

Rhetorical Witnessing and Unconcluded War: For Becoming-in-Loss

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Profound social tensions and structuralized racial violence in the U.S. can be understood in terms of unconcluded war. This is not unique. Especially following civil wars that threaten the integrity of nation-states and that remain in important senses unconcluded, bearing witness offers possibilities for becoming-together in loss. This article examines a testimonial response to the Lebanese civil war's ongoing shaping of society as instructive for the U.S. context, which is also shaped by unconcluded war. Reading U.S. and Lebanese contexts together through the lens of rhetorical witnessing, I discover historical hope in an apparent testimonial failure. A Lebanese testimonial assemblage—graffiti by artist Jad El-Khoury on the war-wounded Beirut Holiday Inn, cross-sectarian public outrage at the graffiti, and subsequent effacing of it by the Lebanese military—serves as an instance where rhetorical witnessing creates social space for becoming-together-in-loss. Such becoming offers possibilities for symbolic unification in contexts of unconcluded war.

Keywords: rhetorical witnessing; trauma; United States; Lebanon; civil war; race; sectarianism

How do we know when war is over, and how do we live together when war remains unconcluded? The questions are salient for seemingly interminable conflicts such as the Syrian civil war—where, long after dictator Bashar al Assad had destroyed plausible alternative claimants to the state, a proxy war among regional and global powers drives fierce fighting still. Given stretches of quiet across its nine-plus-year span, though, what enables us to term such a war unconcluded? What makes a war unfinished, on the one hand, and, on the other, when is a cessation in fighting more than merely a pause, not an ephemeral truce but a lasting *peace*? One may suppose the answers simple. We know war has concluded because authorized leaders of the combatants declare the bloodshed finished in ritually satisfying fashion, with material consequences. A war ends when a performative speech act meets the necessary rhetorical and material conditions to felicitously name it over.¹ The American civil war, for instance, ended when Robert E. Lee, on behalf of the southern army and slaver states, surrendered to northern general Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865. The Union was restored, the Confederacy dissolved. Except, of course, that this is not what happened. Lee did surrender to Grant in April 1865, but he surrendered only the regional Confederate army that he led—the Army of Northern Virginia. The American civil war was not, as a matter of violence or of performative ritual, concluded by Lee's well-publicized surrender.

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¹ Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press, 1962.

Subsequent surrenders dragged out over months and were interrupted with insurrections led by the proslavery forces of the slow-dying Confederacy. Slave states were readmitted to and ejected from and readmitted to the Union again for years to come. Throughout, organized violence by whites against blacks in both southern and northern states, intensifying and finding new forms in the ostensibly “post-war” Reconstruction era, kept war alive in efforts to maintain the antebellum racial hierarchy.² Moreover, though today we popularly suppose the American civil war to have ended in the spring of 1865, it was not until August 20, 1866, that Texas was considered subdued and the leader of the victorious party, U.S. President Andrew Johnson, signed Proclamation 157 and concluded the war officially. The document asserts that “peace, order, tranquillity [*sic*], and civil authority now exist in and throughout the whole of the United States of America”³—and so we say that by 1866, with Johnson’s proclamatory speech act, the American civil war found its peace.

And yet, how speak of peace where antiblack violence continued unabated, with warlike organization? Whether perpetrated from beneath hoods like paramilitary Ku Klux Klan violence in the late 1860s and early 1870s, or “by bands of undisguised men, a sign that perpetrators believed the northern public would no longer support armed intervention,”⁴ white violence against blacks through Reconstruction and beyond was systematic. That violence enjoyed substantial support among white northerners and southerners alike, as Dominic Manthey emphasizes in a recent *RSQ* essay.⁵ Militaristic antiblack violence was normalized, framed discursively as *not* warfare, by whites on both sides of the Mason-Dixon—during the war, antiblack violence was included within the rubric of peace. The powerful northern anti-war movement of the Copperheads, Manthey shows, “fortified . . . toxic visions of peace by framing emancipation as a regression of Anglo-Saxon manliness to a state closer to the supposedly uncivilized slave.”⁶ During the American civil war, in other words, northern whites maintained the white supremacist groundwork that would make peace with southern whites possible by affirming the latter’s continued violence against black people. The Copperheads constructed discursive conditions—and then fostered a “vigorous selective memory”⁷ after the war’s official termination—that would ensure that American civil war could remain unconcluded.

Given ongoing antiblack violence, how *could* Reconstruction have solidified the peace, remade the country in newly unitary fashion? For Reconstruction’s revolutionary work to be possible (re-founding the United States, in essence, by dismantling the three-fifths compromise with which slavery had been constitutionalized and replacing it with true black citizenship), the war would

² See esp. Foner, Eric. *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2019. The extent to which white supremacist racial hierarchy was intended to *continue* slavery can hardly be overstated. In one striking instance, a southern planter is after the war shocked to learn that northern industrialists do not bind employees in explicitly coercive, slave-like contracts. The planter exclaims, as Foner tells it, “How can you get work out of a man unless you *compel* him in some way?” (qtd. in Foner, Eric. *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, Oxford University Press, 1980: 127). This is, of course, not to downplay the importance of Reconstruction as a site of revolutionary possibility.

³ Johnson, Andrew. “Proclamation 157—Declaring that Peace, Order, Tranquillity, and Civil Authority Now Exists in and Throughout the Whole of the United States of America.” 20 August 1866. *The American Presidency Project*. Eds. John Woolley and Gerhard Peters. Web. Accessed 25 February 2020.

⁴ Foner on Democratic “rifle clubs” of the mid 1870s: *Second Founding*, 144.

⁵ Manthey, Dominick. “A Violent Peace and America’s Copperhead Legacy.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2020: pp. 3-18.

⁶ Manthey, “A Violent Peace,” 15.

⁷ Manthey, “A Violent Peace,” 16.

have needed to be over. That the American civil war was transformed but not concluded is evidenced by the fate of Reconstruction itself. At no point, notwithstanding Reconstruction's still-inspiring achievements, did the general condition of southern black citizens come to include "peace, order, tranquillity, and civil authority." Not for long, at least. As Douglas Egerton sadly observes, "Revolutionary movements can be stopped by violence, provided enough politicians are assassinated, enough party registrars are eliminated, and enough voters are intimidated into remaining home on Election Day."⁸ Organized white violence against blacks during Reconstruction, especially around elections and electoral politics, was a continuation of American civil war by other means. War was reformatted along racial and, increasingly, racialized class struggle lines.⁹ While the Union was by fits and starts restored, war was left unconcluded.

That Reconstruction did not end America's civil war for southern blacks is perhaps most evident in the death toll of freedpeople in this era: known to be great, but unknown with any exactitude.¹⁰ No lasting authority tracked the number of blacks murdered in the south during Reconstruction, nor in the north. So, though the number of black people killed by white members of the military-styled Ku Klux Klan and by white "race rioters" during this period remains disputed, one estimate by a contemporary put the number at upwards of 53,000.¹¹ And whatever the actual death toll (though certainly it was large), its very unknownness marks a central fact: between KKK lynchings and the daylight massacres of (mostly) southern blacks by large, well-armed gangs of whites in so-called race riots, organized white violence against black people carried forward the white supremacist cause of the Confederacy.¹² Just this is W.E.B. Du Bois' famous admonition in the "Back Toward Slavery" chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, which highlights also the labor dimension of America's unconcluded civil war: "It must be remembered and never forgotten that the civil war in the South which overthrew Reconstruction was a determined effort to reduce black labor as nearly as possible to a condition of unlimited exploitation and build a new class of capitalists on this foundation."¹³ Not only was Lee's surrender not the end of the "official" Civil War, but the duly proclaimed end of that civil war also did not achieve its effective material end. President Johnson's declaration was rendered infelicitous by ongoing, systematic violence.

In so saying, it is crucial to recognize that organized antiblack violence was (is) hardly restricted to the south. American civil war has remained unconcluded since, well, the ostensive end of the Civil War. The KKK's post-Reconstruction redoubt was Indiana, a Union state. And in the

⁸ Egerton, Douglas R. *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era*. Bloomsbury, 2014: 287.

⁹ See esp. Richardson, Heather Cox. *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901*. Harvard University Press, 2004.

¹⁰ For a compellingly different lens on this continuity, see Bjorn Stillion Southard's discussion of how "peculiar rhetorics" of black colonization did and did not change in their post-war reconceptualization as emigration (*Peculiar Rhetoric: Slavery, Freedom, and the African Colonization Movement*. University Press of Mississippi, 2019). The continuity of racist desire to expel blacks from the United States, though colonization/emigration found various thoughtful black advocates as well, is a striking counterpart to the violence of an unconcluded civil war fought—in large measure—over the question of black citizenship's very possibility.

¹¹ Egerton, *Wars of Reconstruction*, 287.

¹² Alongside Egerton, see for instance Parsons, Elaine Frantz. *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction*. University of North Carolina Press, 2015; and Bateman, David A. "Partisan Polarization on Black Suffrage, 1785–1868." *Perspectives on Politics*, First View (20 June 2019). Web. Accessed 22 February 2020.

¹³ Du Bois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880*. The Free Press, 1992 (1935): 670. Du Bois' concluding note in "Back Toward Slavery" remains as salient today, horrifically, as it was nearly a century ago: "If the Reconstruction of the Southern states, from slavery to free labor, and from aristocracy to industrial democracy, had been conceived as a major national program of America, whose achievement at any price was well worth the effort, we should be living today in a different world" (708).

years of the Civil War (and throughout the century and a half since), race riots were far from uncommon in northern states. Eric Foner describes the New York City draft riot, “the largest civil insurrection in American history apart from the South’s rebellion itself,” as resulting in “a virtual racial pogrom, with uncounted numbers of blacks murdered on the streets or driven to take refuge in Central Park or across the river in New Jersey.”¹⁴ The death of Reconstruction’s revolutionary promise and the American civil war’s unfinished status are intimately connected, both spelled out in the blood of *uncounted* numbers of black citizens.

(White) U.S. Americans often treat extreme political phenomena as characteristic of “the rest of the world,” as somehow “out there” and not very much also “in here,” or else as vestiges of some distant past. Indeed, one of the commonest refrains in the face of the violence and lawlessness of the Trump years was “this is not who we are.” So, the long Syrian or Libyan civil wars look from many U.S. vantagepoints like the horrific political dysfunctions of a Middle Eastern or North African “them” (never mind the U.S.’s role in birthing, pursuing, and maintaining these conflicts). A brief glance at the unfinishedness of the U.S. civil war should put paid to this view. Lynching is a not-yet-past practice and marker of that unconcluded war that continues to shape not only infrastructural systems of shared life, but also the possibilities and impossibilities of public discourse.¹⁵ More fundamentally, as Ersula Ore demonstrates throughout her powerful *Lynching*,¹⁶ spectacular white violence against black people on behalf of a white supremacist racial hierarchy is central to the American identity that emerges in the matrix of unconcluded civil war—and that continues to be produced today.

To think of lynching as an American way of being is to recognize the (only partial) sublimation of a civil war fought over slavery. As Ore puts it, lynching produces circulating images of the materially real “black body in peril” that serves as the “transcendental signifier of America’s white democracy.”¹⁷ The production of the lynching image requires, and is accomplished through, not only the spectacular violence of the moment—from postcard to viral video—but also the systematically racialized violence that operates as cultural backdrop and makes each new threat real. Lynching is, all together, instantaneous violence, the image of that violence, and the regularized enactment of antiblack violence that makes of these first two a racializing threat. The black body in peril is both produced and required for white American democracy, is the internal other against which a white security *polis* arrays itself. In spectating, white America performs abhorrence for its own violence and so comforts itself, even as the racializing threat is renewed. The unconcluded American civil war and, with it, the organized violence that undercuts its unrealized sequel, Reconstruction, result in an unreconstructed constitutional republic that is *for* white and not equally *for* black citizens, who instead are object-ified in order for that republic to be at all.¹⁸ Something like peace is maintained for the white republic, Ore shows, through both constant imperilment of black bodies and repetitive displays of that imperilment. This registers a war that remains unconcluded, still today.

¹⁴ Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*. Harper Collins, 2011: 32.

¹⁵ Consider, for instance, Houck, Davis. “Killing Emmett.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2005: pp. 225–62; and Tell, Dave. *Remembering Emmett Till*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

¹⁶ Ore, Ersula. *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*. University Press of Mississippi, 2019.

¹⁷ Ore, *Lynching*, 135.

¹⁸ On this note, see especially Wang, Jackie. *Carceral Capitalism*. Semiotext(e), 2018. See also Mills, Charles W. *Black Rights / White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Rhetorical Witnessing and Loss

The rest of this article articulates “rhetorical witnessing” as a framework for moving from the uneasy and unconscionable “peace” of an American normal toward something better.¹⁹ Attunement to the rhetorical conditions under which bearing witness occurs opens up new possibilities of becoming-together-in-loss. Even and especially where war remains unconcluded, rhetorical witnessing is a conceptual framework for understanding testimony in terms of its audiential dimensions, and so for attending to the ways in which testimony opens space for becoming-together even where it cannot substantially unify across entrenched divisions or heal persistent harms. Bearing witness always occurs for audiences that are multiple and divided. Where war is unconcluded, there is no even nominally unitary audience. In suggesting *rhetorical witnessing* as a way of apprehending sites where divided audiences seem to make bearing witness impossible, and yet where possibility remains, I draw on a recent piece of testimonial artwork in Lebanon—and its widespread rejection by Lebanese audiences.

The rhetorical witnessing framework helps me read Jad El Khoury’s 2015 “War Peace” graffiti installation at the Beirut Holiday Inn, together with condemnations of that work, as something more valuable than merely failed testimony to war trauma. *Together*, the artwork and its erasure register the *impossibility* of making unitary meaning out of the Lebanese civil war. Such registering was in itself a way of becoming-together-in-loss in the Lebanese present of 2015–16. Ultimately, I argue, the ruined Holiday Inn itself, ravaged and unrestored even as glittering buildings with designer labels spring up around it, bears now slightly less mute witness to the only universally available truth of Lebanon’s 1975–1990ish civil war: that it remains unconcluded, its traumas and the loss entailed by its unspeakability continuing to organize sectarian imaginaries. El Khoury’s artwork and its erasure, together, bear witness to the rhetorical conditions that must be negotiated for *any* peacemaking in Lebanon. Those conditions are, perhaps, made more available for negotiation through attunement to the impossibility of a whole community that stems from unfinished war. We, U.S. perpetrators and victims of unconcluded civil war, of a white supremacist “peace” sustained still by lynching, have much to learn from forms of witnessing that allow societies to become-in-loss-together.

As a concept, rhetorical witnessing highlights that bearing witness entails not only the speaking of something unspoken or unspeakable, but also symbolic production that is *for someone*. To bear witness is to reach some community or audience with discourse (broadly understood) about what remains unspoken and, in that address, to change them in some way. At the same time, to bear witness actually, not merely as an abstract activity, is to be constrained in one’s symbolic activity by some particular audience(s). Witness can only be borne to those with ears to hear, in one influential phrasing of the point. And yet, treatments of testimony often gloss over the constraining force of audiences. To bear witness to somebody or a collection of somebodies is to negotiate what those audiences can accept as real—often much less than, or other to, such realities as remain yet to be spoken.²⁰

¹⁹ Elizabeth A. Flynn and I further discuss the concept in our introductory essay to a symposium on “Rhetorical Witnessing in Global Contexts,” in *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2020: pp. 369-442. As we note there, “Bearing witness is rhetorical action in search of a shared world” (369).

²⁰ Though not in the register of witnessing, just this is Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (and many others’) point in observing that any speech is conditioned by the character of its audience. Perelman, Chaïm, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1969.

The constrainingness of audiences is both structural and particular. Genre and the weight of symbols available in a given language each press testimony into one or another shape, which is always somewhat other to what is to be spoken. Testimony's structurally audiential dimensions include, as Arabella Lyon and Lester Olson highlight in engagement with Adrienne Rich, the often silencing force of symbol systems themselves. There are "certain challenges in using language and symbols to transform cultures in life-enhancing ways, including witnessing and testifying, because the systems of representation reflect the histories of domination and power within them."²¹ What *can* be spoken will register marks of harm due to the power relations shaping and shaped by those languages available for speaking. Lyon and Olson's point is a familiar one in witnessing studies, though with a particular (and useful!) emphasis on power. Language fails to capture trauma not merely because nothing can, but because systems of representation themselves mediate traumatic historical forces. Indeed, a given symbol system not only enables communication, but also encodes conditions of *impossibility* for communicating the harms specific to that symbol system. My focus here is on a complementary, more directly particular force: that of actually existing audiences on testimony.

To think witnessing in terms of rhetoric is to think discourses of the unseen or traumatic or ineffable as always also persuasive discourses for particular audiences. Bearing witness shapes new possibilities of identification and becoming-together for real (and imagined) audiences, and is thus also shaped by those audiences in more or less discernible ways. Rhetorical witnessing, as a concept, thus turns our attention to ways in which testimony's promise of symbolic unification at sites of trauma and violence, where division seems most intractable, is always fulfilled with something less than promised. We lose something when we bear witness for audiences. Apprehended thus, markers of loss in testimony are due not only to trauma itself, to the unsayability of that which has been witnessed, or to the power relations animating symbol systems both generally and particularly, but also to some concrete audiential conditions. The rhetorical occasions of testimony's enunciation mark it with loss.

Witnessing, Bearing Witness, Rhetorical Witnessing

Witnessing as such, if we can try to understand it unrhetorically, is a negotiation in two dimensions. It is less a type of thing that we do and more simply what we are as somebodies, the structure of experience for persons. *Bearing witness* is the intensification of that negotiation in multiple dimensions. Bearing witness creates *testimony*, an active symbolic object that counts as such by virtue of having secured privileged epistemic status for some audience. To count as testimony is to have truth-value for an audience, to shape some other(s) in a new way. Witnessing, to begin back at the beginning, is the constituting motion of any symbolic animal, the be-ing of *someone*. Witnessing is negotiation between subject- and object-being. To be anyone at all is to be a witness, simultaneously a subject actively receiving some (never all) of one or more worlds and an object—enclosed, enfolded within a determinative environment. Witnesses, whether conceived of as individual persons or collective actors, are at once free moral agents and bouncing billiard balls, simultaneously doer and done-to, in psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's parlance.²² And all somebodies are witnesses. To be a person (human or otherwise) is to be a witness.

²¹ Lyon, Arabella, and Lester C. Olson. "Special Issue on Human Rights Rhetoric: Traditions of Testifying and Witnessing." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2011: pp. 203-12: 205.

²² Benjamin, Jessica. *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity, and the Third*. Routledge, 2017.

Witnessing is one way of getting at the negotiative structure of *experience as such* for symbolic animals, being-subject and being-object its two basic dimensions. When thinking about what it is like to be someone, though, we often rely more on what may be termed a “fantasy of pure subjectivity.” This fantasy is an idea or sense of being paradoxically both *properly subject* (not truly also object) and *known as such* by some other. The fantasy of pure subjectivity, or something like it, enables the bearing of witness, the delivery of testimony. We have to believe ourselves knowable, despite and against conditions that conspire to render us unknowable, if we are to make ourselves known, to bear witness. A fantasy of pure subjectivity takes the negotiation between subject- and object-being to be driven by (inter)subject(ive)-being. Even when disavowed, the known subject turns up at the core of our sense of *somebodiness*. The fantasy of being-known, to which we subscribe no less when proclaiming the death of the subject or the ethical superiority of an object-oriented view of things, rests upon supposed recognition of a subject by other subjects. The fantasy of pure subjectivity can be considered a *fantasy of being-known* and it is partially but not entirely debunkable for symbolic animals like the human. We act, where we do act, on the fantasy of being known by other actors to be acting. We surrender this fantasy, when we do surrender it, only at some cost.

The fantasy is unsustainable—we will of course *not* be known—but its surrender is a loss. The fantasy of being-known is adaptive, promoting a capaciously productive sense of self.²³ I can feel myself an actor, a subject, only to the extent that I apprehend others apprehending me as such. So feeling, in turn, improves my chances for negotiative action. Though one need not call it by the name offered here, something like a fantasy of pure subjectivity—with being-known its realizable mechanism of action—seems to be a transcendental for symbolic animals like the human. (There arrive clamoring voices insisting the contrary; I acknowledge that delegation, and can only plead that I address their representatives in a longer work to come.) Certainly, one must fantasize being-known in order to bear witness to some actual other(s), to move from silence into directed speech (or another form of audience-oriented symbolic action). To transform the two dimensions of witnessing that are experience into the active social object that is testimony calls for action, for a discursive labor that is *for somebody*. And yet, both life itself and trying to share our lives with some audience each challenge the fantasy of being-known that enables discursive action. The world bears down us; we are its objects and remain unrecognized by others. We are neither active nor known; *we are being-unknown*.

Not only that. We must *actively submit to being-unknown* precisely in order to become known, to bear witness to what we have experienced, have witnessed. Although a fantasy of pure subjectivity (i.e., of being-known), a belief in our own fundamentally active capacity, allows for the transformation of experiential “witnessing” into truthfully discursive “bearing witness,” that very fantasy must be partially surrendered if we are to become effective in the rhetorical ecologies that make up a shared world. We must effectively navigate rhetorical conditions if our bearing witness is to be felicitous. As Elizabeth A. Flynn and I put this elsewhere, “to think of witnessing’s rhetorical dimension is to emphasize its situatedness as *being for audiences* and *making worlds*.”²⁴ In order to move from witnessing, the negotiation between subject- and object-being that we are, to

²³ I discuss the capacitating role of fantasy with regard to “troubled freedom” in *The Ethical Fantasy of Rhetorical Theory* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), and return to the theme with an emphasis on selves in “Composition Is the Ethical Negotiation of Fantastical Selves.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 70, no. 2, 2018: pp. 169-194. The reader interested in what I mean by *fantasy* and why I think it a useful concept for thinking about our thinking may turn to those texts. Important here is that the sensation of loss introduced by surrender of a fantasy of being-known in giving testimony is always shaped by the concrete rhetorical conditions of testimony’s enunciation.

²⁴ Flynn and Allen, “Rhetorical Witnessing in Global Contexts,” 369.

the audiential and world-making negotiation that bearing witness is, we both must believe we can be *known as subject* and, in some measure, must surrender exactly that belief to the *rhetorical conditions whose objects we are*. For rhetorical action, we will and will not be known by our audiences. Actually bearing witness means taking a hit to the very fantasy that makes bearing witness possible. This fact, in itself, marks testimony with a particular kind of loss—loss associated with partial surrender of a fantasy under particular rhetorical conditions.

Rhetorical witnessing, as a conceptual framework for understanding testimony, invites each new, further-removed audience for testimony to note the concrete marks left on that testimony by surrender of the fantasy of being-known in negotiation with some prior audience's demands. It asks us to hear and see and feel differently when witness is borne. We are to hear not only what is said but also how loss marks the saying. Of course, as noted, witnessing studies has long emphasized that testimony is marked by loss.²⁵ It is a commonplace that bearing witness is marked by the destitution of subject-being that is trauma. (And, more abstractly, by the general unsayability of all that escapes presentation in symbols—Dominick LaCapra usefully distinguishes between loss and absence in this regard.²⁶) The losses to which rhetorical witnessing draws attention are different.

Separate from trauma's unsayability or the abstract but real and confining lifeworld conditions of symbolicity, the losses to which rhetorical witnessing points us are markers that speak of testimony's particular audiences. One point of rhetorical witnessing, as a framework for interpretation, is to help us to note ways in which instances of bearing witness have been constrained by the audiences they addressed, to hear the aporias or excesses or moments of lack that mark testimony as testimony *for someone in particular*. Those marks are sites where a witness has surrendered some portion of the fantasy of being-known. Another point of rhetorical witnessing is thus to help us read bearing witness not only with regard to loss-markers but in tandem with information about the audience reception that counted witness as having been borne. Testimony is an active social object only *because* it is an assemblage that includes the rhetorical activity of its audiences. That activity makes up some part of testimony's meaning. As a conceptual framework, rhetorical witnessing begins from at least two points: One, it stresses that some markers of loss in testimony are due to audience considerations; and, two, it asks us to read testimony as an assemblage that includes not only the discourse of the witness but also (at least) the discourse of the audience. It is in the intersection of these that rhetorical witnessing points to possibilities for becoming-together-in-loss under conditions of unconcluded war.

Unconcluded War and the Realization of Impossibility

How are we to understand and to act in situations that call for peacemaking, where war is ostensibly "over" (perhaps long so, like the American civil war) but remains unconcluded in fact? What common sense can be constructed on behalf of peaceful ways of being-together where no *sensus communis* yet prevails? Testimony makes common sense at historical sites of aporia and loss, without specious (and always premature) calls for healing or unity. Previously in-corporate collective bodies bear witness to (war) trauma and so become new polities. But how? Something materially new must be discursively *realized*. LaCapra observes that "a crucial issue with respect

²⁵ See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1992) or Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), for instance.

²⁶ LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

to traumatic historical events is whether attempts to work through problems, including rituals of mourning, can viably come to terms with (without ever fully healing or overcoming) the divided legacies, open wounds, and unspeakable losses of a dire past.²⁷ But even this somewhat pessimistic framing of possibility assumes pasts that are actually *past*, wars that have concluded and left legacies. What of societies like Lebanon and the United States, where war's unfinishedness is half-sublimated in the maintenance of war-organized (sectarian and white supremacist, respectively) social orders? How are we to live differently together with the unconcluded wars that suffuse so many of modernity's presents? If Stef Craps, for instance, is correct that bearing witness is crucial because "recognition of suffering serves as a necessary first step toward the amelioration of that suffering,"²⁸ there must be some audience to do the recognizing. Peacemaking at sites of unconcluded war calls for both a good enough audience and some witnesses who reasonably believe that they can be believed. Are these to be found?

Ersula Ore's *Lynching* offers a difficult hope with regard to America's unconcluded civil war. From Emmett Till's mother's decision to hold an open-casket funeral for her murdered son to the reception history of James Allen's multimodal lynching exhibit *Without Sanctuary*, she examines rhetorical instances that invite white and black Americans alike to witness—and bear witness to—"the comfortable coexistence of egalitarian ideals and state-sanctioned violence against blacks" that underwrites the "myth of American exceptionalism."²⁹ To bear witness to the specifically American continuity of contemporary lynching with antiblack violence back through to antebellum slavery, founding, and before is to become part of an audience that accepts the reality of what I am calling here unconcluded war. For testimony to be testimony, it must have changed its audience in some way.

Accordingly, Ore traces ways in which *Without Sanctuary*'s testimony is marked by, and in turn marks, its rhetorical moment. Allen's coffee table book of archival lynching postcards and photographs and the accompanying exhibit struck several prominent critics as having "done nothing more than produce contemporary voyeurs of black victimization."³⁰ This "sentiment," against which Ore's fundamental argument is arrayed, "to be clear . . . is shared,"³¹ presumably by Ore herself. Her own rhetorical stance recognizes, as it must on the merits of its own argument, an affective sense in which critics of *Without Sanctuary* like Michael Eric Dyson and Elizabeth Wolters are correct. The liberal-democratic, healing and unifying aims of the exhibit and book are not strictly possible in the America that actually exists.

Ore follows, however, by examining again the rhetorical exigencies that shaped audience reception of Allen and collaborators' (including Civil Rights hero Rep. John Lewis) testimonial offerings: "community outrage over the state-sanctioned killing of innocent blacks by police—in conjunction with the narrative of historical injustice, national complicity, and black activism forwarded by the exhibition apparatus."³² What this testimony does when understood in rhetorical context, she argues, is to "facilitate a critical democratic literacy that aided citizens in reading how lynching's supposedly long-ago past continues to reverberate in the present."³³ *Without Sanctuary*, as Ore asks us to see it, offers testimony to the continuity of state-sanctioned antiblack violence,

²⁷ LaCapra, *Writing History*, 45.

²⁸ Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015: 127.

²⁹ Ore, *Lynching*, 100. See also Charles Mill's *Black Rights / White Wrongs* on the racial contract, which Ore discusses incisively.

³⁰ Ore, *Lynching*, 98.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Ore, *Lynching*, 86.

to the core of an uncompleted American civil war, in part because it finds an audience it can *make its* audience. Ultimately, she credits the assemblage that was this testimony for the 2005 U.S. Senate decision to issue an apology for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation.

And yet, it took another fifteen years before the U.S. Congress would, in 2020, at last pass federal anti-lynching legislation. The very belatedness of this *realization*, I think Ore could agree, registers the extent to which white supremacy remains the organizing principle of an uncompleted American war. The American civil war continues to be fought against black bodies on behalf of the same white supremacy that underwrote the northern Copperhead “peace” movement during the war between the states and the organized antiblack violence that prevented any full Reconstruction thereafter. The result, as Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski demonstrate compellingly in *Southern Nation*, is a United States dominated still by the undead specter of the Confederacy.³⁴ Put differently, and notwithstanding the grim hope Ore offers at moments of both analysis and testimony of her own, the uncompletedness of American civil war means that there is perhaps no encompassing “American” audience that *can* bear witness to black suffering from white supremacy. *Without Sanctuary* finds its audience, but that audience is partial. Given our apparently interminable civil war, we Americans are not one.³⁵ We have yet to *realize* something different in our reception of even the most compelling efforts to bear witness to the consequences of a half-sublimated white war on black bodies.

In Lebanon as in the United States, uncompleted civil war provides both a backdrop to and an organizing principle for moment-by-moment politics. Lebanon’s civil war lasted from 1975 until 1990ish, but had its templates in preceding decades and reverberated through the violences of the (1990–2005) *Pax Syriana* and beyond. Ostensibly ending after the 1989 Taif Accord reworked the national constitution in acceptable fashion for most parties (while further enshrining sectarianism in that constitution), the Lebanese civil war left a legacy of unresolved trauma (and uncontained violence) that carries forward the stochastic suffering and weak-state organization of the war itself (to say nothing of the many ways in which direct warfare continued after 1989-90). Uncompleted war today shapes social possibility at every level. Looking to “map out the landscapes of everyday life”³⁶ in the thirteen years since the so-called Cedar Revolution that followed the 2005 assassination of prime minister Rafik al-Hariri, historian Andrew Arsan describes a world where it seemed “the ordinary order of things had been suspended, giving way to the exceptional and the makeshift, the unexpected, the contingent and the provisional.”³⁷ This is a world where “every act, every choice is political,”³⁸ in which, as Salloukh et al. put it, not only individual decisions but also “the mediascape has emerged as a potent site for sectarian mobilization in the service of narrow political ends.”³⁹ Hemmed in by narrow political ends, and living with a state marked by contingency and

³⁴ Bateman, David A., Ira Katznelson, and John Lapinski. *Southern Nation: Congress and White Supremacy after Reconstruction*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

³⁵ This essay was written before the insurrectionary white supremacist attack on the Capitol Building of 6 January 2021. That frightening spectacle clarified, I think for many for the first time, the depth of the dividedness of American audiences. And yet, it was followed immediately by “this is not who we are” rhetoric from a shockingly wide range of official actors. See, for instance, the statements recorded in Kendi, Ibram X. “Denial Is the Heartbeat of America.” *The Atlantic*, 11 January 2021. Web. Accessed 15 January 2021. A part of the value of rhetorical witnessing as a framework for apprehending testimony is that it helps us to recognize the markers of impossibility and uncompleted war and, thereby, to realize some greater possibility of a lasting peace.

³⁶ Arsan, Andrew. *Lebanon: A Country in Fragments*. Hurst & Co., 2018: 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Salloukh, Bassel F., et al. *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*. Pluto Press, 2015: 154.

uncertainty, Lebanese habitually recognize the conscription of everyday life choices into service alongside forces with which many do not identify.

In contemporary Lebanon, sectarian mobilization has been the trigger for repeated surges of violence (from 2008's brief re-enactment of all-out civil war as Hezbollah forces took large swathes of Beirut to perennially renewed rocket fire and bullets exchanged, in the streets of Tripoli, between Sunni and Alawite militants). Rigidly stratified sectarian politics, in more general terms, allows for every manner of social violence. There is nothing *intrinsic* about the violence of Lebanese sectarianism, any more than the violence of American white supremacy. These are the half-sublimated forms of systematic violence taken by unconcluded wars organized on these bases, from which testimony—perhaps—promises liberation. Salloukh et al. work to demonstrate that “the hegemony of sectarian forms of identification [in contemporary Lebanon] is not the product of an imagined ‘essential’ Lebanese identity.”⁴⁰ To the contrary, it is itself something that is *realized* over time, “the result of the operation of an ensemble of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices at different levels.”⁴¹ Sectarianism is no more eternal than white supremacy, and yet both are durably violent forms of social organization that maintain war in stasis, indefinitely unconcluded.

One way of thinking about sectarian violence is in terms of fighting, all-out war. Another, equally salient understanding is in terms of disciplinary techniques, forms of life that set up and force and harbor individualized and yet homogenous, repetitive violences. As Salloukh et al. note, while sectarianism's disciplinary techniques shape life for women “far more extensively and violently than men,”⁴² particularly in licensing domestic abuse across sectarian affiliations, there is a violently ordering disorder to the system as a whole: it “denies Lebanese [and especially Palestinians] their existence as citizens with inalienable political and social rights, reducing them instead to unequal members of state-recognized sectarian communities regulated by extended patriarchal kinship groups and clientelist networks.”⁴³ To exist within the sectarian order is to have no stable place as citizen, but rather only a place in one or another kinship network, periodically mediated by interactions with the state.⁴⁴ The result is that the state itself is a sort of hodge-podge, its services and guarantees of life only intermittently and erratically available on an individual basis.⁴⁵

Sectarianism as violence is thus not only a matter of mortars and bullets. For women and queer people especially, and for the swollen ranks of “refugees” (including those fleeing war in Syria

⁴⁰ Salloukh et al., *Politics of Sectarianism*, 4.

⁴¹ Salloukh et al., *Politics of Sectarianism*, 4-5.

⁴² Salloukh et al., *Politics of Sectarianism*, 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See also Mikdashi, Maya. “The Magic of Mutual Coexistence in Lebanon: The Taif Accord at Thirty.” 23 October 2019. *Jadaliyya*. Web. Accessed 25 February 2020.

⁴⁵ Rarely has this fact been more horrifyingly exposed than in the August 2020 explosion at the Beirut Harbor, the largest non-military explosion in history, and its aftermath—hundreds dead, thousands injured, hundreds of thousands homeless, all with no functional state response. As political theorist Loubna El Amine compellingly describes that last, “I’m constantly taken aback by the way Lebanese officials communicate with the public: a health minister decrying the state of food storage, as if it had nothing to do with him; or a communications minister informing us by text message that the internet was back up, as if he were a friend conveying good news rather than the official responsible for its being down in the first place; or an ambassador making a speech overseas in support of protests calling for the government to be toppled, as if the slogans did not apply to him. Government statements since the explosion have followed this script: the ministers are all as bewildered as everyone else, condemn those (others) responsible, and promise to make the country safer in the future. Sixteen port officials have been arrested. No one has resigned.” El Amine, Loubna. “Clearing the Rubble.” 7 August 2020. *London Review of Books*. Web. Accessed 13 January 2021.

but also hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who have known no other home than Lebanon, who are second- and third-generation residents of a country they cannot legally call their own) as for anyone without good *wasta* or clientelistic suction, sectarianism organizes individual experiences of impossibility or precarity. As for black people in the white supremacist United States, a common experience of sectarianism in Lebanon is that the state *is violently not for you*. The violence of unconcluded war—enacted differentially against some segments of the population—weaves together an impossibly thin social fabric under conditions of repeated and habitual deterioration.

During my own years in Lebanon, after occasional rocket-fire in Tripoli or the walling in of the Palestinian camp Ain al-Hilweh, or shooting war at the Syrian border between Hezbollah and the Lebanese military, on the one side, and *Daesh*/ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other, two of the most prominent violences of the sectarian system were not what we commonly call violence at all. They were a garbage crisis that lasted weeks and months and recurred periodically, devastating disfavored communities especially, and the related, long-running failure of the state to functionally regulate emissions and pollution. Lebanon experiences the highest rates of *saratan*, cancer, in the Middle East, and this tiny country is regularly ranked as one of the most polluted in the world.⁴⁶ Lebanon's sectarian governments each maintain the uneasy long truce of unconcluded civil war by transferring violence from the domain of the shooting war (though this is not yet gone either) to the domain of population-level oppression. The violence is perpetrated now more or less collaboratively by elites: the *zaim* or hereditary political boss distributes goods to his local clients, yes, but the entire patronage system distributes painful consequences to the population at large. Small wonder that when ordinary Lebanese protest, or even revolt, as in the *thawra* or revolutionary movement of autumn 2019 and beyond, one of their foremost demands is for an end to the sectarian system.

The violences of Lebanese sectarianism are, in substantial measure, products of the country's unconcluded civil war. And yet, they also well pre-date that war, which itself followed on many sporadic periods of widespread violence.⁴⁷ Sectarian politics are at once a driver of violence against the population at large and a stabilizing influence, a status quo that—after the Taif Accord that nominally ended Lebanon's civil war and deepened the hold of sectarianism, while setting the stage for no-questions-asked amnesty for the war's many perpetrators of massacres, rapes, and more—opened a parenthesis to civil war that has not yet closed. It is the unconcludedness of Lebanon's civil war that makes collective meaning-making today so difficult with regard to sectarianism in particular. In much the same way, U.S. Americans struggle to reckon even somewhat adequately with white supremacy.

A recent instance of testimonial artwork at the Beirut Holiday Inn—and the backlash it provoked from nearly all quarters—lends a mirror to Ore's discussion of *Without Sanctuary* with one major difference. The testimonial assemblage emerging around Jad El-Khoury's "War Peace" graffiti exhibits greater unity than that invited by *Without Sanctuary* in realizing the sharedness of

⁴⁶ As I was working on this essay in fall 2019, a Lebanese *thawra*, or revolution, was ongoing. Beset by impossibilities well beyond those sketched here, citizens across the entire country (not merely Beirut, as in many previous protests) took to the streets to make change—above all, change in the sectarian organization of society. For an environmentally focused view of these more-than-protests, see Abi-Rached, Joelle M. "Cancer, Catharsis, and Corruption in Lebanon." 29 January 2020. *Jadaliyya*. Web. Accessed 1 March 2020 (and more generally, reportage by journalism and culture collective *Jadaliyya*). Between a devastating currency crisis, the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the port explosion, the *thawra* has lost steam as I write now, in winter 2021. That it will be renewed in another moment is all but certain.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Salibi, Kamal. *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. U of California P, 1988.

disunity. The unity-in-disunion in question is a cross-sectarian, shared expression of the impossibility of making shared historical meaning of the Lebanese Civil War. This at once indicates just how difficult collective meaning-making is at sites of unconcluded war and offers a sense of what is at stake in using rhetorical witnessing as a lens on the *realizing* work that, at its best, testimony accomplishes. Realizing impossibility at sites of trauma can, paradoxically, offer a way of making meaning out of unconcluded war, perhaps even a way of beginning to make peace.

“War Peace” at the Beirut Holiday Inn

The Beirut Holiday Inn, situated between the historic and now long-since-raised souks of downtown and the wealthy neighborhood of Clemenceau, was a minor architectural wonder when completed in 1974. Built in three years and designed by André Wogenscky, a student of French modernist Le Corbusier, it featured a rotating restaurant and stunning view of the Mediterranean below—and of the surrounding high-rises as well, some of which are still pocked by rifle and shell-fire from its commanding heights. From the time the Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975, a few months after construction had finished, through to the war’s official conclusion, the Holiday Inn was a key site of military contestation. Without going into the many and shifting alliances and massacres of which the civil war was composed, important to know is that the Holiday Inn was held by a variety of different religious and political factions over the course of those fifteen years and more. It is a site of countless individual traumas, and is woven into the traumascapes of wartime Beirut more deeply—and ecumenically—than perhaps any other such site.

Today, the Holiday Inn is surrounded by luxury high-rises once more, fruits for the most part of Saudi investment in Rafik al-Hariri’s highly constrained and constraining vision of a postwar renewal of downtown Beirut. And yet, the scarred sniper tower remains unreconstructed. The hotly contested renewal of downtown Beirut in the postwar era has left it behind, with the base still occupied and guarded by the Lebanese military, the country’s least politically factional institution. The Beirut Holiday Inn is one of the most prominent remnants of a civil war that ended, but was not won, a *stasis* that never proceeded in a winning argument and, thus, that still today allows of no unified history. One consequence of Lebanon’s unconcluded civil war, not unlike the U.S.’s, is the difficulty of making a shared national narrative that speaks satisfyingly to a majority, or even a plurality, of this small country’s citizens.

When I asked my students at the American University of Beirut what they learned in school about the civil war, then 25 years past, they all had the same response. Irrespective of the factional identification of their schooling backgrounds, each had been told by teachers at some point, “We’ll talk about that in 50 years.” This is the situation that Sune Haugbolle examines at length in *War and Memory in Lebanon*. In Haugbolle’s discussion of a Lebanese condition commonly described as *postwar amnesia*, “Amnesty and amnesia may have produced civil peace, but the other side of the coin, intricately bound up with collective forgetfulness,” is that “particularly for those who had lived the war and had memories of guilt and suffering, amnesia functioned as a means to keep traumatic experiences at a distance.”⁴⁸ The rhetorical conditions enabling peace after the civil war—a general amnesty for its many atrocities and a public amnesia reflecting the lack of a clear winner to write the history books—diminish individual possibilities for bearing witness in restorative ways. Even more, these conditions prevent wholesale the production of texts that can function as collective testimony, prevent historical witness from being effectively borne to the trauma of

⁴⁸ Haugbolle, Sune. *War and Memory in Lebanon*. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 72.

the collective subject of the civil war, the Lebanese body politic in its ever-still-fragmentary *tout court*.

Enter Potato NOSE. In late December 2015, Jad El Khoury, a Lebanese graffiti artist who goes by that moniker when painting whimsical but serious, large-scale cartoons around the bullet- and shell-pitting that still mark many Beirut buildings, obtained permission to ply his craft at the Holiday Inn. El Khoury's graffiti in this installation, "War Peace," is at once both testimony and an effort to move on from Lebanon's unconcluded civil war. At other, less famous buildings, his work has been sometimes tolerated, sometimes celebrated. His work is playful, light, disjunctive as a way of making visual sense of Beirut's battle-scarred buildings and unconcluded history of war (see Figure 1).



<Figure 1. El Khoury's Graffiti Testimony.>

Given its levity, and given the wildly heterogenous character of Lebanese public discourse, El Khoury's graffiti has been surprisingly well-received on the whole. His pre-Holiday Inn, August 2015 episode of the multi-building installation "War Peace" was described by Lebanon's premier Francophone daily, *L'Orient Le Jour*, as "reconcil[ing] the past with the present and creating hope for a better future for Beirut."⁴⁹ Other Lebanese outlets were silent at the time, but Canada's *National Post* concurred, suggesting that El Khoury had "realized his own brand of humorous doodling might provide one antidote—uniting people of all beliefs with a laugh."⁵⁰ In time the installation faded into the background, one piece of large-scale graffiti in a city rich in street art, by no means even the most provocative of its genre.

So, it was surprising that when Potato NOSE struck again in the wee hours of November 15, surrounding the mortar-wounds on the broad staircase-side of the iconic Holiday Inn in central Beirut with his trademark doodle-figures, Lebanese public opinion was near-uniform in condemning the work. Armenian-Lebanese artist and art historian Gregory Buchakjian gave early voice to what turned out to be a widely shared view: "This is an outrage! An outrage to Beirut, an outrage to memory, an outrage to everything!"⁵¹ Many others followed; by contrast with the first episode of "War Peace," Potato NOSE's newest giant doodles sparked indignation from all quarters, in Arabic, French, and English alike.

Even disagreement over the significance of the incident proceeded from agreement that El Khoury's graffiti had been unacceptable. As *Al Jazeera* reported the following month, once the offending doodles had been painted over with dull whites and greys, "A distinction has emerged between those who see the Holiday Inn as an unofficial memorial for a war they feel must be acknowledged, and those for whom it is an unavoidable reminder of a conflict they would rather forget."⁵² On both sides of that divide, Potato NOSE's work provoked anger. But, what made the Holiday Inn so different from El Khoury's previous targets? Why were cartoons acceptable there, but not here? What was at stake in the immediate efforts to efface El Khoury's work, which briefly produced a humorously named but entirely sincere "STOP Potato Nose" Facebook group? Why were the Potato NOSE doodles so swiftly painted over on the Holiday Inn (see Figure 2), without official announcement but presumably on governmental authority, despite El Khoury's having secured permission in advance from the military, which occupies still the lower floors of that strategically important building?

⁴⁹ Laemle, Brice. "Jad el-Khoury, bombeur pacifique." 10 September 2015. *L'Orient Le Jour*. Web. Accessed 13 January 2019. Translation mine.

⁵⁰ Burgmann, Tamsyn. "Beirut artist uses bombed out buildings as canvases, transforming scars of war into works of peace." 19 August 2015. *National Post / The Canadian Press*. Web. Accessed 13 January 2019.

⁵¹ Qtd. in Stoughton, India. "The scars of war on Lebanon's Holiday Inn." 29 December 2015. *Al Jazeera*. Web. Accessed 28 February 2020.

⁵² Stoughton, "The Scars of War"

BEIRUT HOLIDAY INN:
POST-POTATO NOSE, 2017



<Figure 2. Beirut Holiday Inn.>

Answering these questions requires investigation into the available rubrics for making shared meaning of war trauma in Lebanon. Which is to say, it requires an understanding of the rhetorical conditions for witnessing in contemporary Lebanon. For Jad El Khoury’s *Holiday Inn* episode of the “War Peace” installation touched a nerve that prior and subsequent installations did not, though all dealt with the same subject matter, and in roughly the same way. The graffiti was an effort to bear witness, at least according to El Khoury’s public comments on it—and reactions against it bore witness as well, *with it*, together as a single testimonial assemblage. To understand the rawness that made Potato NOSE’s doodles on the Beirut Holiday Inn an “outrage against everything,” we have to understand not only the significance of that building for Lebanon’s civil war and post-war reconstruction of memory, but also the rhetorical conditions for public history-making in contemporary Lebanon. We have to understand the impossibility of producing singularizing public testimony about the civil war, which proceeded in a dizzying array of shifting alliances and broken armistices from 1975 to 1990 and, in various ways, has never entirely ended. The partisans and victims of Lebanon’s un concluded civil war have long lived together today in a state of proactive amnesia. This is a situation where, as Haugbolle puts it, “the collective often consists of a silence in the heart of public discourse conveying the things people agree on omitting rather than including.”⁵³ And how else live together, after a war that “ended” in 1989 with an accord (the Taif Accord) that did not even stop the shooting war, followed by a legal framework (the General Amnesty Law of 1991) that promised universal amnesty for war criminals and more deeply entrenched the structuralized violences of the sectarian system?

⁵³ Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon*, 13. See also Traboulsi, Fawwaz. *A History of Modern Lebanon*, Second Ed. Pluto Press, 2012.

The *public effacement* of El Khoury's variant of testimony registers a traumatic reality of both Lebanese history and Lebanon's present. It makes that reality available for negotiation, realizes it. Collective witness to the traumas of the civil war cannot be borne, because the collective that could give—and, as importantly, receive—such testimony is not rhetorically extant. No one is authorized to tell the story of Lebanon's traumatic civil war to a broad national public; no trust-conditions allow for the collective reception of any one such story. Though of course there are many individual testimonies, the closest thing to a collective act of bearing witness that is possible is the military's painting over of El Khoury's graffiti, the capstone of the testimonial assemblage set in motion when he began the project.

The effacement itself is an anonymous composition, an inarticulate articulation of impossibility. Neither assertoric nor veridical, it nonetheless registers truthfully a traumatic kernel of contemporary Lebanese collectivity. That kernel is what Maya Mikdashi describes as “the temporality of the temporary,”⁵⁴ a temporality in which nothing truly new can happen. Writing in fall of 2019, as the Lebanese *thawra* or revolution emerged against a backdrop of political and social impossibility and ever-renewed and reorganized violences, Mikdashi highlights the role of the Taif Accord in producing Lebanon's temporality of the temporary, and so of the impossible. As she has it, “the temporality of Taif is the fore-ever temporary, allowing for and institutionalizing a sectarian present in order to facilitate a transition into an ever-delayed nonsectarian future.”⁵⁵ The somewhat indifferently painted-over graffiti that “War Peace” has become now comprises one more collection of scars on the Beirut Holiday Inn, promising a nonsectarian future in their effacement of El Khoury's testimony. These marks realize the collectively felt impossibility of collectively testimonializing the still-unresolved experience of the civil war. An inchoate collective bears witness here, and produces properly public memory or testimony precisely in the painting over of, the *detestimonializing* of, El Khoury's artwork. But, what's restorative about that? It depends on what we're looking for.

Inventing Peace by Realizing Loss

Philosopher Kelly Oliver's *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* sheds light on the restorative work we want and need witnessing to do, both for individual persons and for communities. For Oliver, testimony makes subjects where trauma denudes subjectivity. Privileging witnessing as (re)constitutive of human being, Oliver argues that when we bear witness, we “repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects.”⁵⁶ For Oliver, bearing witness “reconstitutes the inner witness even as it is addressed to an external witness”—it “begins to repair address-ability and response-ability damaged through slavery and oppression.”⁵⁷ To bear witness is to work with others to recreate human possibility at the site of trauma. This is, in a sense, an intensely audience-oriented view. More, it is heartening in its emphasis on witnessing's world-making power. And yet, it is not exactly *rhetorical*.

Even as she argues that understanding witnessing as the intersubjective basis of subjectivity helps us get beyond subject-object binaries, the kind of person Oliver describes emerging is quite clearly a *subject*, not in any fundamental way also an *object* (in the stripped-down, grammatical sense of these words she rejects, and that I have been using here). A properly rhetorical view

⁵⁴ Mikdashi, “The Magic.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Oliver, Kelly. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001: 7.

⁵⁷ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 105.

accepts that audiences come with conditions—to bear witness as subject is to be the object whose saying is constrained by some audience’s enmeshment in rhetorical ecologies, and unavoidably so. Indeed, not all that can be said can be said *to someone* at all. Which is to say, not all that can be said can, in fact, be said. In Oliver’s otherwise compelling vision of witnessing, the audience for testimony is not conceived of as constraining, but only as enabling. To write in such manner is to enact what I termed earlier a fantasy of being-known, a fantasy of pure subjectivity (though Oliver disavows that, I am saying that she enacts it all the same—as do we each of us).

The subjectivity Oliver describes, occurring under the signs of address-ability and response-ability, is concerned almost wholly with doing, with acting-on-the world. She describes subjectivity as “an infinite response-ability”⁵⁸ that is “founded on the ability to respond to, and address, others—what I am calling witnessing.”⁵⁹ Subjectivity is an intersubjective ability to hear and be heard, to respond and address. In this schema, founded on an active capacity, the inner witness is the pivotal term, acting (within the thus fantastically unitary subject) as “a negotiating voice between subject positions and subjectivity.”⁶⁰ In other words, though Oliver allows for witnessing as a constitutive negotiation between object-being (“subject-positions”) and subject-being (“subjectivity”), the latter is in some sense *most real*, the necessary and driving force of human being. Subjectivity is, to stress the point, “experienced as the sense of agency and response-ability.”⁶¹ By contrast, (object-like) subject-positions are only the residual and contingent effects of a system of domination. Key here is always ability, the *fundamentally active* character of bearing witness. This is the fantasy of pure subjectivity, of being-known. For Oliver’s view of witnessing, the subject is presumptively always prior to, more real than, the subject-positions (i.e., object-being) it must negotiate. The “inner witness” is the emanation of a subjectivity that allows for negotiation of contingent subject-positions through the externalizing production of truth as a communal becoming among subjects. And the production of this truthful subjectivity, collective freedom *from* the oppressive object-ivity of subject-positions, would be the anticipatory end of discourse.

Oliver is hardly alone in her view. Indeed, there is broad agreement in witnessing studies and history more broadly that giving testimony can aid in recovering a dimension of subject-being occluded by trauma.⁶² In somewhat similar fashion, for many religious communities, bearing witness to the ineffable real is making-present a more-than-merely-human force of truth that makes communities cohere. So, too, with witnesses before the law. Whether conceived in terms of trauma, experiences of the divine, or in legal or even journalistic terms, giving testimony involves making something absent present for some audience. But for this to be feasible, especially as regards trauma and the pathologies of oppression, it must be fantasized that, *fundamentally*, in bearing witness I am acting, am a subject. In other words, for the process of giving testimony to restore diminished subject-being, it must be the performance of a kind of fantasy of subjectivity, of active capacity. And yet, in a way that Oliver does not take up, that performance is always *also* rhetorical,

⁵⁸ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 87.

⁵⁹ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 15.

⁶⁰ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 87.

⁶¹ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 17.

⁶² That bearing witness’s role in reconstituting individual experience may be reprised for cultural experience is evident in Verónica Tozzi’s sophisticated discussion of witness literature as “function[ing] in fact as the ‘constitution’ of that past itself” (“The Epistemic and Moral Role of Testimony.” *History and Theory*. vol. 51, no. 1, 2012: pp. 1-17: 5). Tozzi is also concerned with rhetorical constraints on testimony, but her focus is not—as a rhetorical witnessing framework encourages—on the way these constraints do more than simply structure how testimony emerges, also marking it also at the level of content.

addressed discourse in a way that frustrates the fantasy. Witnessing *works* because it is a performance for some already somewhat constituted other (be this only one's own future self, as in journal-writing, or be it in more clearly interpersonal domains) who will recognize one's subject-being. And audiences are demanding—and often far more partial than would make them ideal responders to testimony.

In bearing witness, I (fantastically regarded as pure subject) symbolically (re)make of my experience, of myself as near-object, an object-subject to be offered to myself and to others. In some contexts, this gift of testimony (visual, verbal, tactile, or otherwise) is healing. On this view, bearing witness heals by *realizing* or making as real as possible the very fantasy of being-known that its status as rhetoric makes implausible. A person presences forth and is (fantastically) apprehended as a kind of *pure subjectivity in community*, such that occluded subject-being is restored. Oliver helps us understand our own need for witnessing to be restorative in this sense. Along the way, however, she cannot help but smuggle back in the fantasy of being-known she disavows. This is not a problem for her theory of witnessing, as I see it, but an unavoidable constraint on it. We cannot help but have the fantasy. It's just that we also need to account for how its loss marks testimony.

Some audience *is*, presences forth with or without the witness. Perhaps they presence forth *better* when witness has been borne. But, perhaps not. Perhaps the audience hears the witness borne, but only through its having been mangled into a shape that would be audible, given that audience's particular constraints. The positive realizing effectivity of symbols is the flip side of what it means for witnessing to be difficultly rhetorical. The (always only partial, loss-pocked) realizability of a fantasy of pure subjectivity is what makes rhetorical witnessing a useful framework for understanding places defined by unconcluded war, such as Lebanon or the United States. Rhetorical witnessing's proleptic anticipation of the whole that it (only ever partially) realizes gives us new, less harmful possibilities of peacemaking, which is to say community-making, under conditions of unconcluded war. Oliver is surely right that bearing witness is restorative of (individual and communal) subjectivity. It's just that the restoration includes new dimensions of loss.

Thinking of witnessing as imperfectly restorative helps to clarify what Jad El Khoury was up to in the Beirut Holiday Inn episode of his "War Peace" installation. Equally, the preceding view of witnessing as rhetorical helps to clarify why Potato NOSE's solo testimony could not land as truth, did not count for most of its audiences as bearing witness—and why that, too, participates in restorative possibility. As El Khoury explains the multi-episodic "War Peace" installation, "I didn't live the brutality of war, but these chaotic battle traces gives me an idea of the barbarity that took place in my beloved city [B]eirut. For the old generation who witnessed this barbarism it's time to move on; at the same time, for those who don't know what is to be living in a wartime the traces should be preserved—to give them an image of the craziness of the situation."⁶³ El Khoury's desire to preserve the war scars on Beirut buildings by "highlighting" them in paint foregrounds citizen agency; anyone can be a witness. At the same time, his hope for restoration, a somewhat glib call for the victims and oppressors of a war that ended but never found narrative closure, is at best insensitive. At worst, it is sacrilegious, presuming to render too easily that which cannot be

⁶³ PN, and Jad El Khoury. "Jad El Khoury Adds Colorful Doodles to Beirut's Scars of War." 28 December 2015. *Designboom.com*. Web. Accessed 25 February 2020.

spoken. As Lebanese-Lithuanian architect Ieva Saudergaite told *Al Jazeera*, “The Holiday Inn deserves something that has meaning, layers, something specific to it.”⁶⁴ Doodling cannot make public sense of a building so densely interwoven with the traumatic, still-today-untellable history of Lebanon’s uncompleted civil war.

Potato NOSE’s work on the Beirut Holiday Inn seeks to accomplish more than is possible, to make present-day sense of a past at once ubiquitously present and inaccessible. Driven perhaps by El Khoury’s own fantasy of pure subjectivity, the effort is both monumental and, in its aspiration to simultaneously monumentalize and reduce a site of public trauma, elicits a silencing response. Between the chorus of public voices condemning and the military’s swift effacing of graffiti that would have been impossible to create without military approval, the rhetorical reception of El Khoury’s work speaks volumes. Together with the graffiti itself, these form a testimonial assemblage that *realizes* something, that makes real and unavoidably present an absent center or space of impossibility in contemporary Lebanon. “War Peace” is rejected by its public, but that does not mean there is no witness borne here. To the contrary, El Khoury’s loss-marked realization of a fantasy of collective healing is, together with the erasure of it, an extraordinary moment of rhetorical witnessing. As Chad Elias notes at one point in his definitive treatise on art and memory politics in “post”-war Lebanon, the “conditions of reconstruction in the Lebanese capital have largely foreclosed the construction of state-sponsored memory spaces and practices.”⁶⁵ El Khoury’s graffiti was directly enabled by the state, by the Lebanese Armed Forces who occupy the base of the Holiday Inn. And yet, that same army oversaw the painting over of his work in response to non-sectarian public outrage. The episode in its entirety realizes, makes real for negotiation, the *collective and ongoing loss* entailed by uncompleted war as unmemorializable, unhistorizable. This assemblage-testimony to the rhetorical impossibility of making public meaning out of the Beirut Holiday Inn (and, synecdochally, the war) is instructive for thinking about how bearing witness may be recuperative in other places fragmented by uncompleted war.

What’s at stake for finding peace, something missed in Oliver’s otherwise compelling narrative and all-too-present in the swift effacing of Potato NOSE from the Beirut Holiday Inn, is a dimension of loss that often goes undiscussed when we think about witnessing. This loss is not “merely” the loss of subjectivity imposed by trauma or the loss of the real imposed by witnessing’s character as symbolic activity. Rather, or also, what’s lost in bearing witness is the fantasy of pure subjectivity itself, that fantasy of being-known that is recuperative of subjectivity where subjectivity is scarred by its own absences in trauma, where truth and reality are uncertain or contested. One, whether individual or collective, confronts one’s non-being and surrenders to it for some audience. Where the fantasy of pure subjectivity is successfully (partially surrendered), the particular losses that mark the ensuing testimony realize the unspoken for a community. Understood through the conceptual lens of rhetorical witnessing, it is clear that testimonial assemblages such as that encompassing “War Peace” viscerally *realize*, make real in a felt sense, truths held more consciously at bay.

The difficulty of making public memory in the Lebanese context is what makes Jad El Khoury’s efforts at making testimony of the Beirut Holiday Inn—and the co-witness borne by those who spoke out across ideological and sectarian lines to reject his efforts, and the co-witness borne by the anonymous effacers of the work—a useful figure for bearing witness to uncompleted

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Stoughton, “The Scars of War.”

⁶⁵ Elias, Chad. *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon*. Duke University Press, 2018. See also Seigneurie, Ken. *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon*. Fordham University Press, 2011.

war generally. Interpretive felt attunement to loss tells us not only about the traumas to which witness is borne, but also about the relationships between testimony and its rhetorical contexts. What, in particular, witnessing loses to its rhetorical ecologies marks what we, its subsequent audiences, can or must take to be true. Witnessing, understood rhetorically, offers a model for becoming-in-truth even and especially where communal becoming is impossible, where the violences of unconcluded war are ongoing.

In the United States, the ongoing war of white supremacy against black citizens makes communal becoming impossible, makes lynching simultaneously ordinary, necessary to witness, and in witnessing impossible to stop participating in. Under such conditions, we can only realize feelingly that we *are already becoming together*, and that our becoming together is in loss and in impossibility. We realize our becoming-together-in-loss, make it real to ourselves, in testimonializing the shared pain of the impossibility of communal becoming under conditions of unconcluded war. Andre E. Johnson offers such a vision in *No Future in This Country*, highlighting that African emigrationist Bishop Henry McNeal Turner's "pessimistic hope was to uplift the race by telling the truth about their situation,"⁶⁶ i.e., to uplift with prophetic pessimism, naming an American whiteness that could not and still cannot abide the flourishing of black people en masse. For Johnson, "to reject Turner's prophetic pessimism is also to reject the hope that prophetic pessimism provides."⁶⁷ In attuning to the testimony of impossibility, something that was already the case becomes real for an audience, is made not simply the case but also *real*. The wager is that apprehending this process, as a concept of rhetorical witnessing enables us to do, can help us to become-in-loss together toward something like peace, even and especially when we can't.

⁶⁶ Johnson, Andre E. *No Future in This Country: The Prophetic Pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*. University Press of Mississippi, 2020: 169.

⁶⁷ Johnson, *No Future*, 176