Solidarity: A Way Out of the "Ruin of Flesh and Stone"

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As diplomacy's attempts to stop the war in Ukraine through the imposition of sanctions and as other alternatives to armed conflict are failing, I look retrospectively at some examples of contemporary anti-war poetry in US literature as a way to nourish hope in nonviolent actions. Drawing from Susan Sontag's 2003 book-length essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, I develop a reflection on the ways in which solidarity circulated in the past and still circulates today enabling the production of a common sense of "we," which should never be taken for granted, as Sontag reminds us, especially when we regard the pain of others from a distance.[1] We are experiencing such distance between us and the pain of others in these weeks as we watch the war in Ukraine on television, read about it in newspapers, and witness it on social media or the Internet.

Considering Sontag's argument in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in this essay I contend that anti-war poetry is more effective than photography in creating bonds of solidarity and in circulating shared affects that stifle the war propaganda. Indeed, as Sontag writes, "photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus"[2]. This reflection pertains not only to the realm of photography and the historical context of the Spanish Civil War mentioned by Sontag in her book. As Rebecca L. Stein and Donatella Della Ratta argue with reference to the conflicts in Israel/Palestine and Syria in the digital age, propaganda videos and electronic activism shape contemporary warfare. The visual thus dominates the war scene today as photography did during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, although the visual media being used today have changed. Let me ask provocatively: Why, then, may poetry be a more appropriate tool to address war tragedies than photography, digital technologies, and social media? What do we as readers gain in terms of knowledge and understanding when we engage in the act of reading antiwar poems and what would get lost as we encounter visual representations of wars?

1 Cf. Sontag, Susan: Regarding the Pain of Others, London 2004, 6.

2 Ibid., 5.

In *The Impossible Revolution*, leftist Syrian dissident Yassin Al-Haj Saleh helps readers make sense of the Syrian revolution by offering a subjective, yet lucid account of the Syrian tragedy.[3] Among others, Saleh's account offers insightful revelations on the ways in which Syria's democratic revolution metamorphosed into a bloody war. Both Saleh and Della Ratta are convinced that "a condition of hypervisibility connected to a condition of hyperviolence"[4] may anesthetize viewers. This is an opinion that we also find articulated in Sontag's work, where she states: "For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war"[5]. Unfortunately, the photographs of the Spanish Civil War have not stopped the vicious cycle of violence and the human atrocities committed during wars thus confirming Sontag skepticism about the real capacity of photography to act as a deterrent towar.

I argue in this essay that rather than reproducing, circulating, and amplifying violence as the numerous videos on social networking platforms do, antiwar poems break, interrupt, and suspend the "ruthless force" of war.[6] They further contribute to stop, in the words of Arab American poet and Vietnam veteran Samuel Hazo, "the furious clamor of flags"[7] and help readers imagine an alternative, nonviolent reality freed from the horrors of war. Poetry, in particular, does not simply reproduce the beating sounds and destructions produced by the war. It actively engages with the difficult task of "making peace," as Jewish poet Denise Levertov attempted to do, by providing readers with a "grammar of justice/syntax of mutual aid"[8]. With its capacity to activate affects and move the reader, anti-war poetry further effectively conveys the pain inflicted on others in terms that facilitate the reader's (always partial, provisional, and perhaps defective) understanding of war tragedies because they are clearly articulated and affectively communicated.

Offering a fascinating account on the radically new ways in which Palestinian artists, filmmakers, dancers, and activists have been revisiting the archive to imagine an alternative future for Palestine, Gil Z. Hochberg writes: "Finding, exposing, sharing the same information and the same facts, time and time again – the same atrocities, the same numbers (more or less), the same unveiling of open secrets – can

3 Saleh, Yassin al-Haj: The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy, London 2017.

4 Della Ratta, Rebecca: Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria, London 2018.

5 Ibid., 12.

6 Cf. Whitman, Walt: Beat! Beat! Drums! In: The Poetry Foundation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45469/beat-beat-drums

7 Hazo, Samuel J: September 11, 2001. In: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Sept. 11, 2011. Last Accessed Oct. 04, 2021.

8 Levertov, Denise: Making Peace. In: Breathing the Water, New York, 1984, 40.

be numbing. To fight this archival fatigue and make archives actually matter, we need to develop an altogether different approach – one that builds an imagination, future vision, playfulness, creativity, speculation, and *fabulation*, to borrow Saidiya Hartman's term"[9]. I argue in this essay that this is precisely the approach that the chosen poets invite readers to embrace: to break out of the frame of the war and imagine a nonviolent future.

1. Denise Levertov's "An Interim"

Having served as a nurse during World War II, Levertov had had firsthand experience with the war, from which she would draw to write her antiwar poems. As other US poets who had been involved as ambulance drivers or as caregivers in the First World War, such as e. e. cummings and Ellen N. La Motte, Levertov developed intense anti-war sentiments, particularly during the US involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s. In 1967, Levertov founded the group Writers and Artists Protest against the War in Vietnam; she actively took part in several anti-war protests and was briefly jailed for her antiwar activism on more than one occasion (Denise Levertov – Poetry Foundation).

In "An Interim" (1968), Levertov expresses the weariness and despair produced by the war and the desire for a temporal suspension of the military confrontations between the two rival superpowers. The poem is divided into seven vignettes, each one focusing on a particular aspect of the war/peace divide: the fatigue that overwhelms antiwar activists; the erosion of language by effect of the war propaganda; the horror of spending the days confined in a solitary cell contrasted with the magnificence of the ocean; peace as an arduous enterprise and a splendid harmony. This last aspect is poignantly expressed in the following lines:

> Peace as grandeur. Energy
> serene and noble. The waves
> break out on the packed sand,
> butterflies take the cream o' the foam,
> from time to time a palmtree lets fall
> another day branch, calmly.
> The restlessness
> of the sound of waves
> transforms itself in its persistence
> to that deep rest.
> …

9 Hochberg, Gil Z: Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future. Durham, 2021, x.

Peace could be
that grandeur, that dwelling
in majestic presence, attuned
to the great pulse.[10]

The title of the poem clearly points to the necessity of temporarily suspending the military clashes and human atrocities that replicate themselves without interruption.

In vignette 2, a five-year-old boy is represented as manipulating the language at the expense of a little girl; the image of the unscrupulous child is juxtaposed to that of a US major publicly announcing that "'it became necessary/to destroy the town to save it'"[11]. Levertov's subsequent statement about the erosion of language at the hands of the war is particularly telling:

Language, coral island
accrued from human comprehensions,
human dreams,
you are eroded as war erodes us.[12]

In the following vignette, the desolate experience of fasting and solitary confinement of a very young war-resister – de Courcy Squire – is set side by side with the magnificence of the ocean in the attempt to highlight what war deprives us of: honesty, expansiveness, hospitality, warmness, an accommodating attitude, and in ultimate analysis a sense of wonder. Squire and other prisoners waiting for their trial in a Puerto Rican jail see the trial as a way "to confront the war-makers and, in the process, do something to wake up the by-standers"[13]. Outrage is the affect Levertov mobilizes in this poem: outrage against the war and against the necessity to have people ready to self-immolate so that the horrors of war become finally visible and acknowledged.

In "An Interim," Levertov breaks the "war talk" and its vicious cycle of violence against others and against oneself by making space for peace so that it may again vibrate in harmony with the great pulse of the universe. Reflecting on the works of feminist writers such as Levertov and Lucille Clifton, in *Waging War on War*, Giorgio Mariani convincingly argues that "some texts do allow peace to speak in a voice that does not merely echo that of war"[14]. I believe that Levertov's poem does that and this

10 Levertov, Denise: An Interim. In: Poetry 113 (1968), H.2, 69–77, 71f.
11 Ibid., 70.
12 Ibid., 70.
13 Ibid., 74.
14 Mariani, Giorgio: Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature, Chicago 2015, 25.

is also what June Jordan would do many years after the Vietnam war, when the US was involved in another destructive and long-lasting war: The Iraq war.

2. June Jordan's "The Bombing of Baghdad"

Written during the first Iraq War in 1991, "The Bombing of Baghdad" draws a parallel between the lamentation of the Iraqi civilians under attack and the singing of Crazy Horse, who is outlined as dying at the hands of the white colonists. Jordan in this poem solidarizes with the people of Iraq and the indigenous people of the US, as the lines "And I am cheering for the arrows/and the braves"[15] clearly demonstrate, while also drawing an interesting parallelism between General George Armstrong Custer's invasion of Sioux territory, which started a series of bloody battles, and what she conceives of as a (neo)imperial war in the Middle East.

Despite the poet's insistence on the destructive force of the war, as expressed through the repetition of the verb "we bombed," each time followed by a variety of military but also largely civilian targets, Jordan closes her poem by dedicating it to the survivors: "And here is my song for the living/who must sing against the dying/sing to join the living/with the dead." This is not the first time that Jordan expresses her solidarity with the innocent victims of war massacres occurring in the Middle East. In "Moving towards Home,"[16] for instance, Jordan commemorates the killing of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War. Jordan in this poem also creatively shifts the reader's attention from the horrors of human slaughter to the need for a living room of planetary size where "the land is not bullied and beaten/into a tombstone/…/where the men/of my family between the ages of six and sixty-five/are not/marched into a roundup that leads to the grave"[17].

The solidarity expressed by Hammad in the final lines "I was born a Black woman/and now/I am become a Palestinian" reinforces the long political alliance that has historically united African-Americans and Arab-Americans, as the works of Michelle Hartman *Breaking Broken English*[18] and Alex Lubin *Geographies of Liberation*[19]

15 Jordan, June: The Bombing of Baghdad. In: poets.org. https://poets.org/poem/bombing-baghdad

16 Jordan, June: Moving toward Home. In: Heller Levi, Jan/Keller, Christoph (eds.): The Essential June Jordan, Port Townsend, WA 2021, 91–93.

17 Ibid., 93.

18 Hartman, Michelle: Breaking Broken English: Black-Arab Literary Solidarities and the Politics of Language, Syracuse 2019.

19 Lubin, Alex: Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary, Chapel Hill 2014.

show. And yet, as Carol Fadda-Conrey notes, the response of Arab-Americans to racial classification has not always been univocal. To quote Fadda-Conrey:

> "The instability and ambiguity of Arab American racial classification has historically generated a variety of responses from within Arab-American communities, with these responses revolving around two opposing political demands. The first demand veers toward complete Arab-American integration into the US mainstream and the continuance of the white classification, while the second seeks the right for Arab-Americans to be granted minority status and to self-identify as 'people of color'"[20].

Despite this historical ambiguity, today we witness a resurgence of political and cultural solidarity between the African-American and the Arab-American group, as Hartman's book *Breaking Broken English* clearly shows. Despite the long history of cultural and political interaction between the two groups, today's linguistic and aesthetic influences are different from previous ones and so are also the political alliances and coalitions, which confront new challenges. To quote Hartman:

> "Black-Arab political and cultural solidarity in the United States has become visible once again today. African-American and Arab-American activists and cultural workers have joined together with colleagues in the Arab region, especially in Palestine, to address social justice issues including liberation of the Palestinian people and the specific challenges facing Black communities in the United States, including police violence and murder"[21].

Solidarity, as I have attempted to show, has been the driving force that has guided the creative process of both Levertov and Jordan, as they were confronted with a brutal and sanguinary war carried out in their name and thus wanted to utter their dissent. In the next and final section, I will show what happens when solidarity fails, as Etel Adnan shows in the poem I am considering next.

3. Etel Adnan's "To Be in a Time of War"

Born to a Syrian Muslim father – a high-ranking official in the Turkish army at the dusk of the Ottoman Empire – and a Greek Christian mother from Smyrna, a port city that had been burnt during the Greco-Turkish war (1919–1922) as an act of retaliation, Adnan had fled in 1923 with her parents to Beirut. The life of this poly-

20 Fadda-Conrey, Carol: Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging, New York 2014, 15f.

21 Hartmann, Breaking Broken English, 1.

hedric and cosmopolitan artist is characterized by strings of solidarity that she contributed to knit since the early years of her artistic production. Her first novel *Sitt Marie Rose*[22] (1978) was based on a true story that defied the logic of "the tribe" or "the clan," since the protagonist is a Maronite Christian working in a school for deaf children in a Palestinian refugee camp and who had been kidnapped and killed by the Phalangists for her "crime," that is showing solidarity with the supposed enemy. Palestinian refugees within Lebanon are not the only group with which Adnan has politically aligned herself. Out of solidarity with the anticolonial fighters in Algeria in the 1960s, Adnan stopped writing in French as an act of dissent and started to "paint in Arabic"[23] instead; she further composed poems in English lending her voice to a Vietcong at the height of US protests against the Vietnam War. Finally, in her long poem *The Arab Apocalypse*[24] (1989), Adnan commemorated the genocide of Native Americans while also rallying against the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world and the neocolonial wars being fought there by Western powers.

The first US war against Iraq (1990–1991) marks the beginning of a profoundly painful period for the Arab-American community, mainly for the sense of powerlessness and for the general indifference that a considerable part of the US and global public opinion were showing toward Iraq and its people. The poem "To Be in a Time of War" by Etel Adnan included in the collection *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (2005) dramatically mirrors this traumatic moment in Arab-American history when solidarity clearly failed. This is how Adnan explains the genealogy of the poem:

> I did this because I was brought up in the Middle East, in Lebanon, but when the Iraq war began, I was living in America. When you are not a native to a country, in time you can pretty much come to feel integrated. But when it comes to a crisis somewhere back home, or near home, then you realize that you lead a double life. You can carry on with your everyday routines, but something is hurting you that is totally without interest for other people.[25]

The poem "To Be in a Time of War" thus reads as a frantic meditation on the suffering produced on the speaker by the indifference that the people surrounding her show towards the plight of Iraqis. The following passage, in particular, poignantly expresses the narrator's sense of frustration, impotence, and isolation:

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22 Adnan, Etel: Sitt Marie Rose. Trans. Georgina Kleege, Sausalito, CA 1982.

23 Harrison, Olivia C: Etel Adnan's Transcolonial Mediterranean. In: elhariry, yasser/Edwige Tamalet Talbayev (eds.): Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis, London 2018, 189–215, 207f.

24 Adnan, Etel: The Arab Apocalypse, San Francisco 1989.

25 Adnan, Etel: An Artisan of Beauty and Truth: Etel Adnan in Conversation With David Hornsby and Jane Clark. In: Beshara Magazine 5 (Spring 2017) 1–10, 2.

> To rise early, to hurry down to the driveway, to look for the paper, take it out from its yellow bag, to read on the front-page WAR, to notice that WAR takes half a page, to feel a shiver down the spine, to tell that that's it, to know that they dared, that they jumped the line, to read that Baghdad is being bombed, to envision a rain of fire, to hear the noise, to be heart-broken, to stare at the trees, to go up slowly while reading, to come back to the front-page, read WAR again, to look at the word as if it were a spider, to feel paralyzed, to look for help within oneself, to know helplessness, to pick up the phone, to give up, to get dressed, to look through the windows, to suffer from the day's beauty, to hate to death the authors of such crimes, to realize that it's useless to think, to pick up the purse, to go down the stairs, to see people smashed to a pulp, to say yes indeed the day is beautiful, not to know anything, to go on walking, to take notice of people's indifference towards each other.[26]

Through the disturbing repetition of verbs in the infinitive form, the poetic voice expresses not only her anguish and disorientation but also her frenetic attempt to find some sort of relief. The hypnotic repetition of verbs in the infinitive, in particular, is reminiscent of the emotional intensity of *dhikr*, the mnemonic repetition of the ninety-nine names of Allah that Muslim mystics recite to reach a state of rest and a feeling of peace. The only difference here is that readers are faced with a list of customary quotidian actions rooted in everyday life, which are predominantly secular. This poetic strategy does not only encircle the poem with an unsacred halo but also contributes to firmly root the Iraqi war in the US context. Indeed, as Fadda-Conrey argues:

> The mundane, everyday acts conveyed in these and other phrases in the section (such as preparing meals, eating, buying gas, taking out the garbage, listening to the radio, and reading the newspaper) ground the Iraq war in an immediate temporal and spatial US present. The war is not merely over there, disconnected from a US landscape, but is evoked in every act performed by the speaker, even the most mundane ones.[27]

The war, in other words, has moved creepily from the elsewhere to the here. And yet, the speaker is the only one to feel the deafening sounds of the bombs that are being dropped on the cities of Iraq, while her fellow compatriots continue to look away.

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26 Adnan, Etel: To Be in a Time of War. https://www.eteladnan.com/in_the_heart/in_the_heart_excerpt.pdf, 2.

27 Fadda-Conrey: Contemporary Arab-American Literature, 122.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown moments of solidarity, as negotiated by contemporary US women poets belonging to the Jewish-, African-, and Arab-American communities. These solidarities or the lack thereof were negotiated or denounced during two very ferocious and long wars that saw the US involved in the first place. I contend that these poets mobilize images, affects, grammars, and a syntax that not only defy the linguistic erosion produced by the war but also give readers an "imagination of peace"[28]. This is not a minor detail, as Judith Butler explains in *Frames of War*: "Antiwar poetry produces new frames, a new kind of content, and a new language together with new affects."[29] Solidarity, in particular, is the affect that these poets activate in readers, an affect that pushes readers to see the planet as being held together by interconnecting threads, one in which the precarity that marks our living together requires mutual care and responsibility but also a disposition to look at the world and at humanity from a certain perspective, a receptive one. To quote Butler again: "Our affect is never merely our own: affect is, from the start, communicated from elsewhere. It disposes us to perceive the world in a certain way, to let certain dimensions of the world in and to resist others"[30]. Solidarity in this case does not simply represent a strategy that one performs to shield oneself from the pain of others but rather an active initiative embraced with the intention of being sympathetic and of putting the suffering and killing of others to an end. In other words, a poetry that concretely makes peace and circulates solidarity appears to be the only way out of the "ruin of flesh and stone"[31] lamented by Sontag and all the poets discussed. Indeed, as Sontag makes patently clear: "War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War *ruins*"[32]. Affects such as hope, solidarity, and moderation, which are the opposite of the ones mobilized by the war propaganda, surface these poems. Since they stress solidarity over fear, hatred, and mutual distrust, all the poems included in this essay require on the part of readers a daring act of the imagination, one that is participative, moves beyond grief, and is ultimately responsive. Indeed, as Marianne Hirsch explains in "'What We Need Right Now Is to Imagine the Real'" with reference to Grace Paley's antiwar writing: "Sometimes, Paley shows us, we stop and look at each other, we listen, and sometimes we even respond. And this is the first burst of imagination, the first antiwar act"[33]. By pushing

28 Levertov: Making Peace, 40.

29 Butler, Judith: Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? London 2009, 50.

30 Ibid., 50.

31 Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 4.

32 Ibid., 7, emphasis in the original.

33 Hirsch, Marianne: 'What We Need Right Now Is to Imagine the Real': Grace Paley Writing Against War. In: PMLA 124 (2009), H.5, 1768–1777, 1776.

readers to pause and to look at each other, I suggest, these women poets perform an antiwar act that may have a lasting impact and whose vibration may reach us, as we are being faced today with the tangible threat of yet another long lasting and bloody war.

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