

## Researching Trauma: Some Methodological Considerations for the Humanities

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Since at least the mid-1990s trauma has come to form a more staple theme of research in the humanities, across and between the fields of history, literature, anthropology, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, memory studies, and of

course psychoanalysis. More recently, there has been a concerted effort to “decolonize” trauma studies, outlining how the variegated field remains subservient to European and North American teleological and epistemological reper-

toires. And while accompanying critiques of trauma studies as a discourse—as an institutionally located reproductive mechanism of power and knowledge maintaining relational conduits of subject and object formations—have served to draw attention to the constitutive implications of research paradigms, this has taken place almost exclusively within the bounds of theory.

In this essay, I take as my point of departure the idea that in the humanities there has been an excessive amount of trauma theory, all the while neglecting to develop discussions around methodology. In proposing a consideration of methodology, I want to shift the debate from its overdetermined theoretical concerns to the more worldly, fleshy, and physical contours of a materialist phenomenology focusing on modalities of encountering, inhabiting, and embodying specific livelihoods—livelihoods of people, of places, of things, of objects—including research subjects and research materials themselves. While discussing these themes I draw on some of my encounters with subjects of my research in Lebanon.<sup>1</sup>

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Epistemology is true as long as it accounts for the impossibility of its own beginning and lets itself be driven at every stage by its inadequacy to the things themselves.

(Theodor Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*.)

### Trauma: Between Theory and Method

Since at least the mid-1990s trauma has come to form a staple theme of research in the humanities, across and between the fields of history, literature, anthropology, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, memory studies, and psychoanalysis. More recently, there has been a concerted effort to “decolonize” trauma studies, outlining how the varying field remains subservient to European and North American teleological and epistemological repertoires. According to a prominent critic, Irene Visser, this subservience is informed by an “event-based model of trauma” (252) that underestimates “circumstances—colonial, racial, patriarchal”—in which trauma constitutes enduring textures of life.

Visser’s observation taps into significant research articulating a departure from event-based models of trauma. Writing from the South African context, Michela Borzaga emphasizes how a preoccupation

with the incidence of trauma underestimates textures of social livelihood. In her essay “Trauma in the Postcolony,” she writes (68): “to speak about trauma no longer means to investigate subjectivities and their mutual, shaping relationship with the socio-cultural context in which they are embedded, but only to speak about ‘events’, ‘stressors’, ‘accidents’!”

Borzaga’s emphasis on “context” is echoed by other critics writing in what can be called “the field of decolonizing trauma theory,” such as Stef Craps (43). While Craps and Borzaga share a critique of the predominating event-based model in trauma studies (of which I will say more below), they otherwise depart in a significant respect. This concerns the almost fetishistic faith that Craps invests in *theory* as a moral, largely epistemological agent of change. As he writes in the conclusion of his introduction:

I suggest that, rather than serving as the handmaiden of the status quo or a purveyor of voyeuristic skills, a decolonized trauma theory can act as a catalyst for meaningful change. By enabling us to recognize and attend to the sufferings of people around the world, an inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory can expose situa-

tions of injustice and abuse, and open up ways to imagine a different global future (Craps 7)

I do not want to downplay the valuable contribution to trauma studies by Craps and others,<sup>2</sup> especially concerning the significant critique of what Luckhurst has called “private therapeutic acts of self-improvement” (75). For my purposes, I want rather to question the excessive faith in theory.

Accordingly, in this essay I take as my point of departure the idea that in the humanities there has been an excessive amount of *trauma theory*, all the while neglecting to develop discussions around *methodology*.

In proposing a consideration of methodology, I want to shift the debate from its over-determined theoretical concerns to the more worldly, fleshy, and physical contours of a materialist phenomenology focusing on modalities of encountering, inhabiting, and embodying specific livelihoods—livelihoods of people, of places, of things, of objects—including research subjects and research materials themselves. Rather than profess universalizing pretensions immured in what Sara Ahmed has called a “paperless philosophy” (34), such a phenomenology is attuned to differential circulations of material and imaginary

resources by which subjects and objects comport themselves and “cohere.”

This shift from a theory of the production of knowledge to the methods and social modalities by which knowledge is gathered and applied (from logic to logistics, we can say) requires an alternative view of methodology itself. In phenomenological terms, methodology transpires not so much as a reproducible, categorical means of ordering the logic of knowledge production—which serves in the main to remove the presence of the researcher from the scene of research—but rather as an exercise of encountering research material and exchanging a sense of purpose with research subjects. Perhaps part of this shift in how methodology (the very term is imbued with a rather dry and prosaic aura, and hence tends to be avoided in the humanities) is discussed and debated involves a view of knowledge as know-how, as a practical and passionate exercise in learning, with others, how to know. This includes a willingness to reflect on circumstances in which one has learned how to know, and been induced to “unlearn” (hooks 38) how to know.

As I have come to learn through my developing relationship to my research and that of others, the phenomenological nexus of

knowledge and method is a particularly important ethical tangent for many of us whose research takes place in the Mashreq and Maghreb. Across these regions, much of the social texture and political culture, as well as intellectual know-how, is having to somehow incorporate and process more acute experiences of violence and trauma (physical and symbolic, actual and potential, sudden and enduring) as not only pressing concerns for everyday life, but also as not quite out of the ordinary. By ethical, I mean, in the first instance, that a researcher cultivates a sense of having a relationship to their research subjects and material. I think Michael Lambek is on the right track when, in his discussion of Gadamer and hermeneutics, he suggests a shift of “virtue ethics” from a Levinasian concern with the other to the “circumstances” (230) in which the other appears as other, potentially disturbing my terms of reference. More heterophonic than polyphonic, such an approach suggests that the relationship a researcher has with research subjects and material is mediated by a number of factors and tangents, all involving specific, mostly institutionally directed circulations and exchanges of power, know-how, desire, emotion, passion, and temperament—what Lambek in his essay articulates as an overlapping tension between “tradition and practice.”

From existential and professional experience, I have also come to learn that researchers tend to have negative assumptions concerning violence and trauma. Violence seems always to imply something destructive and immoral, at least according to conventional expectations of normality; or more precisely, according to an analytic temperament that fails to recognize that alignments between normal and abnormal resonate and come to cohere (or be rendered incoherent) as embodied hermeneutic patterns of self- and other-awareness—alignments that are thus always shifting. Kirsten Hastrup (313) has argued that research applications are designed to anticipate “order, pattern, system and essential stability,” and hence are poorly equipped to gauge “fragmentation and instability as part of human experience.” As researchers carry set assumptions about violence, it is inevitable that they categorize varying modes of violence the phenomenon will as beyond the pale of normality, underestimating how a research source, or else a research subject, embodies and makes hermeneutic sense of their social environments.

To borrow from Veena Das, a sensitivity to what I have called shifting alignments between normal and abnormal involves an attentiveness not only to the “ordinari-

ness” of how subjects of enduring violence and trauma revitalize their social circumstances, but indeed how research itself can be attuned to this ordinariness, can “descend into the ordinary.” Writing about the fragments of speech articulated by one of her research subjects, Das writes: “it appears to me that filling out the repertoire to which each fragment points allows us to construct meaning as a process in which the spoken utterances derive their meaning from the lifeworld rather than from the abstract notions of structural semantics” (65). Indeed, in her critique of orienting research through the question “what happened?” Das maintains a critical distance from event-based models. She gives more emphasis to modalities in which violence and trauma are “folded into everyday relations” (75). This “folding” refers both to embodiments of lingering violence and trauma and capacities to reference and narrate experiences and circumstances of such.

Attentiveness to “ordinariness” does not mean that violence (political, domestic, civil, symbolic) should be excused, thematized as a basic attribute of life, or else rendered a constitutive theme of restorative justice. It is rather to foreground that ready-made notions of violence as negative and abnormal underestimate how

actual, emotional, potential, resistant, and symbolic violence play significant roles in maintaining textures of social life. In Lebanon, for example, *martyrdom* circulates, and is packaged and exchanged, as an emotional, productive modality of social bonding, very similar to the ceremonies and social imaginaries of war shrines, tombs, and narratives of unknown-soldier symbols in Australia or the United States.

Researchers also tend to view trauma through a negative lens, as an affliction that should be cured and overcome, or else that can be explained according to a neat, teleological model of cause and effect. As I mentioned above, trauma is often assumed to be associated with a specific event or incident, so that what comes after a “traumatic event” is viewed in terms of personal coping, or else configured as a remedial response to the traumatic event. In her discussion of “the humanitarian trauma model” in Lebanon, Moghnieh argues that trauma is mostly viewed by the “humanitarian experts” as a rupture to the psyche, and rarely recognized as a mode of reference revitalizing capacities for social being. Writing about the July War of 2006 (Israel’s thirty-day bombing spree of Lebanon), Moghnieh says: “Humanitarian organizations that arrived in Lebanon to provide psycholog-

ical assistance relied on ‘the trauma model’ as a mode of intervention that understands violence solely as a traumatic encounter injuring and rupturing the psyche” (28).

Clinical and theoretical ways of speaking about trauma often presuppose a notion of the subject as primordially self-contained and indivisible (individual). Consequently, remedial theories and practices are geared towards patching up this indivisible container. In a temporal sense, the question “what happened?” assumes that trauma is concentrated in an incident of the past, and that present circumstances are innocent of enduring trauma. In the post-civil war years in Lebanon (after 1990), for example, not much effort was made to develop adequate public health facilities, remedial practices, and economic well-being to address enduring and lingering trauma as both personal disposition and social texture. My point is that the failure to do so is a constitutive condition of enduring trauma.

Traumatic symptoms can be valued as varying emotional, intellectual, social, and material ways of coping with distressing circumstances of livelihood, especially when such circumstances involve anticipa-

tions of further violence and the absence of adequate health care. Kai Erikson is one of the very few social anthropologists to have researched trauma in terms of social textures of livelihood and coping, going so far as to claim that no incident or event is itself inherently traumatic. He makes the somewhat radical suggestion that traumatic impulses—both articulate and haptic—are shared as modalities of cohering as a group or community.<sup>3</sup>

As I am suggesting, in the humanities critiques of trauma studies have tended to concentrate on theory, neglecting questions concerning methodology. But how should methodology be understood in relation to varying applications of research? How can methodology be regarded not merely as a way of conducting research and organizing findings, but rather as a relational mode of inhabiting a social texture of life in which trauma is variably embodied? How, indeed is methodology discussed in the humanities? To my mind, critical discussions of methodology tend to be restricted to questions of epistemology. This restriction underestimates how researchers can consider methodology in respect to a physical experience of being-with, or being in the midst, as it were. How, concerning the theme of this special issue—“the materiality of suffering

and the politics of trauma in specific contexts,” to quote the call for papers—can a predominant comportment toward knowing be shifted to a more physical “comportment toward being,”<sup>4</sup> including *being-in* relationships with research subjects and materials?

In this paper, then, I emphasise a notion of methodology as a practical application of research, though having ethical and phenomenological implications. Although phenomenology has often been articulated through a guise of transcending (or “bracketing” beliefs and prejudices) circumstance,<sup>5</sup> its value lies in its basic assumption that subjects, bodies, or for that matter, concepts, are not defined according to their substantive properties, but by capacities, by relational modalities of comportment. As Sara Ahmed writes, speaking about race: “It can be problematic to describe whiteness as something we ‘pass through’: such an argument could make whiteness into something substantive, as if whiteness has an ontological force of its own that compels us and even ‘drives’ action” (135). Accordingly, I want to try to situate the question of methodology in respect to relational dynamics and circulations in which subjects, concepts, research agendas, and knowledge come to cohere.

As I have suggested, while in the social sciences there has been much debate concerning methodology, in the humanities trauma *theory* tends to hold sway. I can outline some of the questions I want to problematize as follows. How, for a start, should we understand “methodology” in respect to researching trauma, in respect to pain and suffering, to social textures of life and livelihood, as well as performative and narrative works that either thematize trauma or else reverberate as traumatized thresholds of social and cultural production? How can methodology be understood in terms of a materialist phenomenology? By this, I mean to suggest, as mentioned above, a shift away from a notion of methodology as a strict exercise of gathering and ordering knowledge to an awareness of *inhabiting* research and social environments consisting of certain modalities of comportment.

### Trauma in a Manifold Refrain

A particular assumption embedded in theories of trauma is that victimhood implies a passive orientation of self and circumstance, in relation to traumatic incidents and/or enduring psychological and physical pain. Consequently, a person's failure to speak about and articulate their pain, give voice to their experiences of violence, or else narrate their present

emotional and material circumstances of livelihood, indicates a failing, an incapacity. Yet this assumption tends, firstly, to encompass binary notions of normality and abnormality, and secondly, underestimates how a person is always actively engaging their circumstances and working on managing unpredictable occurrences of stimuli.

As a modicum of pain, trauma involves *relational* exchanges of voice and voicelessness, speech and speechlessness. The withdrawal of voice and speech can be another way of managing self and circumstance. In her acclaimed *The Body in Pain* (1987), Elaine Scarry discusses the theme of social extension in terms of a transformative momentum between body and voice, understanding these as modalities of inhabiting place and capacities to exchange a sense of self with others. If pain, according to Scarry, “destroys a person’s world, self, and voice” (49) directing a person towards corporeal contraction or withdrawal, then by contrast, the articulation of pain, expressing (pushing, breathing out) voice as an articulation of an experience of pain (if only to say “ahhhhh”), has remedial consequences. Accordingly, as an exchange of self with others, traumatic pain implicates an act of *listening* by which “one human being who is well and free

willingly turns himself into an image of the other’s psychic or sentient claims” (Scarry 50).

Scarry’s discussion suggests a notion of trauma as not only an experience of violence, but also as a way of holding oneself together in the lingering aftermath of violent incidents and events. For my purposes, she emphasizes a compelling notion of pain and trauma taking place as relational modalities of comportment, in between one subject and another, rather than restricted to a subject understood as an embodiment of substantive properties. Listening transpires as a vehicle by which the telling or else sound of pain takes place as a “projection” of oneself beyond their “suffering body,” beyond their body in pain.<sup>6</sup>

Yet listening, of course, is not always provided willingly and freely, but involves modicums of power and desire, institutional and otherwise, by which a subject is disposed to hear and receive the voice of another. The listening subject very often coheres as a professional, humanitarian mode of comportment that assumes a rather atomised notion of the subject according to a substantive notion of possessive individualism. So that while telling and listening take place as relational

modalities of inhabiting and sharing a site in which stories and voice<sup>7</sup> are exchanged, different institutional settings and conventionally channelled orientations involve varying capacities to tell and hear. We should thus be careful not to assume a rather liberal notion of place and subjectivity as primordially, or perhaps potentially, neutral, unmarked by institutional corridors of movement, comportment, deferment, and extension.

One of these institutional corridors is to be sure the formal place for production and exchange of scholarly research, a site that is certainly not immune from conduits of power. Towards putting into further relief my primary theme of a phenomenological methodology, I want to mention an example when the research institute—in this case, my home base at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient—became a site not only for a thematic discussion of trauma, but indeed for a listening to the projected, self-extended voice of a traumatised subject.

This occurred at one of our public colloquiums (always held on the last Thursday of the month, during semesters), when a colleague, Karin Mlodoč, gave a presentation of her research with Anfal women survivors in Iraq.<sup>8</sup> In the usual open discus-



sion following her talk, after some initial questions and comments, a middle-aged man tentatively indicated that he'd like to speak. As it turned out he was himself an Iraqi/Kurdish Anfal survivor (of a poison gas attack), and began speaking about his experiences. What struck me at the time were his thoughtful pauses, his intermittent hesitancy to speak and tell his stories—not because of timidity, or else insecurity with the German language, which he spoke fluently, albeit with a heavy accent.

Interestingly, he did not direct a question to my colleague Mlodoch, as the rest of us were wont to do. He rather addressed us all, moving his gaze across and around the room as he spoke. It seemed to me that he was not sure if the rest of us, with our academic preoccupations and research orientations, wanted to hear what he had to say. I think he was also not sure how much of his experience he should recount, perhaps to spare us, in the circumstance of a scholarly event, or else as a modicum of modesty, the gruesome details of his subjection and pain. As I recall the event, it seemed obvious that he was not sure how we were predisposed to *listen* to what he wanted to say. At the same time, he felt it was important that he speak, and give us some idea of his and his people's experiences.

The man was obviously acquainted with the research of my colleague, and had made an effort to visit our centre for the talk. Through their field trips, most of my colleagues at ZMO, I think it is fair to say, are acquainted with circumstances (if not events and incidents) of violence, and often work with subjects who have experienced violence.<sup>9</sup> So while the stories the gentleman shared may not have been shocking, such a direct account of personal experience of violence and pain sat uncomfortably with the research focus of the event, in an institution more adept to framing discussions of violence and trauma as themes of research. Obviously, his hesitations had also to do with his sense that the occasion was more about thematizing trauma as a modality of research and therefore was not an occasion for the telling and listening to a first-hand account of violence and trauma. Perhaps he felt that his intervention could make a valuable contribution to the way in which we were discussing these themes.

My point in recounting this incident is threefold. Firstly, the man's capacity to express his voice, narrate his experiences, is not only restricted by his experiences of violence and enduring trauma, but also concern the circumstances and occasions that influence and shape capacities to tell

and hear. Secondly, he did not merely articulate his stories, but actively managed his voice and how we were to receive and perhaps respond to his stories and voice. Thirdly, how I myself was induced to reflect on the ethical parameters of my research—indeed, to think more of the various ways in which my relationship to my research coheres. (One of the reviewers of my present essay, Vasiliki Touhouliotis, suggests that to some extent the institutional setting coheres by excluding from the scene casual modes of narration, usually restricted to the field of research. I think this is an interesting way of not only further discussing methodology as a modality of inhabiting the scene of research, but also how a “source”—such as the soliciting of a research subject's account of himself or herself—becomes a source. This is where I feel that a materialist phenomenology attuned to both the specificities and pluralities of circumstance provides a sense that a story transpires through different guises, carries different connotations, depending on the circumstances in which it takes place as a modality of exchange, or concerning how it is categorized and becomes part of a collection).

Such reflections, I feel, are important, if we are to consider how giving one's story and having it received does not take place in a

power vacuum, or else on a level playing field. More significantly, as I said at the beginning of this section, social textures of trauma entail modicums of voice/speech and voiceless/speechlessness not as incapacities, but as measures actively taken to manage how one engages circumstance and an exchange of self with others.

#### **Black-and-White Photography**

On my first visit to Lebanon in 1979, large parts of Beirut, as well as other urban and rural areas of the country had become convulsed in bouts of recurrent armed conflict, massacres, and demographic cleansing, as well as foreign occupation. Amidst the violence, there were intermittent periods of calm. As various militias emerged and battled over control of streets, neighborhoods, villages, and towns, people had to make an effort not only to survive physically—access to bomb shelters, medical services, supplies of food and water, electricity and gas—but also make some sort of sense of the violence.

Increasingly, people had also to make sense of interludes of non-violence, usually with an air of anticipation of further violence. In the wake of the ensuing, brutal Israeli occupation of Beirut in 1982, the

political parties and their militias became increasingly territorial and opportunistic. Consequently, circumstances became unpredictable, as people were never sure when and where a bout of violence would break out, or else when and where an interlude of non-violence would emerge. As people had more pressing to undergo a heady, intractable mix of actual, imaginary, symbolic, precipitate potential violence *and* non-violence, trauma became part of the texture and ethos of social life.<sup>10</sup> While people in their neighborhoods had a range of ready-to-hand vernacular terms to name violence and non-violence, the unpredictability tested their capacities to represent how they understood what was going on. Consequently, the vernacular had to be inventive. *Theory*, to be sure, constitutes another modality of exchanging terms of reference, often far removed from localized practices of talking about circumstance. Yet, in a dissimilar way to social vernaculars, the value of theory cannot be restricted to its ready-to-handness, to its practical application, but has also to strive to account for its relationship to its conditions of emergence. In other words, the question of the value of theory cannot be limited to questions of epistemology, but has also to entertain its phenomenological implications. Edward Said had something like this limitation in mind

when in the first of his traveling theory essays he writes about what he calls “resistances to theory” (242). By this he means that any theory transported from one place to another has to be sensitive to people’s own hermeneutic capacities to embody and make sense of themselves and their circumstances.

This critical insight is brilliantly captured by Ziad Rahbani and Jean Chamoun in one of the episodes of their satirical radio show *Baadna Taybeen: ‘oul Allah!* that was broadcast in Beirut from 1975 to 1978. The title can be translated as “We’re Still Alive, Thank God,” employing a mix of humour and irony to address the pulse beats of the civil violence.<sup>11</sup> While articulating political commentary, many of the episodes focused on how people processed their circumstances temperamentally, emotionally, and hermeneutically.

In an episode titled “Black-and-White Photographs,” Rahbani has his somewhat incredulous character tell a story about a photographer taking pictures of Lebanon (a “country drowning in war,” as is described in another installment, “Greetings from Lebanon”). Strangely, the color film the photographer used would only produce black-and-white images. When the character asks his interlocutor if he believes this story, the other remarks,



positively: “Of course, it makes sense. If you are photographing a black-and-white situation, as Lebanon currently is in, then you’ll get black-and-white images, even if you use a color film.” The first character rejoins with a quite logical follow-up: “then what should you use to make color photos?” The point of this comical exchange is that a form of representation embodies the symptomatic reverberations of its circumstance—a photograph *signifies* its subject by *resonating* with an encounter with the circumstances of its subject.

In other words, to make color photographs one would need to be in tune to the circumstances in which one engages a mode of representation, be more responsive to an encounter<sup>12</sup> with the subject being photographed, and not only the formal properties of the medium.

Rahbani and Chamoun directed their satirical humor towards the absurdity of predominating, largely expedient modes of representing and inevitably normalizing the violence and chaos, or else the normalization of the absurdity of violence—a successful colour photograph would only be true to the terms of reference framing the picture than the circumstances in which the picture is taken. At the time, *Baadna Taybeen: ‘oul Allah!* provided a rather radical response to ideological and political explanations of the

violence, precisely by avoiding any moralizing arguments that one way or another served to render the violence either normal or abnormal.

This particular rhythm of responsiveness that captures my discussion of trauma, especially concerning my interaction with and relationship to (my) research subjects and material in Lebanon. Yet my point is not that a researcher should not assume a moralizing or ideological argument or approach. Rather, my point is that the embodiment of this assumption should not become a substitute for giving an account of how my subjects of research themselves engage with and make sense—or perhaps avoid making sense—of their circumstances and livelihoods.

It is probably an exaggeration or else absurdity to say that amidst the chaos and utter unpredictability of recurrent incidences of civil violence there were outbreaks of non-violence. Yet this observation begins to give us a sense of how difficult it is to articulate violence and trauma as themes and experiences (sudden, enduring, precipitate, looming) according to logical terms of reference. Again, this is not to deny the relevance of a logical way of thematizing enduring violence and trauma, but rather to sug-

gest a relational approach attuned to instances in which research applied in color film is transformed into shades of black and white.

To return to my theme of a phenomenological notion of methodology, how can what I have called a “rhythm of responsiveness” inform a discussion of research in the field, keeping in mind how different disciplines entail varying practices of research? Being, in the main, a literary and cultural scholar myself, I sometimes wonder about what I understand as “fieldwork.” At the ZMO, I am surrounded by anthropologists who understand fieldwork very differently to myself. The contrast is so big that I have had to strive to learn to understand fieldwork as indeed a practice. In my first years at the ZMO, I shared an office with an anthropologist, Laura Menin. I noticed that she planned her field trips for two or three months at a time, whereas by contrast I would undertake more rapid one-week visits to Lebanon to attend a workshop, meet other academics, or do an interview. The latter were usually done in an office on a university campus, quite detached from the noise and bustle of, say, the Corniche, or a café in Hamra. Laura would say something like she needed to sense the climate, or imbibe the atmosphere. Is it necessary

for a literary and cultural studies scholar to imbibe the atmosphere of a place, especially when researching traces of trauma in works of cultural production, as I have previously done (Nikro *The Fragmenting Force of Memory*)? If so, how would a literary scholar go about doing this?

One aspect of literary and cultural studies that has always left me dissatisfied is not so much its concentration on visual and literary sources (which, unlike people, are in some respects more amenable to being detached from their immediate circulations of social production and exchange, and are thus more readily transportable). I rather mean how scholars often have no embodied experiences of the places where the literary texts they work with have been produced and reviewed, discussed and debated. For example, a literary scholar can have an interesting formal idea of a particular thematic element of literary production (memoir, say), and discuss a number of works of literature that express this specific theme. This can range over works of literature produced in different parts of the world and even in different languages (often read in translation), each work becoming an illustrative example of the central idea. Yet the works of literature themselves embody certain dynamics that to a significant extent only make sense in

respect to “their relationships to their conditions of production”.<sup>13</sup> By this, I do not mean the all-too-relativist point that a work of cultural production has to be read in respect to its context. I am rather thinking of a relational observation that its very livelihood involves a myriad range of practices of address (including that directed through research), review, and public debate—supplementary articulations contributing to the significance and resonance of a work of cultural production.

In other words, a work of literature (or a film) do not merely reflect a certain context, but provokes practices of referring to and engaging contexts, an emergence of context itself. To again refer to Rahbani and Chamoun's radio show, the medium (a color film) cannot be regarded as a neutral methodological means of representing events, but comes to phenomenologically embody the pulse beats and resonances (in black-and-white film) of an engagement with circumstance. The work of a literary scholar provides another layer of this embodiment.

### Phenomenological Methodologies

While noting the institutional circumstances and conduits by which applications of know-how take shape, coherence, and purpose, I want in this final section to

reflect on the phenomenological notion of methodology I have been proposing as a compliment to “trauma theory.”

To continue on a personal note, I feel that it is worthwhile considering how my relationship to my research is enabled, especially in respect to what on the one hand may seem like mundane logistics, though on the other hand play a role in orienting me towards gathering, sharing, and practicing my know-how. For example, I have the privilege of being able to visit my primary field of research, Lebanon, collect my “sources” (interviews, documents, artefacts), and then come back to my life and work in Europe. From the moment I plan my trip and book a return flight I embody and apply a methodology based around a separation of myself from the scene of my research, from what I call “my research field.” Like most researchers, I tend to carry with me a rather inflated sense of the significance of my work, as well as an expectation that people and things in Lebanon should be readily receptive to my endeavours. I travel into the “field” and return with my spoils—sources, exhibits, books, films—which I duly store as a reusable stock of resources.

Most of my intellectual training is informed by critical theories arising in Europe and North America. These theories embody,

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take for granted, specific notions of time and space (the former “progressive,” the latter split between “public” and “private”), subjectivity (possessive individual), and the sacred and secular (the former having been left behind, or else neatly quarantined away from political deliberations) as their hermeneutic horizons and epistemological repertoires. As many critics have pointed out, these epistemic assumptions inform predominant intellectual and humanitarian notions of trauma arising in Europe and North America.

The “research field” I visit and work in involves varying temporal, spatial, and economic modalities of life. This field, therefore, does not constitute a holistic package that I can oppose to Europe, and hence cannot be neatly wrapped up and contrasted to what in the process would transpire as an equally wrapped up and parcelled Europe and North America. In Lebanon, things are much messier, with significant differences within and between cities, towns and villages, and in relation to other places of the Mashreq and Maghreb. To what extent, I can well ask, do my “sources” (research subjects and research material) maintain their varying, site-specific modalities of hermeneutic livelihood once they are constrained to respond to the constitutive applications of my

research? Do they simply shed their previous ways of resonating and cohering? To what extent do such sources experience their hermeneutic vigor otherwise—not as “sources” for the gathering of knowledge? How, perhaps, can a source be regarded as a phenomenological embodiment of circumstance—including the institutional circumstances in which a source is stored and exchanged as a resource for practices of know-how, repertoires in knowing how to know? These questions become more vexing when considering how in Lebanon temporal and spatial experiences and imaginaries involve not merely acute experiences of violence and trauma, but also varying ways of thematically and/or symptomatically engaging violence and trauma.

Yet, as I have been suggesting, these questions involve a methodological practice that cannot be limited to epistemological arguments over the appropriateness of certain categories and classifications (such as “ideal types”). The question of methodology requires an attentiveness to relational modalities of inhabiting and making sense of one’s research in and through reciprocal vectors of social exchange.

The contemporary preoccupation with *theories* of trauma, as I said in my introductory remarks, tends to underestimate a phenomenological dimension of methodological practices. Where the optics of theory usually entails a convenient separation of the researcher from the scene of research, methodology implicates the researcher’s physical presence and practice. In a phenomenological refrain, methodology takes place through social practices of exchanging a sense of purpose with others, with research subjects and research materials.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The German Ministry of Education and Training (DFG) funded the research of which this essay is a part. This essay was presented at a seminar of the research group *Trajectories of Lives and Knowledge* of which I am a part, at the ZMO. I would like to thank my colleagues for their feedback. Also thanks to the reviewers, Dr. Muzna Al Masri and Dr. Vasiliki Touhouliotis for their valuable comments.

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed the critical literature and debates in my introduction to a special issue of the journal *Postcolonial Text* I edited. See Nikro, "Situating Postcolonial Trauma Studies", 2014; as well as in chapter 5 of my *The Fragmenting Force of Memory*, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See his essay "Notes on Trauma and Community", in Caruth (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory*). For an expanded discussion of his argument and fieldwork, see his *A New Species of Trouble*.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the phrase from the late William Spanos (*Toward a Non-Humanist Humanism: Theory After 9/11*), who provides a convincing critique of the (de)constructivist ethos of the last few decades in cultural and literary studies in, mostly, North America.

<sup>5</sup> Ihde (*Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*) provides an interesting discussion of what he calls "first phenomenology," in respect to his preoccupation with sound.

<sup>6</sup> For a similar, and just as compelling notion of listening, see the two chapters by Dori Laub (*Testimony*).

<sup>7</sup> On voice as sound not necessarily equal to speech, see Dolar, and Cavavero.

<sup>8</sup> See Mlodoch. Her colloquium presentation was on February 26, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> For a compelling discussion of the theme by another of my colleagues, see Alimia.

<sup>10</sup> Sami Hermez (*War is Coming*) provides a compelling ethnographic discussion of how people in Lebanon embody an anticipation of violence.

<sup>11</sup> Many of the episodes (all in Arabic) aired between 1975 to 1976 are available as MP3 files on the internet (Rahbani & Chamoun).

<sup>12</sup> On the photographic event as an "encounter," see Azoulay.

<sup>13</sup> By "production" I include printing and publishing, reviews and commentary, public readings and discussion, as well as adaptations of the work, be it a novel, a memoir, a film, etc.

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