only a partially true depiction of war and after. The movies only talk about bad things.

M: If you could to make a film about the war or after, how would you like to show things?

A: I'm not against those films, but they only talk about war and negative things. While during this time people lived and some were happy, there were a lot of nice buildings... they only talk about the bad things.

M: What do you think they could do to convey a more accurate image?

A: They could talk about the two visions of the city, not just buildings with holes, war and all. Maybe I can understand, they're making a war movie, they don't want to show anything else. I'm sorry but I need to tell you: I have good memories of this period. For example, when we went out, we received family, we went to my cousin's, to university... There weren't all bad things. The movies only focus on the war, even when you watch the movie, the colors are all black, there is no sun ... Maybe to talk about war you have to make a movie like that. But it does not correspond to my experience.

Alia's opinion about the movies depicting the war and the following decade highlights that she feels uneasy about them, for two reasons that are contradictory only in appearance: she dislikes them because they both look and do not look like her memory of Beirut at the time. The discourse and the mythology surrounding Beirut at the time seems to weight too heavily, and she expresses that she cannot relate to them. She also apologizes before telling me about her good memories, which could maybe mean she has identified the weight of a dominant discourse on the era, and that she feels her feelings are not legitimate, or maybe do not make sense. She insisted a lot on telling me about her good memories of the era before and after the war; these were the last words we exchanged during our discussion:

M: I have no more questions, thank you so much for your time. Is there something you would like to add?

A: (after a long silence) There are things that I don't remember very well from that time. For example, when I read about events of the war or after, I feel estranged. I was there but it is as if I were a stranger to what I am reading. It must be said that we were fleeing a lot to day3a. I remember in 1982 I saw an Israeli naked on a tank, who was pouring water on himself. I don't know if it was a dream anymore but if I think I saw it.

M: Is there a question you would like to answer? That you would have wanted me to ask you?

A: No, but frankly... maybe because... I don't have a traumatic memory of the war in Lebanon and the years after. Maybe because we were running away to

day3a when it was getting too out of hand, maybe because I left in 1993. It's as if I didn't feel what people felt.

Alia's insistence on the fact that the era was not "traumatic" for her seems to be directed against another vision that she has in mind of what people would think hearing her testimony. I never mentioned the word "traumatic" myself, and I let her talk about before 1990 when she wanted even though my questions were directed on her life during 1991-1992. Her accounts of feeling estranged and her voluntary or involuntary dissociation to some events echoes an inability to relate to collective myths that seem to simply take up too much space. They appear to be obliterating the possibility of individual or collective identification.

### **GENDERING GLOBAL CONFLICT: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Alia did not feel that her lived experience of navigating public spaces and shared transport was singular because of her gender, or different than any man's experience.

M: Do you remember where you liked to eat in the first years of the 1990 decade?

A: Like today, a lot of home cooked meals! On Sundays we went out together as a family to the Luna Park Ferris wheel, all in my father's Mercedes. We would have lunch at a cafe near Luna Park, it still exists today.

M: Do you think that men, your brothers for example, had a different experience of commute than you? Regarding what you were telling me about commuting at night, maybe?

A: Frankly, we didn't go out much at night. On New Year's Day, for example, we would go out with the family, with the cousins. It wasn't as safe as it is now in the 1990's. You see what I mean? My brothers walked a lot, just like me.

M: I wonder if your experience of walking and going out was in any way influenced by your gender or if you think it would have been the same if you would have been a man.

A: No, my brothers commuted in the same ways I do. Everyone took the same precautions.

I was impatient to hear her account of her perception of her navigation of public spaces and shared transport. However, since she did not relate at all to my suggestion that the experiences of someone in a public space might be shaped differently depending on their perceived gender, I did not push for a “gendering” of our discussion<sup>5</sup> .

To conclude, this article gathered a retrospective discourse centred on sensorial perception to shed light on mental periodization and geographies during and after the Lebanese civil and regional war. Alia’s account of her perception of the end of the war is sensorial as much as it is geopolitical. She describes 1991-1992 not as the end of war, but rather as the end of sound. Without negating that warfare is structuring in her perception of the era – and she navigates back and forth between after 1990 and before, sometimes referring to after 1990 as a “war context” –, she emphasized several times that she thinks her experience was not centred around deprivation or trauma. Her account is important because it underlines how the gathering of retrospective accounts focused on perception can participate in shedding light in the ways the cities we label as “post-conflict” are lived and perceived by their dwellers. One could offer brief not only in favour of exploring the “geopolitics of affect and emotion in a post-conflict city” (Laketa, 2016), but also, to rephrase Laketa, *the geopolitics of sensorial perception and feeling of relatedness in a post-conflict city*. The fact that Alia’s testimony was a retrospective one, looking back 30 years, means she had had time to come in contact with myths and discourses linked to this period, which she might have co-produced, and to which she was able to express that she could not relate entirely. I have decided not to add another woman’s interview because I did not want to weight Alia’s testimony with another one. The value of her testimony lies in the fact that alone, it is not generalizable; it forces us to look at it for its own value, without the help of conceptual varnish or the

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<sup>5</sup> for work on the gendering of conflict, see Sjoberg, 2013

perceived perspective induced by comparison. Overall, what talking to Alia taught me was the discomfort and the fecundity of resisting my urge of making sense (of her experience, of an apparent contradiction, of a choice of words that catches me off-guard). It is only by relentlessly striving to suspend our appeal for sense-making that we can hope to catch glimpses of *sense-unmaking* – be them individual or collective. These sense-unmaking dynamics find themselves at work in the event of a confrontation between someone or some people longing to relate, facing a collective discourse or a shared myth whose immobility has made unrelatable. Barthes wrote that “the very end of myths is to immobilize the world” (Barthes, 1957); they might also make it unrelatable. What I call *sense-unmaking* is the acknowledgement of the encounter with this feeling of unrelatedness and the exploration of its heuristic power.

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Supported by Mama Cash and Norwegian People's Aid. The content of the publication is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the positions of the Norwegian People's Aid or of Mama Cash.