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Listening to the Stories People Tell: Poetry as Knowledge Disruption on the Lebanese Civil War

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ABSTRACT

This article considers how using poetry in research allows novel ways of thinking about problems in conflict and peace research. Specifically, this article draws from the epic poem The Arab Apocalypse by Etel Adnan as way to disrupt categories and characterizations of war and peace, and challenge existing narratives of the Lebanese Civil War. The analysis of the poem builds on the author's queer-feminist epistemic position to challenge assumptions about the dichotomy between peace and war and the lasting impact of trauma on society and politics. It thus questions the linearity of conflict and focuses on explanatory narratives of trauma.

Introduction

Charles Tilly argued that 'social science's strongest insights do not take the form of stories and often undermine the stories people tell' (2002, 26). Tilly's point regarding the insights of the social sciences refers to a desire to understand the social world as linear, a consequence of cause and effect, and in binary and hierarchical categories. Building on Tilly's argument that the social sciences 'often undermine the stories people tell' poetry or, more broadly, literature can provide a way to understand and interpret the complexity of the social world, and – as argued here – specifically war. It can elevate, rather than undermine, the stories people tell through poetry and literature. In taking these stories seriously, using them as a method to interpret or understand the complexity of war, it is possible to transform how we think about conflict and war. Such interventions can be destabilizing for long-held assumptions about conflict and political violence, thus engaging in a critique of general and normative assumptions produced from white-masculine and western epistemic methodological positions in the social sciences (see Meer and Müller 2021). In this article, I use Etel Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse*,[1] an epic poem written between 1975 and 1976 about the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90) to make a general intervention in how war and peace are often discussed and a critique of discussions of the Lebanese Civil War. This intervention, in its general and case specific development, focuses on a queer-feminist epistemic position that underscores a decolonial

narrative and understanding of war and peace (Kulpa and Silva 2016).[2] While there has been increased interventions in the disciplines of politics and international relations from queer and feminist perspectives (Richter-Montpetit 2007; Sjoberg 2014; Weber 2016), questions can be raised about the ongoing exclusions from the academy; especially with concern for which privileged bodies are able to partake in knowledge production and which bodies are used for extraction (Grosfoguel 2010; 2013; Quijano 2000). It is for this reason that I turn to poetry, and specifically Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse*. Although a celebrated artist and poet, which results in another kind of privilege, Adnan's story is knowledge producing and avoids the harmful and extractive relations that can develop in the academy between the researcher and subject or participant (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Parkinson 2022).

Poetry, and literature more generally, has been increasingly used in the disciplines of International Relations and Political Science as a subject of study to understand political and social issues (Bleiker 2001; Dorfman and Mattelart 1975; Doucet 2005; Grayson 2013; Hozić 2017; Hunt and Sands 2000).[3] While this may present a form of 'low theory', as Jack Halberstam argues it provides 'a counterhegemonic form of theorizing, the theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production' (Halberstam 2011, 18).[4] Thinking with Halberstam and his discussion on Pirate Cultures, referring to Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2011, 18-19), alternatives are produced when empirics are understood to be undisciplined actions and events that happen beyond our theoretical and conceptual categories. In other words, by understanding acts and events as existing exogenous, rather than inherent, to a set of theoretical positions and concepts, categories, and classifications, new possibilities of understanding come into existence.

Adnan's poem offers an undisciplined reflection on the Lebanese Civil War that disrupts our understanding of war and peace. It alters the intellectual boundaries and categories used to describe and make sense of war and peace due to the positionality of the author.[5] By considering Adnan's positionality and episteme as reflected in the pages of her oeuvre, the discussion of the Lebanese Civil War is layered in relation to her experience of trauma[6] and her understanding of politics and society. Although the poem is written from her perspective, she moves through society by inhabiting different positionalities throughout, destabilizing the category of the 'individual' and the use of the first person singular 'I'.[7] Questions concerning failure, trauma, and critiques of the bifurcation between peace and war emerge by exploring her narrative of the Lebanese Civil War.

Adnan's artistry works to upend longstanding histories of the Lebanese Civil War, despite multiple and, sometimes, contradictory narratives. These histories can refer to the War as being a conflict of 'outsiders' (Tuéni 1982), absolving Lebanese nationals involved in bringing the country to fifteen years of violent conflict. These narratives often blame the Palestinians for their reckless behaviour as refugees, the Syrians and Israelis for their physical occupation of the country (Badran 2009, 36), the French for establishing a flawed system of governance, and the Arab and Syrian nationalists for wanting to absorb Lebanon into a greater Syrian state – dissolving Lebanon of its distinct (Christian) character (Zamir 1978). In contrast, the Lebanese Civil War is also discussed as a conflict made entirely by its own population, a war of Muslims against Christians (O'Ballance 1998, 12) – the modern continuation of the Muslim conquests and Christian crusades, a conflict over the national identity of the state, and a power grab when the state was at its weakest. In contestation to these histories, this article does not attempt

to underscore a 'truth' about war, peace, or the Lebanese Civil War. Instead, it propels Adnan's work to the forefront as an undisciplined source of knowledge on a conflict that has been a dominant feature in the literature on civil wars, post-conflict peace building, and sectarianism (Chamie 1976; Ghosn and Khoury 2011; Hudson 1997; Preston 2004; Saouli 2019; Siegel and Badaan 2020; Stoakes 1976). In doing so, what emerges in the below analysis is, a kind of queer failure. This follows from an intervention by Thom Donovan (2010) who argues that 'any hopes one might have of achieving mastery over the language of [*The Arab Apocalypse*] is completely challenged. One can only fail and produce the best possible outcome in this failure. Interpretation is not enough. Not explanation either'. It does not sit comfortably within the boundaries of what the social science disciplines so often demand and is not an attempt at literary analysis.

Building on Donovan's (2010) analysis, and in relation to Halberstam's (2011) assertions, Adnan's poem is intrinsically undisciplined, and is useful to produce undisciplined knowledge concerning war and peace, from which a decolonial positionality is put forward. This functions to upset the logics of longstanding narratives that rely on research methods and categories which are inherent to colonial and imperial logics; what Anibal Quijano refers to as the nexus between a 'Eurocentric perspective of knowledge' and 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000; Grosfoguel 2010; 2013; Hoagland 2020). While the academic scholarship on the Lebanese Civil War has covered different and compelling explanations for its outbreak, its prolongation, and conclusion, these different accounts have been produced within standard or normative methodological practices in the social sciences and humanities. Their purported development and application, the intellectual background from which they seek 'truth', are limited by colonial epistemic positionalities from which 'real' knowledge has been produced in academia; an argument that has also been made by feminist academics who continue to challenge epistemic privilege in knowledge production (de Beauvoir 2010, 166; Mohanty 2018).[8]

In addition to being guided by Jack Halberstam's (2011) interventions on knowledge production; decolonial critiques of eurocentrism (Grosfoguel 2010; 2013; Quijano 2000); and feminist challenges about what 'real' knowledge is (de Beauvoir 2010, 166; Mohanty 2018), this article builds on Cynthia Weber's (2016) interventions regarding a 'will to knowledge'. Here, Weber asserts the possibility of a queer 'will to knowledge'. Weber's interventions underscore the ability for multiple categories, arguments, and conclusions to be held together at the same time. In making this argument, Weber considers queer subjectivities as a departing point, relying on 'those subjectivities that do not signify as *either* one sex, gender, and/or sexuality *or* another; they are subjectivities that signify as (also) *more than one* sex, gender, and/or sexuality, often at the same time'. Continuing in this intervention, Weber writes that 'queer subjectivities more than exceed binary logics of the *either/or*' (Weber 2016, 4). Arguably, Adnan's epistemic position as queer is reflected in her writing, which facilitates undisciplined knowledge. Using Weber's argument of queer subjectivities exceeding binary logics and applying it to a reading and analysis of Etel Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse*, also allows for new possibilities to be created, explored, and undermine the separation of war and peace by understanding the two categories as part of a single, knotted, thread.

Building on feminist traditions that have challenged assumptions about what 'real' knowledge is by using the arts and literature and, in the case of this article, poetry, it is possible to disrupt existing narratives of the Lebanese Civil War. These narratives are

often produced in relation to epistemic methodological traditions considered to be 'normal' or 'standard' in the social sciences. The epistemic position of these methodological traditions is one that is white (Western) and hetero-masculine (Escobar 2007; Mignolo 2007; Ndlovu 2018; Quijano 2007; Schiwy 2007). In contrast to these normative methodological traditions, I argue that the use of arts and literature, and specifically affective poetry, can provide the enduring first-hand accounts that challenge existing 'objective' (Code 1991; 2013) inquiries and engage in novel and thoughtful research. Working in tandem with decolonial and feminist positions, a queer logic can further interrupt conclusions derived from 'normal' or 'standard' social scientific methods and methodology. This article does not provide overarching or grand answers, but is meant to work with, learn from, and reflect on the possibilities of literature as epistemic method. In doing so, it speaks to the Adnan's positionality as queer and a feminist and draws from scholarship in both areas to facilitate analysis of *The Arab Apocalypse*.

As is explored in this article, Adnan's narrative emerges from her queer-feminist and decolonial episteme and is reflexive of the lived realities and experience of the Lebanese Civil War. As such, it does not rehearse the standard, often 'objective', framings and linear[9] narratives of the conflict. Adnan's poetry as epistemic method disrupts 'normal' methodologies in politics and IR and requires us to re-think several assumptions concerning war and peace, temporality, and linearity. It provokes the reader to consider the undisciplined reality of conflict, reinforcing a queer will to knowledge; building on feminist scholarship that questions the ability to attain 'real knowledge'. The result is itself an embrace of queer failure which functions as part of, and in contestation to, colonial and heterosexed systems. Building a relationship between Adnan as the author and a reading of the poem, the first section of this article discusses Adnan's positionality and thinking, drawing from interviews conducted with Adnan. The second section is divided into three parts. The first part explores the stretchiness of time and temporality. In doing so, it reconsiders the designation and difference between peace and war. Thinking in this way follows from Maya Mikdashi's (2021) statement that societies' subject to war 'will recognise how the terms 'war,' 'peace,' and 'ceasefire' fail to account for experience. These words, if anything, index a vanishing point between violence and stability, rather than a border'. It is from this understanding that the following two subsections are developed. In the second subsection, the experience of conflict is explored. It highlights the production of trauma as a dislocation, a by-product of intentional action, and the mobilization of group solipsism (Fierke 2004, 472, 476, 490). The third subsection explores the inability to define peace following conflict, specifically, as the presence of conflict forever alters any environment of peace thereafter; a knot in a single thread that cannot be undone. By disrupting the accepted knowledge systems in scholarship on the War, Adnan provides a decolonial reference, highlighting other ways of knowing through non-hegemonic narratives and logics.

Etel Adnan's positionality: Understanding the poet as a reference to her poetry

The Arab Apocalypse avoids extractive, generalised, romanticized, and orientalized constructions of Lebanon and the Lebanese Civil War and, in doing so, it reclaims the story of the Civil War to an epistemological position of the author. This position, for Adnan, is reflective and reflexive, and builds on her understanding of the world. Adnan's positionality concerning

sexuality, as a feminist queer author and artist, is reflected in her work, where – as discussed in the sections below – the queerness of reality is prioritized over simplified 'objective truths'. In an interview with Kathleen Weaver for *Poetry Flash* (1986), Adnan notes how 'men identify themselves through their sexuality. They identify someone else through their sexuality.' This follows from Cynthia Weber (2016) who examines sexuality as an episteme that helps us understand ourselves and the political world. For the male heterosexual, understanding the self and the world is productive of binary genders and sexualities with related categorizations. Including the masculine and feminine as equivalent to the strong and the weak, the public and the private; and sexualities such as heterosexual and homosexual as representative of the normal and the perverse, necessary for the (re)production of social power structures and the threat to those structures. For Adnan, the binary and bifurcated categories related to gender and sexuality are blurry, interwoven, and, at times, indistinct, representing a queer comprehension of the world.

Notably, throughout the conversation with Weaver (1986), Adnan critiques male heterosexuality as the normal and standard way of viewing the world, instead engaging with complexity as explanations of social reality. Specifically, it highlights how masculinist sexual virility is concerned with power. Here, Adnan reflects on André Gide's writing 'in praise of sensuality'. According to Adnan, right-wing Catholic ideologues argued that France lost World War II because of French anti-masculine decadence, as expressed by Gide. As such, right-wing Catholic positions embraced a masculine heterosexual episteme, whereas decadence was considered *irrational* and was embodied by Gide's position on sexuality and sensuality. Correspondingly, Gide's decadence was a failure of male heterosexuality, which was evident of an effeminacy that did not match his biological sex. Crucially, this decadence did not make him 'feminine', it was – instead – a perversion from the *normal*. However, a queer logic ascertains that Gide's subjectivity was evident of an ability to exist in more than one category and classification at one time.

Analysing and referencing Gide's story, Adnan argues that the repression of human expression, caused by decadence and resulting in masculinist failure, is a necessity for masculinist sexual virility and its need for power. This becomes, according to Adnan, untethered violence (Weaver 1986). Despite the thrust of conflict, war, and violence being associated with masculinist positions, a queer-feminist episteme allows us to understand how conflict produces knowledge that exists in contradicting and multiple realities. Adnan gets to this position, arguably, from her own experience of failure: failure to embody the socio-cultural variant of hetero-femininity that frames the normative categories in a gendered and heterosexed world.

Failure, as Halberstam argues, is related to being undisciplined which opens new possibilities and new ways of knowing. However, within the context of masculinist and heterosexed logics of neo-liberalism and capitalism, failure is normatively conditioned as a negative position in relation to success. Yet, failure is bound up in a queer epistemological position. As a queer subject is considered a failure from the normal, queer failure is bound up in trauma of not belonging, a social position that can lead to radical self-acceptance beyond the normative logics of a gendered and heterosexed world (Halberstam 2011, 88). This radical self-acceptance, emergent from traumas of failure, is a new way of knowing, one that is etched into Adnan's experience. By considering Adnan's poetry as reflexive of her position, her writing exposes the queer logics mobilised to understand conflict that unsettles what counts as 'real' knowledge.

By unsettling what counts as 'real' knowledge through a queer episteme, Adnan goes a step further: whether intentional or not, her relationship to the environment of conflict is a feminist position that is reflective and reflexive (England 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Rose 1997; Hemmings 2012). Here, the epistemological position of white hetero-masculinity that emphasizes 'objectivity', which has, for example, produced scholarship focused on sectarianism as an inherent structure of society is abandoned. Instead, Adnan guides the reader through her memory and experience, where *The Arab Apocalypse* frames the conflict by discussing layers of trauma by occupying different positions: the sun, the exiled, the mother, the fighter, the child, the dead, the religious leader. By understanding the Lebanese Civil War through a reflexive practice that builds on failure, Adnan questions the post-conflict environment. In doing so, Adnan queers the discussions of peace and conflict, which further questions the validity of bifurcated and binary logics of peace and conflict.

Adnan layers the narrative of conflict, reflecting a lived experience that embeds her positionality and trauma into the events by using different approaches. First by tying the experience of conflict into daily life, exposing its emergence from the positionality of an individual bystander of the environment, politics, and militias that engulfed life. Her submergence into the conflict, however, transformed her from bystander to witness, shrouded with guilt for being unable to stop the actions of others, producing feelings of culpability; what some may call survivors guilt. Here, she is not a researcher writing history, reading history, or trying to find conclusive answers. Instead, Adnan traces the forceful continuity of daily life as well as its changes, the interruptions, and the events that are beyond her control. Second, Adnan punctuates her writing with signs and symbols, what she has described as 'excess of emotions […] I wrote by hand, and here and there, I put a word, and I made instinctively a little drawing, a sign … Maybe it is because I see these apocalypses … because my first thought is always explosive. It is not cumulative' (Adnan interviewed by Obrist 2014). This relationship between memory, experience, and emotion in relation to the conflict, and the inability to engage in cumulation, arguably, speaks to an understanding of conflict that allows blind-spots, wilfully created, or subconsciously developed (Haugbolle 2005). These apocalypses are essential pauses, they can be considered as periods of adjustment to new environments and events, offering respite from violence.

By noting the overlapping and entangled dynamics of peace and conflict, making the beginning of one and the conclusion of the other indistinguishable, Adnan disrupts the linearity and causality imposed by 'scientific' thinking. Although the 59 stanzas were a response to the 59 days of siege on Tel al-Zataar, temporally stretching the poem to cover the period of the Civil War, there are no dates, no time stamps, and the 'events' are not easily separated from one another; creating an elasticity where the days and events blur together. While the logic of time is transformed, the conflict is marked by trauma and what Adnan refers to as 'apocalypses'. This acts to reinforce the positionality of the storyteller, in this case Adnan, as one that is reflexive and does not emphasize temporal linearity as equivalent to truth. By forcing the reader to consider the affective positionality of the individual who has experienced the conflict, the 'corrective' lens of the researcher is abandoned. Instead, a reflexive immersion into an individual's memory and experience of conflict, unmediated by a researcher, reveals the distortions of time, the blurring and obscuring of divisions, the feeling of loss through destruction, and a

helplessness to control one's own mortality. In doing so, Adnan requires the reader to embody her positionality; a practice that is often foreign to the social scientific researcher who seeks objective truth constructed on abstract concepts and categories.

Decolonial possibilities: *The Arab apocalypse* as epistemic queer-feminist possibility on peace and conflict

Reconsidering the linearity of time and temporality

The social sciences emphasise the importance of linearity and temporality to discuss events, case studies, and to evidence causation. While I do not argue that this is necessarily a problem, the significance of linearity and temporality in social science methodology emerges from a need for objectivity and the reliance on fact to help fill gaps in knowledge. Yet, in attempting to understand war and peace, the experience of linearity and temporality is often subjective, related to legal notions of war, or derived from vague, if not unstable, interpretations an definitions. Discussed here, extrapolated from the Adnan's poem, is a reading that disrupts linear assumptions and understandings of war and peace by focusing on the *experience* of time.

Adnan begins *The Arab Apocalypse* with what reads as the banal passing of the day. In a style and manner reflective of the works of Gertrude Stein, the repetition, or what Stein refers to as 'beginning again and again' (Springer 1991, 193), of the sun and the ordinary scenes of life in Beirut fill the first four pages. Here, Adnan sets the scene, a day goes by, and another day, the sun rises, it takes on different hues, it produces different light, it is yellow, green, red, and blue; each repetition is a new 'beginning again and again'. The division of daily life, marked by the sun's appearance references a division of time that later wanes as the conflict unfolds.

I

A yellow sun   A green sun   a yellow sun   A red sun   a blue sun
a ✳ sun   A sun ✹ a ◉ blue   a ∴∴ red   a ◉ blue
a blue yellow sun a yellow red sun a blue green sun a
a yellow boat a yellow sun a ◉ red a ◉ red blue and yellow
a yellow morning on a green sun a flower flower on a blue blue but
a yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun

a ⚹ yellow A sun ⚹ a small craft ◁ a boat ⚡ a ⍑ red   blue

a quiet blue sun on a card table a red which is blue and a wheel
A solar sun a lunar sun a starry sun a nebular sun
A yellow sun   A green sun a yellow sun Qorraich runner ran running
A blue sun before a red sun   a green sun before a lunar sun
A floral sun ❀ a small craft as round as a round sun ⬮ A solar moon

Another sun jealous of Yellow enamoured of Red terrified by Blue horizontal
A sun romantic as Yellow jealous as Blue amorous as a cloud   ⧱
A frail sun a timid sun ⬭ vain sorrowful and bellicose sun
A Pharaonic ⬙ boat an Egyptian sun a solar universe and a universal sun

A solar arrow crosses the sky An eye dreads the sun the sun is an eye
A tubular sun haunted by the tubes of the sea ⟳ a sun pernicious and vain
A ⊕ Hopi a Red Indian sun an Arab Black Sun a sun yellow and blue

(Etel Adnan, from The Arab Apocalypse (The Post-Apollo Press, 1989), p. 7. Reprinted with permission of The Estate of Etel Adnan and The Post-Apollo Press)

As the first four pages end, the reader begins to understand the universality of the sun, of daily life under the sun, regardless of traditions and culture. While it is not always pleasant, the sun evades the trappings of uniformity in the conception of the universal, bringing into question any possibility of universality. It appears everywhere but is not the same everywhere that it appears. Yet, it always marks a new day, it sees off the moon, it oversees the heat it produces, the life it gives, takes away, and is a reminder that the days continue. Exceptionally, a linear experience of time can be traced in these pages, where the days are similar but distinct and not equal in measure. There is a new different beginning that reproduces the banality of the everyday.

Unlike Stein's poetry, however, Adnan's use of punctuations, small drawings, that interrupt her writing, cause literal pause. It can be imagined that these apocalypses, as Adnan describes them, bring her world to a pause. Here, in reference to the sun, it is evocative of a moment of pause, perhaps emerging from a dimly lit interior to the raucous city streets, looking up at the sky and allowing a moment for the body and mind to adjust to the new environment. A small explosion of bliss and exaltation before the day continues. The effect that these pages possibly serve is threefold: in the first instance, it is to remind the reader of the everyday lives that were lived before the conflict, allowing the reader to position themselves in relation to Adnan, almost as if the reader can occupy the same experience. Second, they also provide a reminder of the stretchiness of time, the gaps that are naturally produced throughout the day, and the unequal passage of time. And third, they speak of a normative context: one that does not need reference to peace since there is not yet an allusion to conflict. In other words, it is the context before war, as failure, and emergent experience of trauma.

While the focus on the sun in the first pages of The Arab Apocalypse represents the banality of everyday life prior to conflict, the importance of the sun is not to be diminished. Referencing The Epic of Gilgamesh, the sun-god, Shamash, has given people the 'power […] to bind and to loose, to be the darkness and light of mankind' (Sandars 1964, 115). It is accepted that Shamash, the sun, sees all, allowing humans to make decisions, even those that the sun does not like. In the case of Adnan's writing, the Arab is no more and no less than a subject of the sun, much like Gilgamesh understood his inferior position in relation to Shamash, whose power was all encompassing. For example, how the sun follows Adnan through her daily routines before the eruption of conflict, it continues to do so during the conflict. However, with the conflict, her relationship to the sun changes. Where the banality of the everyday disappears, the sun, much like everything else, becomes an active participant in the conflict, as Shamash does in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Following from this position, Adnan writes, 'O sun which tortures the Arab's eye in the Enemy's prison!' and continues by highlighting how the passing of time and trauma are held together, with trauma obscuring temporality and a linear sensibility.

A simple reading of these pages in relation to the rest of the poem is that the repetition of daily life evokes a sense that life goes on. Yet, this sentiment is limited by questioning whose life goes on and the kinds of traumas that occur that disable a sense of daily life, provoking an experience where time expands and contracts, the days become blurred, and, in the moment of these apocalypses, stop altogether. Adnan's reflection provokes a contradiction to how we discuss conflict, where the experience of conflict diverges

from exact timelines, yet marks the passage of time. This is evident later in her writing when the appearance of the sun, its announcement as a prelude to the new day, is staggered by violent events.

a sun sunning the bed the bed of a nocturnal river ╱ season!!!
a Hopi filled with bitter whiskey a solar bar in the midst of America anthracite
a sun as androgynous as yellow mixed to blue ◂● red and blue bird
a yellow sun a purple sun in the purple heat of the wind
⋇⦂● an Indian sun a Hindu sun a Zoroastrian sun a sun for catacombs
my pain mounting the sun like a racing horse. The field is infinite
◂━ a yellow sun claimed like a melon from Amazonia · O dead Indians! ⟪⟫
a red sun a black sun a yellow sun a purple sun and nothing else
O thwarted Arabian moon orgiastic under the rain the wind hou ! hou! the desert
morning sun solar morning banal morning apotheosis. An angel went by . . .
sun risen as early as an arm bewitched universe ◆ teapot full of atoms
a yellow sun in my memory cancer in the heart of the rose the prisoner's cry
O sun which tortures the Arab's eye in the Enemy's prison! Sun yellow silence.

(Etel Adnan, from The Arab Apocalypse (The Post-Apollo Press, 1989), p. 10. Reprinted with permission of The Estate of Etel Adnan and The Post-Apollo Press).

As the tone is initially set in the first pages of *The Arab Apocalypse*, it quickly begins to explore the unfolding of the conflict. Often discussed as the trigger of the Civil War, the 1975 Bus Massacre, is referred to as 'the non-event'. Here, Adnan is referring to Phalangist gunmen killed 27 Palestinian refugees in the Ayn al-Rummunah district of Beirut. The event is often viewed as a consequence of an attack on a church congregation in East Beirut where Phalangist party members, Joseph Abu Assi, Antoine Husseini, Dib Assaf, Selman Ibrahim Abou were killed. Yet, by referring to this as 'The night of the non-event' (Adnan 1989a, III, 11), Adnan provides an antithesis of how the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War is normally described.

Adnan's positioning of these developments as a non-event forces the reader to consider other events, possibly more or less important events, over a longer timeline that have contributed to the development of the Lebanese Civil War. In other words, by discussing it as a non-event Adnan puts forward an assumption that challenges the periodisation of the conflict. In the first instance, from Adnan's position, the event did not present itself as an environmental shift in the country. In the second instance, she implicitly references the longer history of Lebanese, Levantine, and Arab politics and society; requiring the reader to reengage with the political and social context and history. For example, it can reference forms of state making and nation building by the French throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the establishment of the state of Israel and the Palestinian *Nakba*; the 1958 crisis; and the politics concerning the collapse of Intra Bank in 1966; without ever mentioning these events. This disrupts the 'starting point' of the Lebanese Civil War as a rational periodisation of the start of the Lebanese Civil War, often discussed as 13 April 1975.

By challenging the starting point of the Lebanese Civil War, Adnan presents a conundrum for researchers engaged in normative methodological practices. Specifically, that the accepted *cause* of the Lebanese Civil War is much more complex, historically produced, and filled with contradictions. By understanding the production of conflict in

this manner, the linear relationship between cause and effect is problematized, as is the dichotomy between peace and conflict. In other words, the means to understand how the social world functions according to 'normal' social scientific methods and methodology is disrupted. Adnan forces the reader to consider the longer scale of history, with multiple overlapping, contradicting variables and asks the researcher to question: when does peace end and war begin? In doing so, the first four pages are brought into question: was there ever peace?

Although the first pages of The Arab Apocalypse describe a pacific environment, it is possible to understand how failures throughout history, such as French colonialism, the Nakba, the 1958 crisis, and more, are cumulative in chipping away at the foundations from which a particular society develops. Happening in the background, they are events that are passively acknowledged, leading to a greater explosive event. The non-event, according to Adnan, was like previous events: disturbances. Yet, the accumulation of disturbances, the pinnacle of which being the night of the non-event, amounted to 'War in the vacant sky' (Adnan 1989a, III, 11).

III

The night of the non-event. War in the vacant sky. The Phantom's absence.
Funerals. Coffin not covered with roses. Unarmed population. Long.
The yellow sun's procession from the mosque to the vacant Place. Mute taxis.
Plainclothed army. Silent hearse. Silenced music. Palestinians with no Palestine.

The night of the Great Inca did not happen. Engineless planes. Extinguished sun.
Fishermen with no fleet fish with no sea fleet with no fish sea without fishermen
Guns with faded flowers Che Guevara reduced to ashes. No shade.
The wind neither rose nor subsided. The Jews are absent. Flat tires.
The little lights are not lit. No child has died. No rain
I did not say that spring was breathing. The dead did not return.

The mosque has launched its unheeded prayer. Lost in the waves.
The street lost its stones. Brilliant asphalt. Useless roads. Dead Army.
Snuffed is the street. To shut off the gas. Refugees with no refuge no candle.
The procession hasn't been scared. Time went by.   Silent Phantom.

(Etel Adnan, from The Arab Apocalypse (The Post-Apollo Press, 1989), p. 11. Reprinted with permission of The Estate of Etel Adnan and The Post-Apollo Press)

The environmental shift is detailed by the sun's absence in that moment, where previously the sun's omnipresence was the only object worthy of note, however, war overshadowed all else. As daily life came to a standstill following that night, the sun is referenced as rising in the East 'from the mosque' to the West, or 'the vacant Place'. Unlike the first pages when there was a pause to admire the sun, there was nowhere to escape: no shade, an allegory for the coming apocalypse.

With each violent event, an accumulation on the previous, the apocalypses described above, the 'explosive' first thoughts that Adnan highlights within the text, reference

ongoing incomprehensible traumas. However, as the tragedies mount, from the Sabra and Shatilla massacre, the use of chemicals and the massacre at Quarantina, the Tel al-Zataar Massacre, Adnan's use of drawings conclude and are replaced by the command 'STOP'. 'STOP' becomes an echo, a word that lingers in the air as it bounces off events. It acts as a circuit breaker, a plea for pause, with the brutality of the conflict transforming the banality of everyday life. Notably, despite the long process of conflict development, discussed above, the experience of conflict produces an anxious temporality that is difficult to measure. It is an apocalypse that appears without much warning as the deteriorating environment occurs in a manner that individuals and society acclimatize to. While, by definition, an apocalypse presupposes a conclusion for everyone, the conclusion is experienced differently by different people. For those who are dead, the violence draws their worlds to a decisive end, and for those who survive, their luck manifests in physical continuity but the misfortune of the psychological process of becoming trapped in those moments of incomprehensible trauma; a dislocation.

War and trauma: Remaking the self/society

Adnan generously offers her own experience of trauma to make sense of conflict. Here, trauma acts as a motivating factor that shapes the desire of salvation and survival. Critical of how trauma shaped this desire, however, Adnan writes that that 'a sun-ambulance carries Christ to the insane asylum … Close to the monkeys' (Adnan 1989a, X, 25). This critique serves a dual purpose. First, it disrupts how the Lebanese Civil War is often framed as a sectarian conflict. Second, it exposes the traumas – the depths of deprivation and loss – the dislocation of the self from the other(s), caused by conflict, that is fertile ground for sectarianism to root itself in a novel fashion.

In the first instance, the emphasis on sectarian conflict limits our comprehension of the real political and social complexities of the conflict, it reinforces and limits the narrative to one that is focused on the discourses of the militia-leadership, which treats of the 'other' as an existential threat. This discourse that is evident in some instances of the Lebanese Civil War served a propagandic and mobilizing purpose. It is, effectively, a masculinist elite desire for political power, which plays on the populations' desires for salvation and survival but does not explain the desires of the population. Where attempts have been made to explain these desires, there is often a discussion of *inherent* or *embedded* sectarianism, an argument laced with biological determinism that is problematic. Nevertheless, this feeds into the second point related to the function of trauma as socially transformative. For example: the leadership of the Lebanese Forces constructed Christ as the source of salvation and a reason to mobilize for conflict, using the language of Christian salvation and survival for the purpose of a political goal.[10] Here, Adnan is engaged in a critique of the illogical, yet easy to grasp, conclusions which portray the conflict as a matter of inherent sectarianism; by using Adnan's writing as that of witnessed account, it is possible to work through the prevalent narrative to highlight and expose the contradictions:

XXIX

the sun is unsettled dissident eruptive in anarchy
I forbade the sky to traverse my eyes STOP Running
They came with yellow ears and drained nostrils
I saw cross-bearers with   death in their sockets
the boys cried STOP the girls didn't spread the linen
the father died of a heart-attack on a boat named Cyprus
the mother was beating raw meat the enemy surged from the stone mill
She ate with cannibal eagerness the icons and the bread
Then sang a solar litany on Resurrection Sunday
the sun-muezzin intonated prayers till the evening of palms
the mother and the recitant met in the fire
I saw them throw their cut-up fingers on the Church's platter
The saints did not come to their rescue the Companions neither
between two epic pauses they fought believe it!
the sun's pain rose on the thermometer
muezzins and priests posted bulletins of victory
the combatants remained horizontal on the horizontal line of the sea

(Etel Adnan, from The Arab Apocalypse (The Post-Apollo Press, 1989), p. 48. Reprinted with permission of The Estate of Etel Adnan and The Post-Apollo Press).

Adnan's critique of the religious leadership whose politically opportunistic practices veil the social and political realities of conflict, lending itself to dominant and facile narratives of ethno-sectarian mobilisation is layered. As the focus of The Arab Apocalypse is much broader than this passage of the poem, the layers include the stories of those who cry *stop* and whose livelihoods are disrupted. It is entangled with the pervasive deaths as indirect consequences to conflict, even in eventual moments of relief, and the witnesses who suffer from the anger and frustration of their environment, as well as the hunger and desperation that manifests psychologically and physically. Here, the *icons* represent the psychological and the bread the physical. For the mother, who 'was beating raw meat' the mix of psychological and physical manifestations of conflict are apparent. The mother creates an uneasy balance between hunger and desperation, where 'she ate with cannibal eagerness' there is desire for salvation and survival. After which, she 'sang a solar litany on Resurrection Sunday'.

In the moments of litany and prayer, as in moments of suffering which seemed to be enduring, religious differences helped mobilize animosity and conflict, because in these moments, salvation and survival were finite. However, as Adnan notes, these witnesses, across the religious divide, are otherwise the same. Where the threat to survival provokes the same response 'the mother and the recitant met in the fire / I saw them their cut-up fingers on the Church's platter'. And, as in their mutual hungers, desire for survival, and salvation, 'the saint did not come to their rescue the Companions neither'. Adnan evokes an important feeling of dismay, of being let-down by the religious beliefs that, in their desperation, they held on to. These beliefs structured their eagerness to fight, to turn their backs on their neighbours, justified by a sense of righteousness that had been provoked by their politicians and religious leaders, yet when the promised salvation and holy intervention did not occur on their behalf, they continued to fight. Here, Adnan notes that

'the sun's pain rose on the thermometer' a reference back to Gilgamesh, as well as a reality of the human condition, absent of religiousity, speaking to the environment that gives us life and takes it away. While the sun was in pain, the 'muezzins and priests posted bulletins of victory', claiming that the deaths were not in vain, making all of us grievable.[11]

Adnan's discussion draws out the political positionalities inhabited by individuals, politicians, and religious leaders, and in doing so, displays how the opposing factions are mere reflections of each other. Here, the answer to the question *why* individuals fight is made evident but not tangible, pointing to conflicting explanations. On the one hand, it is not enough to simply argue that people are motivated by religious beliefs. On the other hand, despite the importance of religious identity, it needs to be understood as politicised by political and religious leaders who worked the machinations of power for a victory that would be solely theirs; using trauma and questions of survival to mobilise individuals, disregarding the livelihoods and lives lost with the simple promise of eternal salvation.

By viewing the Lebanese Civil War as the development of war from historical accumulations, it is possible to view war as part of a knotted thread; where the war reconstitutes the thread by creating a new knot. By conceptualising war and peace through these means, the problem of sectarianism becomes part of the war-knot reconstruction of the thread rather than an inherent and omnipresent characteristic of Lebanese society.

Post-Conflict? Blurring the binary between war and peace

In the final pages of *The Arab Apocalypse*, Adnan describes the inconclusive conclusion of the Civil War and the material and immaterial realities as the environment shifts once again, creating a new knot. Perhaps the inconclusive conclusion reflects the fact that Adnan had completed writing the poem in 1976 while the war continued until 1990. However, it is possible to stretch these pages to the final official days of conflict in 1990 and the subsequent developing environment. The post-war environment is often discussed as a period of development, retrospection, and reconciliation. It is thought to be a period of unease, with conflict always being around the corner, yet marked by declarations of pacific agreements between elites, a new day and the promise of a new thread. Although Adnan does not describe the political agreements, policies, government making in the immediate post-war period, she reflects on her surroundings, presenting a queer reality where conflict is said to have concluded but the new 'post-conflict' environment is assembled on the foundations of violent conflict. This, again, blurs the categories of peace and conflict, prompting the question – how can we *know* peace after conflict?

As fighting between the Lebanese factions came to an end during this phase of the war, Adnan writes: 'There are more Syrian kings in the ant-hills than ants STOP THEM!' (Adnan 1989a, XLVI, 65). This is, arguably, a reference to the proliferation of leaders representing different factions and who have sought to occupy their seats of power. If we are to stretch the poem to reference the final days of the Lebanese Civil War, we could reference this passage as the occupation of Lebanon by the Syrian military. In either case, the vision of a post-conflict environment held by many is one of a new pacific environment, a sense of return to the sun-pocked days, yet the Syrian army officers, referred to as Syrian kings, that occupied Lebanon following the Ta'if Agreement, became the rulers, law bearers, and judges who dictated the lives of the population. Although the Syrian occupation was meant to maintain order and a pacific environment, they were not innocent of

crimes or neutral purveyors: 'They drank drops of sweat and infants' blood' (Adnan 1989a, XLVI, 65). The Syrian presence as a continued marker of coercion, further blurs the boundary between war and peace.

The difference between the conflict and post-conflict environments, of active war and peace, are often considered to be distinct categories. While there are observable differences between the two, the presence of conflict persists within the post-conflict environment. In the case of Lebanon, as argued by Adnan, this presence was evident with the Syrian occupation, the establishment of a new political structure and elite from the belly of war, and the altered social and physical landscape. Here, the failure of the previous hetero-masculine system brought forth an untethered violence seeking power, only to be tempered by an agreement between the very agents of failure and violence.

The staying power of the war exists beyond the structural changes caused by failure. Adnan writes 'History is dead. the sun is Nothingness. the air is burning for ever' (1989 LIV, 73). These are ruminations on a social and physical landscape that have been transformed by the weight of war, a sentiment that is evident throughout the final pages of *The Arab Apocalypse*; where she notes that peace is only possible when the apocalypse is final: the moment where the thread ends.

<div align="center">LIX</div>

When the sun will run its ultimate road
fire will devour beasts plants and stones
fire will devour the fire and its perfect circle
when the perfect circle will catch fire no angel will manifest itself STOP
the sun will extinguish the gods the angels and men
and it will extinguish itself in the midst of its daughters
Matter-Spirit will become the NIGHT
in the night in the night we shall find knowledge love and peace

(Etel Adnan, from The Arab Apocalypse (The Post-Apollo Press, 1989), p. 78. Reprinted with permission of The Estate of Etel Adnan and The Post-Apollo Press)

Conclusion

Building on decolonial, feminist, and queer scholars, this article uses *The Arab Apocalypse* to examine the Lebanese Civil War and dynamics of war and peace. In doing so, it critiques the 'normal' epistemological position from which social science methodology is derived. It builds on arguments that these 'normal' positions emerge from histories of (white) Western colonialism and hetero-masculinity. Critiquing this 'normal' methodological position by building on decolonial, feminist, and queer practices of knowledge production, *The Arab Apocalypse* becomes more than a piece of literature. It is knowledge producing, providing the possibility to challenge assumptions regarding what 'real' knowledge is and where it comes from. As such, using Adnan's epic poem, as 'an undisciplined zone of knowledge production' (Halberstam 2011), the article challenges the existing logics

evident in the social sciences regarding the Lebanese Civil War. It does this by under-standing the epistemic position of the author, allowing this to carefully guide the reading of the poem. Here, the queer subjectivity of the author provides an epistemic pos-ition that highlights a critical discussion of war and peace based on the experience of war.

By engaging in knowledge production derived from a queer subjectivity, the author disrupts notions of linearity and temporality in the discussions of conflict. Instead, focus-ing on the affective experience of war. What this does, for the reader, is not only provide an emotive position on conflict, but highlights how the development of conflict is layered and entangled; difficult to discern definitively; and only when it is too late. It disrupts our thinking of conflict as being the absence of peace, the result of a single event, and instead requires the reader to think about conflict as always possible, a potential in the back-ground, made up of accumulated small failures. By disrupting the exceptionality of conflict and considering it as a constant possibility, it stands in contrast to, but also hand-in-hand with, the banality of everyday life, where small failures become embedded in everyday life, knotted into a thread of history, without much attention paid. Adnan further dislodges the logic of sectarianism that often takes the form of biological essenti-alism when discussing the Lebanese Civil War. While Adnan does not deny the realities of sectarianism, her story focuses on the dynamics of trauma, which works against orientalist tropes to reveal a more complex narrative. By taking these stories seriously in IR, the cat-egories and characterizations of war and conflict that are embedded in the social sciences and which 'undermine the stories people tell' can be challenged, providing opportunities to re-think existing knowledge on war and peace.

Notes

1. The poem was largely a response to the Tel al-Zataar siege and massacre, home to around 30,000 Palestinian refugees and committed by Christian forces, lasting 59days and sub-sequently mimicked by Adnan in the structure of the poem into 59 stanzas (Adnan 1989b; Plum 2020, 2–3).
2. See also the work of Helene Marie Abiraad included in this Special Issue for further discussion on memory and the stories that are told as well as temporality of war and peace and the framing of 'post-conflict'.
3. Naeem Inayatullah and Dauphinee (2016) along with Jenny Edkins (2013) explore the role of autoethnography and creative writing by academics in International Relations in the so-called narrative turn.
4. Bleiker (2001) similarly argues that 'aesthetic explorations of sensibilities may well offer insights that cannot be reached or even comprehended by way of mimetic recognition of external appearances' (531).
5. This follows from the interventions made in the Introduction to this Special Issue, particularly with regards to who gets to know peace within the multiple voices of 'knowing' and which ones are elevated.
6. Borrowing from Karin Fierke (2004) trauma is understood as 'a 'dislocation' accompanied by an inability to mourn or speak of the trauma' where trauma in relation to conflict is 'more difficult to come to terms with because the pain is a by-product of intentional action' at which point, trauma becomes isolated 'to another level of experience […] the political, where [it becomes] part of the mobilisation of group solipsism' (472, 476, 490).
7. As written by Hilary Plum, Adnan's use of 'I' 'The speaker's agency is asserted but decentred: the speaker has no firm identity, no single voice, and does not represent a defined self-pres-ence but the possibility of subjectivity realizing itself in language. The reader cannot rely on

familiar signs to define an identity for this speaking presence; it seems other modes of reading are required' (2-3).

8. Simone de Beauvoir argued that the 'representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth' (2010, 166).

9. Linearity is questioned and explored by scholars including Kimberly Hutchings (2008), who explores how ideas of time are based in Western political thought, which determines what we can and cannot know about politics, and Siba Grovogui (2016), who argues that temporal linearity is a product of empire (also see Rahul Rao's (2020) book *Out of Time*). Grovogui's argument highlights the Westerncentric framing of temporality and Adnan's obfuscation of temporal linearity.

10. Similarly, Rahaf Aldoughli (2021) argues that sectarianism in Syria has become embedded through issues of ontological security.

11. Judith Butler (2016) argues asks 'whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable' and argues that 'we can see the division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives' whereas Adnan, in her writing, highlights the importance of grieving all bodies by overcoming the classifications and dichotomies imposed by binary logics.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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