

Editorial

Some Trees and Their Troubling Truths: Boundaries in Times of Crisis

Sleiman El Hajj

In Toni Morrison's classical novel *Beloved* (1987), one image that stays with the reader long after they return the book to its shelf is the protagonist Sethe's "tree." On the Sweet Home plantation during the epoch of Slavery, when Sethe is pregnant and still lactating to nurse her other infant, two white boys hold her down in a barn and steal her breastmilk. When she makes the brave move to report them, and the boys find out, they whip her, leaving a tree-shaped scar on her back. Last month, in a lecture on illness writing that I delivered at the University of Oxford, I showed how Sethe's encounter with another former slave, who makes love to the tree on her back, helps reclaim "its wide trunk and intricate branches" (p. 34) – from a place of extreme physical pain and psychological anguish to a site of care and comfort. This shift in perspective in how we deal with scars and their memories helps the character redefine the tree as something different from what it was, or from the inscription of violence it was intended to be.

The trees of various forms and sizes that populate this issue of *Al-Raida* have similarly benefited from the reorienting of and/or new perspective that lived explorations of trauma may cobble in the minds of their authors – as they try to heal, cope, or find meaning or a sense of purpose during, or in the aftermath of, adversity. Hardship or personal conflicts are tackled in this collection under two overarching themes, illness and war, which develop the special issue's overall topic: Boundaries are felt and seen everywhere, in times of peace and war alike, and are channeled therein across five modes of writing – autoethnography, autofiction, memoir, literary criticism, and a book conversation – in the personal, interpersonal, national, and international contexts their writers inhabit. Some boundaries, such as those for preserving mental health, are celebrated; others are criticized or actively resisted, mainly the self/other binaries created by the Israel-Hezbollah War in 2024, and, to a lesser extent, the inherited cross-generational traumas that persist in Lebanon decades after the Taef Accord ended the Lebanese Civil War in 1990.

In fact, I write this editorial on the heels of a ceasefire following an even more recent Israel-Hezbollah War, this time in 2026, which will no doubt motivate a new wave of writing about illness and war, coping and healing. Hence, to adequately understand illness and its multifaceted implications, a versatile conception of the term is needed in a way that juxtaposes its medical dimension with the historical and cultural roots that may get somatized into clinically recognized symptoms (El Hajj, 2025). In this sense, a condescending physician's refusal to take their patient's complaints or emotions seriously – the crusade of two of our authors – is symptomatic of a medical patriarchy, as grievous and grave as a twisted testicle, itself an immensely painful experience seldom reported in biographical writing outside of this issue. Knowing that the harshest and most systemic boundary people face, especially those who choose to color outside the lines, is that of silence, the present issue promotes the use of autoethnography to facilitate readers' exploration of how the featured authors actively engage in the process of transferring learning from their real-life experiences to those of others. Particularly in contexts of conflict, the autoethnographic approach as a form of qualitative inquiry provides a structure for the analysis of culturally and theoretically pressing themes – such as war, sexuality, and/or illness – premised on personal experience (El Hajj, 2023; Muncey, 2010; Rober & Rosenblatt, 2017; Speciale et al., 2015). The issue therefore anchors four narrative accounts of theoretically significant episodes of lived experience, contextualized to the Lebanese setting. Otherness is the principal boundary and malady that the authors of the first three autoethnographies find themselves confronting.

In "Wajd's sentiments – وجدانيات وُجْد: A life writing exploration of a young-adult Palestinian refugee's identity in Lebanon," Wajd El Khatib describes the vicissitudes of her quotidian as an immigrant in the host country she grows up in, after her family flees the historic violence of the Israel-Palestine conflicts next door. Ella Waked seeks to overcome otherness of a different kind in her ethnography, in which she poses and attempts to answer the question of how best to approach terminal illness as a caregiver. Thus, in "Bystanders: Terminal illnesses through the eyes of loved ones," Waked makes audible the voices of different terminal patient caregivers, including hers, once-silenced by grief and self-doubt on one hand, and by unsympathetic or insensitive healthcare professionals on the other. In the same vein, medical patriarchy and its impact on patient wellbeing is explored in Ghalia Kondakji's "Normalized abnormality: Living with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)"; in this essay, Kondakji narrates her physical as well as psychological ordeals with dismissive and "gender-biased medical advice" in the wake of a PCOS diagnosis as a teenager. Remarkably, there is minimal illness writing examining this condition, despite its prevalence among women worldwide.

There is a similar dearth in biography or pathography on the subject of testicular torsion, especially that exacerbated by a combination of malpractice and medical patriarchy, as we see in the memoir of Hussein Kobeissy later in the issue. In "Scalpels and scars: An account of testicular torsion and its aftermath," Kobeissy shares his journey with misdiagnosis, pain thresholds, and psychological distress at the prospect of losing what is generally deemed a precursor of manhood, and the boundaries faced and overcome in the recovery process. Knowing that negotiating boundaries in reflexive life writing is precipitated by "autobiographical stimuli for story-building and meaning-making" (El Hajj, 2023, p. 646), the enclosed memoirs by Mariam Yahya, Mohamad Kobeissi, Francesca Ghosn, and Amal Kabalan largely corral their lived experiences – of adversity, disappointment, grief, and harassment – into one parting message: interpersonal boundaries are the protective barriers we sometimes need to erect to ensure that our private space, be it physical, sexual, mental, or emotional, is not encroached upon, whether unwittingly or maliciously.

Between September and November 2024, as Israel pummeled Lebanon, Melissa Chalhoub was a student studying at a university in the United States. In “Critical reflections on boundaries: My experience abroad with personal and political boundaries during the 2024 war in Lebanon,” Chalhoub explores the question of self/other boundary-making during wartime by yoking her experience of vicarious trauma to the inevitable mental and emotional immersion in the war in her home country, as experienced by the Lebanese, thousands of kilometers away. Aligning with this war-torn context/timeline, but based in Lebanon itself rather than overseas, four other voices emerge in the special issue across three short memoirs and one more autoethnography – by Maryam Chamseddine, Fatima Beshar, Leen Fakih, and Narjess Haidar, respectively. In “Righting and writing the world by reflecting on the past and documenting the present: How displaced women heal through war,” Haidar links her gendered experience of internal displacement in Lebanon to that of other women who have “visibly and invisibly shaped history and sustained identities,” managing to both survive and thrive despite the odds. Chamseddine’s “A line crossed”; Beshar’s “Boundaries in the wind”; and Fakih’s “It was all gone” discuss the violence of the last few months of 2024 from a civic rather than gendered perspective. While all three deplore the material damages and lost homes incurred by Israel’s air raids and scorched earth policy, especially in south Lebanon, Beshar and Chamseddine subtly question and revisit the sectarian and xenophobic considerations that became a bellwether of the partisan (*déjà vu*) attitudes beleaguering those forcibly displaced by the war, to areas in Lebanon far from their original homes. Indeed, in her last monograph on Lebanese postwar literature, Syrine Hout (2012, p. 201) aptly queries if stories rooted in this part of the world will always be premised on memories of the last century’s sectarian Civil War, 1975–1990. In the book conversation included in this issue, Zainab Chamoun and Jennifer Philippa Eggert discuss, to a certain extent, Hout’s question in relation to Eggert’s *Women and the Lebanese Civil War: Female fighters in Lebanese and Palestinian militias* (2021). They revisit the discrepant boundaries spawned by Lebanon’s war(s): the gender discrimination, generational divides, and the vexed grappling with collective memory still applicable to date.

Since fiction is not assessed by the same “metrics of authenticity” (Smith & Watson, 2016) as nonfiction, auto-fictional texts or fictions directly informed by personal experience may provide a heuristic space for self-appraisal, gender expression, and social critique, especially in setups that proscribe these topics. Dimitri Rousse’s auto-fictional study, “Twin flames: How death anxiety haunts the narrative in fiction writing,” is a case in point. Autofiction, like autoethnography, harnesses a potent composite of creative writing and critical commentary to explore its subject matter – Rousse’s exploration of death anxiety in relation to queerness – but takes more creative liberty in refashioning, fictionalizing, and reimagining the protagonist, their journey, and its outcomes. Finally, Reine Fawaz’s research article, “Crisis sociology and nature in literature: How crisis influences personal and societal fabrics in *The Nightingale* (2015) and *Years of Wonder* (2001),” makes the compelling case that “the sociological transformation of individuals and communities during crisis remains consistent across countries and throughout time.” Fawaz thus brings the issue full circle, by extending its discussions of otherness, and of the illness/wellness binaries, from creative nonfiction to fictional writing, and from present times in the Arab world, to World-War-II France, and to the Black Plague in 1665 Eyam, England.

It has been a privilege and a challenge curating this special issue. This is a time of great uncertainty in Lebanon, the journal’s home country, at the heels of the latest Israel-Hezbollah War in parallel with US-Israel War on Iran. When lives and livelihoods are

as constrained by security concerns and survival anxieties as they are by the grid and grip of patriarchy, their concomitant voices gain new significance. They combine the urgency of local breaking news with illness writing on medically recognized illnesses, as well as psychological traumas of broader applicability across contexts far-removed from the authors' own. Illness, somatic or cultural, and war, along with its consequences, are the tropes that I hope this issue of *Al-Raida* may help contextualize and make more intelligible, as we witness the universal realities that shape our common present and the poignant tree collective that marks it.

**The content of the special issue is developed in the editorial according to theme, rather than genre. For each narrative's pagination and/or order of print appearance, please see the Table of Contents.*

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