

## **Writing Memories of the Present: Alternative Narratives about the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon**

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*We are born into webs of narrative: micronarratives of familial life and macronarratives of collective identity, codes of established narratives that define our capacities to weave individual life stories.*

- Gillian Whitlock (11)

*It has been said that our era is "the age of testimony", and that the act of bearing witness to an event, of providing or establishing evidence before an actual or projected audience, is the literary or discursive mode of our time.*

- Bella Brodzki

In July 2006, I was all packed and ready to move back home to Lebanon from the US with my husband and our one-month-old twin daughters. The last of the tower of boxes had to be packed and shipped and my primary focus was to break through my postpartum haze and muster enough energy to make the trip from the small Midwestern town I had resided in for the past six years to the new home awaiting us in Beirut. When the news initially broke on July 12 about the Israeli soldiers abducted by Hizbullah and the escalating situation in the south of Lebanon, I did not for one minute think that that might interfere with our travel plans. Having lived through the Lebanese civil war and its aftermath, I assured my American husband that it was "business as usual" and that the issue will be resolved overnight. But with the quick Israeli escalations, we, along with thousands of others, were thrown into limbo, watching in horror and disbelief as the country that I regard as home was mercilessly and methodically besieged (by air, land, and sea), bombed, and destroyed for thirty-three days, resulting in the death of 1,200 Lebanese (most of whom were civilians), the displacement of close to a million people,

and the destruction of some of the country's vital infrastructure, including the dissemination of the Beirut southern suburb of Dahyie.

With the situation quickly becoming a far cry from "business as usual," the move back to Lebanon became more and more improbable, and my husband and I hastily started piecing together an alternative future for us in the US. But my story cannot even come close to the traumas experienced by thousands of others who found themselves literally in the line of Israeli fire. For that summer, a high number of Lebanese expatriates and non-Lebanese tourists converged onto Lebanon to fulfill predictions that the summer of 2006 would be the country's best touristic season since the end of the civil war. But with the Israeli-imposed naval and air blockade, and the persistent bombings of the Beirut-Damascus road taking everyone by surprise, both citizens and visitors found themselves under an impenetrable physical as well as psychological siege.

Many of us in the US (Lebanese and non-Lebanese alike) were beset by a similar, albeit invisible and non-physical, siege. Unable to operate normally, we spent those long summer days repeatedly trying to reach our families and friends in Lebanon by phone, and obsessively following the details of the attacks that were being covered around-the-clock by Arabic TV stations and newspapers. We tried to dispel a sense of impending despair by organizing sit-ins, demonstrations, and teach-ins to protest and raise people's awareness about the Israeli attacks, which, backed and funded by the US, were seen by the Bush administration as a final abolishment of Hizbullah and, in Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's words, "the birth pangs of a new Middle East" (qtd. in Hovsepian 2008, 1). Perhaps the most poignant and haunting stories that were coming out of Lebanon during those thirty-three days were the ones portraying the war, fear, and damage (both physical and psychological) from a human and first-hand perspective.<sup>1</sup> One particularly valuable source of news for Lebanese (as well as non-Lebanese) following the events from outside Lebanon was the online circulation of various eye-witness reports dispatched from within Lebanon by way of cyberblogs, emails, online journal entries or newsfeed postings, documenting the conflict from a Lebanese/Arab or insider's perspective. These narratives were widely distributed and accessed via the web, including, for instance, cyberblog and journal entries written by

Lebanese, Lebanese-American, as well as non-Lebanese artists, graduate students, activists, professors, and writers such as Rasha Salti, Maysoun Sukarieh, Maya Mikdashi, Zena el-Khalil, Hanady Salman, Patrick McGreevy, and Laila Farah, all of whom documented their experiences of living in Lebanon through the Israeli siege. Others were writing from outside Lebanon, from such places as Jordan and Syria like in the case of Arab-American performers Leila Buck and Najla Said, as well as Andy Young writing from New Orleans.

These blog and online journal entries documenting what is being referred to as "The Summer 2006 Siege of Lebanon" or "The July war" not only develop a distinct and immediate war narrative, serving as a cathartic release and a means of connection for the blogger/writer, but they also become necessary information lifelines for the diasporic Lebanese, immersing them headlong in the intricate day-to-day details of the war back home as portrayed from a first-person perspective. More importantly, this type of testimonial as disseminated through cyberspace serves to humanize the Arab voice and its experience of war for a Western, more specifically here, American public, inevitably creating an archive of much-needed alternative stories that challenge the "heroic" master narrative often used to justify the direct or indirect involvement of the US in foreign wars, specifically in the Middle East. For in a US that has become increasingly desensitized, if not downright apathetic, toward journalistic reports of civilian casualties, bombs, and general upheaval in different areas of the Middle East, first-hand testimonials and accounts of living through such realities, dispatched not only from Lebanon but also from other places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine transmit to the reader a wider understanding or a multi-layered perspective of these realities, a perspective that has become more and more absent from US mainstream viewpoints, especially after 9/11.

For after 9/11, the attention given Arabs and Muslims in general (whether in the US or abroad) has been, for the most part, negative in nature, creating indiscriminate parallels between Arabs, terrorists, and religious fundamentalism. The end result of this increasing US hostility toward Arab identity and its various cultural productions is the lack of a complex and multi-layered understanding of the Arab world and its history, resulting in an alarming shift to a more dichotomous, unilateral, and holistic approach to

this region. Such an approach is quickly overtaking and defining collective and individual mainstream Western attitudes toward the Arab world, the understanding of which is besieged by misinformation, prejudice, suspicion, and racism.<sup>2</sup> It is nevertheless important to note that such a slew of reductive attitudes were entrenched in Western thinking well before 9/11 and the war on Iraq, with watershed events like the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the 1973 Arab oil embargo, and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon being other examples of the polarization of Western and Middle-Eastern political viewpoints. By emphasizing alternative stories about war, identity, and culture, and more specifically by showing the human and dark underbelly of war traumas, cyberblogs and online journal entries such as the ones written and distributed during "The Summer 2006 Siege of Lebanon," I argue in the paper, ultimately become vital tools in the deconstruction of the overwhelmingly negative Western-based master narrative surrounding the reception and understanding of Arab identity and culture.

Describing the "blog" as "a new genre of autobiography produced by changes in communications technology," Gillian Whitlock, in her book titled *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, discusses the popularity of the Iraqi blogger Salam Pax, whose site "Where Is Raed" chronicled the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftereffects (2007, 1). With these "life narratives hav[ing] a distinctive role to play in the struggle to shape dialogues across cultures . . . in conflict," autobiography written in the vein of Pax and similar bloggers becomes, in the words of Whitlock, a "soft weapon" (2007, 2-3).<sup>3</sup> The softness of this weapon emanates from its possible use as propaganda, which, I argue, nevertheless does not lessen its impact or relevance in countering "a careful manipulation of opinion and emotion in the public sphere and a management of information in the engineering of consent" (Whitlock 2007, 3). Similar to Salam Pax's entries on the invasion of Iraq, the online testimonials dispatched from Lebanon during Israel's 2006 attacks bring into the limelight the interconnectivity of public and private spheres as existing within areas in/of conflict. Even more pertinent is the ways in which these online testimonials as alternative war narratives possess the potential for connecting the writer and reader across international borders, thus promising a significant transformation of the fabric of cultural spaces by breaking through what is (mis)conceived as clearly defined national and cultural parameters.

Such a potential, however, faces inordinate challenges represented by an increasingly binary and divisive rhetoric spewed by political leaders both in the West as well as in the Arab world. In light of such rhetoric, what we see today is the perception and treatment of a country's ordinary citizens as significant contributors to their nations' terrorist organizations or imperialist visions.<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Achcar describes a US-led push to ideologically militarize ordinary citizens in the Arab world in order to justify targeting them as part of the global war on terror, stating:

In this war [the global war on terror], the enemy is no longer an army or a nation's economic might, but, rather, the nation itself, identified with the terrorist plague that must be eradicated . . . concluding with a war on entire peoples viewed as terrorists because they tolerate the actions of terrorists in their midst or the continuation of a regime defined as terrorist. According to this logic, it has become legitimate to attack peoples themselves, whether in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in the occupied Palestinian territories, or in Lebanon. (2007, 72)

This type of confluence between civilians and what are perceived as terrorists or guerilla fighters is evident in the way ordinary Lebanese citizens, especially in the southern suburbs of Beirut and villages in south Lebanon, came under direct Israeli attacks during the Summer 2006 war. In addition to being a rejection of the above-mentioned terrorists-by-association label,<sup>5</sup> the online testimonials distributed to portray the civilian perspective can also be regarded as an assertion of these civilians' commitment to fight back by using their testimonials as "soft weapons" in the face of Israeli aggression. These "soft weapons," then, take on the form of writing about the war "as a lived experience . . . [rather than] dealing with war as abstraction" (Hovsepian 2008, 13). Unlike spent bullets or unexploded shells, however, these discursive weapons leave behind an archive of what Nubar Hovsepian, in his introduction to his edited collection *The War on Lebanon*, calls the war's "human dimension" (2008, 13).

This "human dimension" is represented in Hovsepian's collection by a variety of voices and perspectives, including those of writer and curator Rasha Salti, anthropologist Kirsten Scheid, Lebanese school counselor living in Michigan Rima Brinjikji, and journalist Hanady Salman, whose war testimonials constitute the "war as

lived experience” section in *The War on Lebanon*, published in 2008. The archival importance of including such narratives as part of a collected reader on the Summer 2006 War on Lebanon marks the necessity for including voices that are usually unaccounted for in official historical annals. However, the impact of such narratives lies in their online dissemination and immediate reception by a wide readership, subsequently reshaping a removed audience’s participation and understanding of the war’s development and its effect on human lives. Salti’s cyberentries, for instance, exemplify such a transformative perspective. A film curator, freelance writer, and Lebanese activist of Palestinian origin who had moved to Beirut a day before the war broke out on July 12, 2006, Salti started writing her diary-like entries with the onslaught of the Israeli attacks to “friends outside Lebanon” primarily “to remain sane and give them my news” (2006, “Lebanon Siege: Day 5”).

Alternately titled "Salti Dispatches from Beirut", “Lebanon Siege,” or "Siege Notes" and widely circulated on the internet during the thirty-three-day war, Salti’s journal entries not only document the unfolding of events between July 12 and August 13 of 2006, but they also delve into the collective Lebanese psyche to record personal and collective fears, disillusionment, phobias, losses, political opinions, grief, and traumas that Salti and fellow Lebanese underwent during that period. Divided into twelve entries and written between electric power cuts, air raids, and an increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere to describe what the situation was like "on the ground," Salti's testimonials became a way for the writer "to fight dementia at home, in my home and in my mind, to bridge the isolation in this siege, [rather] than to fight the media black-out, racism, prejudice, and break the seal of silence" (2006, “Lebanon Siege: Day 5”).

Even though the personal and the local were the initial impetus behind Salti’s cyberblog entries, this "seal of silence" was nevertheless broken, for the entries, most of which were forwarded electronically, quickly took a life of their own, providing an insider’s perspective for many Lebanese and non-Lebanese outside Lebanon who were anxious to get information about the alarming day-to-day effects of the war. Salti’s “Seige Notes,” in fact, in addition to being widely circulated through email lists and cyberblogs, were also published in part in the *London Review of Books*, the *Middle East*

Report, and on the online site “Electronic Lebanon,” and were ultimately posted in their entirety by Salti on her blog (<http://rashasalti.blogspot.com/>).<sup>6</sup>

By drawing the reader into the “now” of the war, thus implicating him/her in the experience of trauma, the cyberblog-as-testimony changes the topography of the war experience, both at home and abroad, thus broadening the impact of this experience and the way it affects its subjects, whether directly or indirectly. Even more so, such testimonies blur the lines between the personal and the collective by portraying a more or less common national experience of a people under attack, despite the discrepancies in this range of experiences.<sup>7</sup> Yet this collective remains distinctly Lebanese, becoming even more foreboding and hopeless when compared to a more global, human (and humane) collective. Referring to her isolation and alienating detachment generated by the siege, Salti writes,

I had another life that seems distant and foreign now. The morning is different, noon is different, sunset is different. Another Beirut has emerged. War time Beirut. War time Lebanon. War time mornings, war time noons. Siege time Beirut, siege time morning, siege time sunsets. Everyone else in the world is going about their day as they had planned is or as it was planned for them. (2006, “Lebanon Siege: Day 5”).

This sense of isolation and disconnection from what is perceived as an indifferent outside world is itself offset by the fact that thousands of readers outside Lebanon were experiencing the war in a more visceral and immediate manner by reading the dispatches written by Salti and other bloggers. Salti quickly becomes aware of such a readership, recognizing through her readers’ input the ways in which her writing was breaking through the boundaries imposed by the Israeli siege and reaching a wider audience, some of which she had not even intended to target. The more her entries are circulated via the internet, the more feedback (both positive and negative) she starts receiving from readers around the world, varying between Arab readers and non-Arab readers, some who were familiar with the Arab world and others who did not know much about Middle-Eastern politics.

This emphasis on audience in writing testimonials is evident in Bella Brodzki’s description of the term “testimony” in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, in which she

writes, “Testimony challenges the boundaries between intimacy and publicity, secrecy and disclosure, but as a performative utterance it depends ultimately on an audience, an audience positioned at various historical and psychological removes of estrangement, resistance, identification, or receptivity to the events being recounted - as well as to their particular mode of transmission” (2001). In this way, the successful articulation of war testimonials by Salti and others hinges on a real rather than imagined readership, one that is psychologically implicated but at the same time physically removed from the traumatic “events being recounted.” Comments written in response to Salti’s entries reveal the variety of reactions on the parts of readers from around the world. The role of such testimonials in providing readers with an alternative vision of current events is evident in one German reader’s statement that she “rel[ies] on [Salti’s] diary for reality,” (“Linda” 2006) while a comment posted by “liberalrob,” a Texas-based blogger, reads: “Bet you don’t hear these [entries] read aloud on CNN or Fox News. Very powerful” (2006). The reactions to Salti’s testimonials, nevertheless, are not all positive, for some engender viewpoints that challenge Salti’s perspective, as well as her credibility. She specifically refers to the criticism doled out by Israeli readers, who, she points out in Day 7 entry of her siege notes, hold her writing to

high expectations in journalism and reporting. An interesting community of fact-checkers has emerged south of Lebanon's south. They find my “reporting” deplorable and send corrections that conclude with profound philosophical interrogations on who do I think I am, what I want from life, and if I am ready for a serious dialogue with the 'other'. I am not a reporter, nor do I ever wish to be. (2006, “Lebanon Siege: Day 7”)

The discursive self-consciousness that comes with acknowledging an audience, no matter how friendly or hostile this audience is or whether its presence is immediate or removed, inevitably contributes, both directly or indirectly, to the writer’s intent. Recognizing that she is “no longer writing to the intimate society of people I love and cherish, but to an opaque blogosphere of people who want “alternative’ news,” Salti realizes that she cannot “sacrifice candor, transparency, and skepticism at the risk of having my notes distorted to serve some ill-intentioned purpose” (2008, “Notes” 141). Therefore, the presence of a readership, whether it exists as an abstraction or as a



direct challenge, is key to transform online journal entries like Salti's from personal ruminations on the Summer 2006 war to a more consciously-framed attempt to represent a collective national experience. The conscious use of the testimonial as, to borrow Whitlock's term, a "soft weapon" to counter Israeli aggression against Lebanese civilians is evident when Salti states: "I gradually became obsessed with having the deaths of everyday folks acknowledged as a first step to redressing injustice" (2008, "Notes" 135). One way to redress such injustices was to "seek [and narrate] other people's stories" (2008, "Notes" 135), a narrative strategy that Salti adopts to widen the sphere of the personal by incorporating the collective: "I needed to lend my self (consciousness and body) and vehicle (to mediate) the subjectivity, pain, and suffering of those whose stories were not being told, or could not find space to be told" (2008, "Notes" 135).

Such narrative consciousness and mediation is exactly what we encounter in many of Salti's and other bloggers' accounts, which then come to embody an online space to relay experiences that would have been mostly unaccounted for in major media and news outlets. Through Salti's narrative perspective, we encounter, for example, the image of families displaced from their homes in the South living in a public garden in Beirut, the resolve of a nine-year-old boy to find work at a printer's shop in Beirut in order to assist his displaced family, the trauma of untrained volunteers exposed to scores of burnt dead bodies, as well as the suffering of individuals left with no food or medicine. This collection of stories, then, as witnessed by Salti through her relief work in Beirut and the south of Lebanon during the 2006 Israeli-Hizbullah war, serves to remove a testimonial such as Salti's from the realms of the purely personal, guiding the reader through a multi-layered and wide-ranging mosaic of various Lebanese civilians' experiences of this war.

The important role of audience and the connection between the personal and the collective can be found at the heart of another type of cyberblog testimonials. The drawings by Lebanese musician and cartoonist **Mazen Kerbaj** posted on his blog throughout the July 2006 war capture (in seemingly simple lines and sketches) the very complex and far-reaching psychological and physical effects of the war as it was being lived in Lebanon, both individually and collectively. Accompanied by Arabic text often

included in doodle fashion and translated separately on the blog into English, Kerbaj's art bears witness to the war atrocities, drawing his online viewers/readers into visual depictions of the dark, ironic, and downright macabre aspects of the siege. In a series of drawings titled "Real News From Beirut," Kerbaj challenges international coverage of the deteriorating conditions in Lebanon by chronicling, for instance, Israel's targeting of civilians escaping southern villages by bus and the escalating humanitarian crisis overtaking the south of Lebanon and Beirut during those summer months. The second installment of "Real News from Beirut" features a human-like bombed-out building with a family of four trapped under it. The blurb "Whole Buildings Are Falling With The Families Inside" and "A Family of 10 People Was Found Under a BLDG in TYR with 13 Other Persons" confronts head-on the guilty inaction of the international community during those thirty-three days of the attacks (Kerbaj 2006, "Real News").

Like Salti, Kerbaj's increasing awareness of his cyber-audience is apparent in the commentary accompanying his sketches, in which he encourages his readers to widely disseminate his drawings as they see fit in order to raise international awareness during the attacks.<sup>8</sup> This virtual audience, then, in addition to assuming the role of a reader, in turn participates in the (re)production of these testimonials by forwarding them to friends, colleagues, and various listservs. By ensuring, through the participation of their online audience, the continuation of the act of bearing witness, bloggers like Salti and Kerbaj (whether consciously or subconsciously) admit to the possibility of their own death, thus attesting to Brodzki's belief that "the act of testimony is a commemorative moment . . . [but] [i]t is [also] ineluctably tied to death" (2001).

In a sketch posted on July 23, 2006 and titled "black," Kerbaj depicts a distorted and haunting face with billowing black hair, accompanied with the Arabic words "*nahnou maouta el-ghad*," translated into English in a vertical line beneath the drawing as: "We are tomorrow's dead" (Kerbaj 2006, "black"). The literal and metaphorical darkness depicted in this sketch captures the artist's individual despair as well as the collective despair of a nation slowly losing its grip on hope. While rendering the threat of imminent death as experienced by the artist and his fellow Lebanese a concrete one, the foreboding drawing also alludes and pays homage to the hundreds of deaths that have already occurred. In this way, Kerbaj's art as testimony, just like Salti's, "personalize[s]"

and humanize[s] categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard” (Whitlock 2007, 3), not only in its depiction of a community’s fear of obliteration, but also in its allusion to the victims of the war, or “the dead of yesterday,” who like their future counterparts and many before them, will be slowly forgotten and obliterated from national and international collective memory.

Both Kerbaj and Salti engage in existential self-questioning, with their ruminations targeting the relevance of their own acts of testimony. As the Israeli siege drags on and communal despair sets in among the Lebanese, Salti slowly starts to question the impact and role of her dispatches, stating, “Writing is not pointless per se, but it is not longer an activity that gives me relief. The world outside this siege seems increasingly far, as if it had evacuated with the bi-national passport holders and foreigners” (2006, “Lebanon Siege: Day 8”). Such disconnection from the outside world is accompanied by a sense of timelessness (reflected in the way the entries are written in spurts of siege dispatches instead of a day-by-day log). As the Israeli attacks and the siege continue, the difference between days and weeks become more and more blurred. Slowly, with the tendency of history to repeat itself, the past and the present also merge, so much so that, for the generation that is old enough to remember, the siege of 2006 becomes one and the same as the 1982, 1993, and 1996 Israeli incursions into Lebanon. Salti, with a tinge of black humor, refers to this constant sense of fluctuating between the past and the present, layering her entries with memories of previous wars she had experienced:

[T]hose of us who endured that Israeli murderous folly [Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon], should get some sort of a break, a package of mundane privileges, free internet, free coffee, parking spots. . . . The renowned Lebanese novelist, Elias Khoury, said this morning on al-Jazeera that he is so reminded of past experiences with Israel's wars that he feels he is living between a time of memory and the present time. (2006, “Lebanon Siege: Day 11”)

Khoury himself reiterates this disorienting sense of déjà-vu occurring within “a time of memory” in his article titled “Do I see or do I remember?” and published in the *London Review of Books* on August 3, 2006. In this article, he places the events of the summer 2006 war within the larger context of Lebanon's complex history and this

country's role in regional politics. Here again, Khoury describes the blurring of past and present events in the individual as well as collective Lebanese consciousness, stating,

Before me I see the same images of death that I witnessed 24 years ago [referring to the 1982 Israeli invasion, often alluded to by the Lebanese as "the invasion"]. The pictures themselves, the noise of invading aircraft in the skies of Beirut and all over Lebanon, are the same. Do I see or do I remember? When you are incapable of distinguishing between what is in front of you and what you remember, it becomes clear that history teaches nothing. (Khoury 2006)

This inability to learn from history, as Khoury puts it, is mirrored in a widespread suppression of the fifteen-year civil war (1975-1990) in the Lebanese collective consciousness. Such collective amnesia has been mostly challenged in the post-civil war era by Arab and diasporic literary narratives, often written retrospectively to document the kaleidoscope of perspectives on a long and complicated conflict, the effects of which are still evident today. These post-war narratives include, for instance, works by Arab and diasporic writers such as Rabih Alameddine, Patricia Sarrafian Ward, Elias Khoury, Ghada Samman, Mai Ghoussoub, Hanan al-Shaykh, Hoda Barakat, Etel Adnan, Nada Awar Jarrar, Jad El-Hage, and Rashid al-Daif, to name a few. In a country that quickly became obsessed with physical reconstruction and with a specific vision of the nation's future at the expense of its past, these war narratives become one of the very few (if not the only widely available) memorials referencing or commemorating the war, offering what Syrine Hout calls a "complex consciousness characterized by mixed modes and moods, such as irony, parody, satire, nostalgia, and sentimentality" (2005, 219).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, what makes these narratives even more significant is the multi-layered perspective they offer on the experience of war trauma, so much so that in the absence of an official/state narrative on the war, the multiple perspective of experiencing and surviving the war constitutes an effort to face and reconcile with a painful past. As Elise Salem states in her book, *Just as war was* "a condition that many of Lebanon's writers attempted to understand through writing, through narrative" (2003, 169), the postwar amnesia also needs to be addressed, with postwar narratives about the war serving to "disturb rather than entertain" (2003, 10).

This postwar amnesia was all too vividly shaken by the renewed sound of bombs and reemergence of curfews, power cuts, and uncertainty during the Summer 2006 war between Hizbullah and Israel, a war that, to a certain extent, can be regarded as a by-product or even an extension of the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. The online narratives disseminated during the July war, unlike the post-civil war collection of literary texts (most of which were written in retrospect), serve to generate an immediate reaction on the part of both writer and reader: with the writer articulating war trauma as he/she is living it, and the reader gaining an understanding of the events as they unfold through alternative mediums.<sup>10</sup> In this way, these online war testimonials generated during the 2006 Israeli siege, as shown here, serve to establish "a living archive" of the war, creating dynamic and varied narratives generated by engaged citizens and diasporics, some of whom were literally, others metaphorically, under siege.

In an article entitled "Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War," Sune Haugbolle points to increasing efforts in Lebanon to develop a discourse that inscribes the civil war in the Lebanese collective memory. Discussing what he calls "the relationship between public and private forms of social memory," Haugbolle states, "Despite a strong inclination in [the Lebanese] state and society to bury the memory of the war, a public debate has slowly been emerging in the last five or six years" (2005, 191). Applying Haugbolle's distinction between "public and private forms of social memory" to the war narratives of the more recent Israeli-Hizbullah conflict, it can be stated that the multitude of blog and online journal entries making up what I call a "living archive" started in most cases as a private form of social memory (addressed to concerned family and friends outside Lebanon), recording writers' personal reactions and perspective on the summer war, but was rapidly transformed into a public form of social, cultural, and historical memory. Their availability and the wide reception they obtained render these online entries an extremely important part of a national as well as international historical and cultural consciousness. In other words, by delivering a complex and multi-layered portrayal of this region and its people through a first-person perspective, these war testimonials break the unilateral and one-sided depiction of Arab identity and culture, specifically for US readers, as disseminated through Western media. Establishing such a personal, and by extension, collective record of war

experiences becomes the first step toward connecting with a country's history and people, so as to keep the significance and implications of this history alive, no matter how traumatic or scarring it might be.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay focuses on narratives portraying Lebanese reactions to and experiences of the Israeli-Hizbullah July 2006 conflict. The Israeli reaction to Hizbullah's attacks on northern Israel has been represented on various online sites and blogs, but a thorough analysis of the Israeli perspective lies outside the limits of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Examples abound of the reductive terminology used to describe the Arab world and Arabs. For instance, it is very common to hear the Arab world referred to in the US by the average citizen as "over there," especially in reference to the US's military undertakings in the area, with such terminology reducing a varied assortment of cultures and nations to an abstract and removed mass. Accompanying such indistinct reductions of the Arab world in terms of place is the dehumanization and denigration of the Arab character. While waiting in an airport lounge one day, I overheard a woman discussing the Iraq war with a fellow traveler. After terms like "scumbags" and other derogatory words were used to describe Arab nations, the woman stated: "They don't love their children the way we do," with they referring to Arabs in general. This type of statement provides important insight into the psychology of a significant segment of the American public, which, to internalize its government's imperialistic rhetoric and justify the killing of innocent civilians, necessarily has to perceive Arabs as either terrorists (therefore in need of being eradicated) or sub-human.

<sup>3</sup> There exist, however, various differences between testimonials and autobiography. As noted by Bella Brodzki, "One could say that testimony, to a greater extent than any other kind of autobiography, emerges out of a political context, in response to a particular set of political circumstances and rhetorical conditions." Moreover, "testimonies are language events or speech acts with special claims to truth and authenticity and are received, reflected, assimilated, and appropriated by particular audiences and interpretive communities as representing those whose voices would otherwise not be heard. What testimonies testify to always exceeds the boundaries of an individual life, of individual experience . . . They invite solidarity, not facile identification in the personal, psychological manner of so many autobiographical narratives" (Brodzki).

<sup>4</sup> The direct implication and even targeting of civilians in contemporary warfare is undertaken by recognized nation states as well as non-governmental militias and fundamentalist networks. Despite the fact that drawing such parallel links is problematic due to the wide differences among such disparate entities, it still remains true that in contemporary wars (both declared and undeclared, holy and secular), innocent lives are lost due to the attackers' militarization of civilians, who are often used as pawns to exert pressure on the "enemy."

<sup>5</sup> The Israeli attacks targeting civilian shelters in many southern Lebanese villages resulted in numerous massacres of whole families. The justification behind these massacres and the obliteration of many villages in the south of Lebanon was that these civilians were harboring Hizbullah fighters amongst them.

<sup>6</sup> Sections of Salti's "Siege Notes" have also been published in *Inside Lebanon: Journey to a Shattered Land with Noam Chomsky* (2007).

<sup>7</sup> It is nevertheless important to note that this common portrayal or perspective presented by testimonials such as Salti's are far from being completely representative of the nation as a whole. Even with various areas in Lebanon being indiscriminately targeted in the summer of 2006, there were still huge discrepancies in the way different Lebanese experienced this war. While many Lebanese were stranded and bombarded in southern villages and the southern suburbs of Beirut, others (mostly in the Eastern parts of Beirut) continued their leisurely summers in mountain and beach resorts. At the same time, foreign nationals and those Lebanese holding foreign passports were evacuated by land, air, and sea. Furthermore, despite a collective Lebanese denouncement of the Israeli atrocities, the Lebanese public opinion on Hizbullah's role in instigating and prolonging the attacks was very diverse during the summer war and even more so in its aftermath.

<sup>8</sup> After the war ended, however, Kerbaj posted an addendum to his blog postings asking people to contact him for permission to reprint his drawings.

<sup>9</sup> For after the Lebanese civil war, (in which approximately 100,000 people were killed, and an estimated 100,000 were handicapped by injuries), no memorials were erected, no clear "winning side" emerged, and no war tribunals were held.

<sup>10</sup> I do not intend to insinuate here that online testimonials or blog entries on the July 2006 war are not shaped and influenced by factors such as editing, premeditation, revision, or even self-censorship.

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