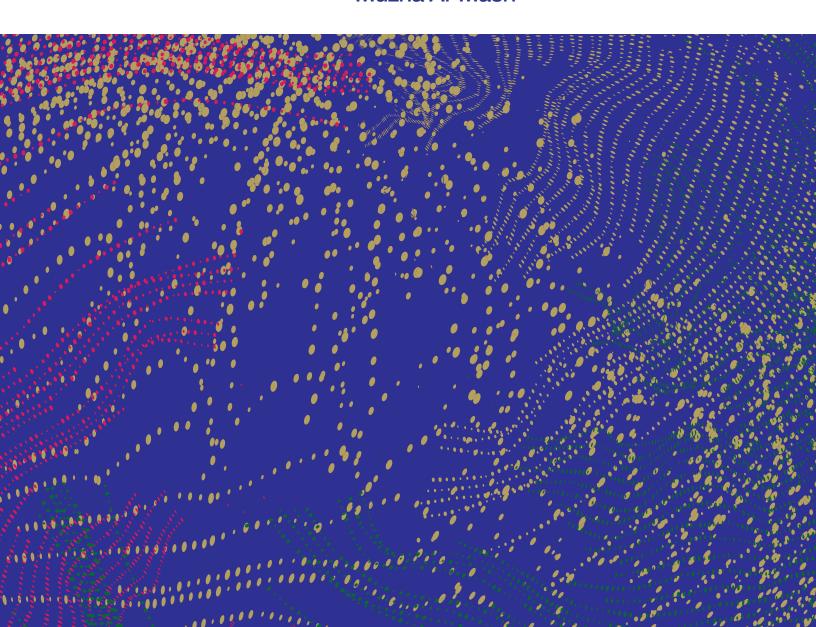The World Humanities Report

Witnessing the Emergence of Future Worlds: Ethnographic Research in Turbulent Times

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Witnessing the Emergence of Future Worlds: Ethnographic Research in Turbulent Times

Muzna Al-Masri Ebla Research Collective

This essay reflects on the possibilities for and contributions of ethnographic research in an ambiguous, fluid, and crisis-ridden moment. Going beyond a simplified understanding of engagement, it details three modes of ethnographic research and three roles for the social researcher, particularly the ethnographer: keeper of the record, bridge builder, and discerner of new worlds in the making.

Fieldwork Realities

Let me start by giving you a quick glimpse of what my "research site" in Lebanon has looked like since mid-2019. Rising political tensions among a corrupt political elite, who have maintained a stronghold on Lebanon since the 1980s, and a remarkable economic crisis led to countrywide protests and demonstrations. People who took to the streets appeared to have finally left their cherished leaders behind and embarked on building new a country. Discussions filled the squares as political groups emerged to protest a fiscal policy that allowed for wealth accumulation among the political elite but caused havoc to the local economy.

A brief moment of "revolution" in October 2019 took Lebanon by storm and carried with it promises of wine and rainbows, to use the words of poet Mahmoud Darwish. However, the security arm(s) of the regime soon showed their might,[1] and the local currency started to fall, beginning an economic crisis that impoverished many.

In this context, the COVID-19 crisis seemed like a relative blessing. Safe in

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[1] Lebanon has a sectarian-based power sharing political system that has allowed state capture by a small group of elite but maintained relative stability to the detriment of economic and social development. In 2019, the economic ramifications of decades of corruption and inept governance set the country down a spiral of local currency devaluation and sociopolitical instability made worse by regional and international interference and circumstances. Popular dissent, most prominent in October 2019, was fragile and fast contained by the ruling elite through sectarian mobilization that paralleled a securitized response to demonstrators and accusations of treachery against them.

our quarantined nooks, we could be temporarily numb to the fast-deteriorating situation and ignore impending poverty. People came out of the quarantine fatigued and fragmented. The regime maintained its power, while the opposition did not manage to build the strength to create alternatives. In the middle of a hot summer of unemployment, increasing prices, and intermittent electricity, the country received its final blast—literally. The catastrophic explosion in Beirut on August 4, 2020—a result of unfathomable corruption—killed hundreds, injured thousands, and displaced hundreds of thousands.

In the chaos and haze of these events, I was trying to do field research, in many of its forms. In the early days, I spent time in the squares as a citizen, an activist, and a wonderer with an anthropologist's gaze. I knew this was a precious moment that needed to be captured, so I kept field notes and recorded public conversations. At the same time, I worked on commissioned research on behalf of human rights and humanitarian organizations. Yet like many friends and colleagues, I was struggling to comprehend and analyze the situation. The ability to make sense of what had happened appeared more elusive by the day.

Here is an example of what this meant in practice. In January 2020, Zeina Abla, Rana Hassan, and I were commissioned by an international organization to implement a "conflict and peace analysis for Lebanon" to support the organization's programming and help it advise other actors on strategies for peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive development. I had implemented several such exercises in earlier years in other settings, most of which used interviews and focus group discussions to present a snapshot of key conflict issues and actors and to summarize larger context and interactions. For this assessment, we spoke with more than fifty activists, political party representatives, Syrian refuges, and nongovernmental organizations' representatives, among others in Beirut and its suburbs, as well as in the cities of Tripoli, Saida, and Nabatieh. We reviewed recent research and went through traditional and social media archives. Even with the volatile, busy context and all of these moving parts, our methodology was not a challenge; in fact, most interviewees were grateful for the chance to talk and reflect with us. The challenge was in comprehending and explaining what was happening in such a moment. In February 2020, we wrote:

> Despite the increasingly gloomy economic outlook and tense relationships, a positive attitude permeated most of the interviews. Even individuals who were not taking part in the demonstrations or those who were loyal to political parties opposed to the protests expressed an awareness that the system is broken, and that any change now is a step forward. While this positivity might be slightly mis-

guided in a moment of revolutionary euphoria, it needs to be capitalised on as a rare opportunity for change.[2]

By April 2020, before the report's publication, its findings seemed obsolete. The will for political change had deteriorated as the protests waned and the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the economic crisis.

In July 2020, we began a second wave of interviews and analysis to update the earlier report and capture another moment in a rapidly changing context. That positive attitude had disappeared, and interviewees seemed to have realized the resilience of the system while they continued to sink into poverty. On August 4, we were still considering how the issues we had heard about in the second set of interviews might develop in the future. Before we had finished drafting the second report, its findings again seemed obsolete. There was no value in drafting future scenarios based on data collected before the Beirut blast, which not only caused major damage but also prompted the influx of aid and international interventions that again reshaped the economic and political scene.

What Role for the Researcher?

In such a volatile and dynamic context, what role can we play as social researchers, and how can we comprehend what is happening, let alone write or theorize about it? In Lebanon, as in several countries in the region, the intensity of events and the emotions attached to them appear to devour both residents and researchers, who are often embroiled in the management of everyday life as they try to make sense of daily developments. Researchers are robbed of the opportunity to put pen to paper with distance and reflection. In the words of Kirin Narayan, "amid the scale of troubles on this slowly spinning globe, not knowing how to proceed with writing is surely trivial."[3]

To clarify the question I seek to explore, let me set aside a number of themes that often attach themselves to reflection on research in times of crisis, which are not my concern here. This essay is not about the positionality of the researcher

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[2] Muzna Al-Masri, Zeina Abla, and Rana Hassan, *Envisioning and Contesting a New Lebanon? Actors, Issues and Dynamics Following the October Protests* (London: International Alert, 2020), 6, https://www.international-alert.org/publications/envisioning-and-contesting-new-lebanon-october-protests/.

[3] Kirin Narayan, "Tools to Shape Texts: What Creative Nonfiction Can Offer Ethnography," *Anthropology and Humanism* 32, no. 2 (2007): 142, https://doi.org/10.1525/ahu.2007.32.2.130.

and their affective entanglement with a field site and its overbearing conditions,[4] heightened ethical considerations and researchers' safety,[5] or the ensuing methodological adaptations of data collection.[6] This also is not an essay about research in Lebanon, through its current crisis or the hundred years of turbulence that preceded it (at the core of how the country has been molded and remolded). It is not even about the region east of the Mediterranean.

Instead, this essay is about the promises and possibilities of social research where a state of emergency is not the exception but the rule. I reflect on the role and value of research at a moment of becoming and transformation. I am looking at social research in general and particularly ethnographic research, which involves long-term participation of researchers in the life of their field site and their ability to then distance themselves from that site to write about it. I invite reflection on the value of slow and reflective social science research during turbulent times, when the research communities we work with are looking for immediate answers and suggestions for a way forward. This is a question not just of temporality but of ethnography's purpose. What form of engagement could it take in such a context?

Nancy Scheper-Hughes argued that anthropologists have a "responsibility to be public intellectuals" who "take sides" and "make judgments."[7] This form of engagement is a privilege in contexts where the anthropologist is de facto engaged by the fact that their life and future are enmeshed in the realities of their field. More important, in constantly changing social and political situations, the answers to our questions elude us.

In a meeting of scholars in the early days of the Lebanon protests, a younger demonstrator called on those present to "guide the way." She wanted answers from academics to help revolutionary groups discern a path, and she assumed

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[4] Helena Nassif, "To Fear and to Defy: Emotions in the Field," *Contemporary Levant* 2, no. 1 (2017): 49–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2017.1322227; Elena Chiti and Mona Abaza, "The Criminal, the Victim, the Policeman, the Judge," openDemocracy, June 28, 2017, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/criminal-victim-policeman-judge/; Samar Kanafani and Zina Sawaf, "Being, Doing and Knowing in the Field: Reflections on Ethnographic Practice in the Arab Region," *Contemporary Levant* 2, no. 1 (2017): 3–11.

[5] Nada T. and Mona Abaza, "Multiple Entanglements," openDemocracy, April 27, 2017, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/multiple-entanglements/.

[6] Muzna Al-Masri, "Sensory Reverberations: Rethinking the Temporal and Experiential Boundaries of War Ethnography," *Contemporary Levant* 2, no. 1 (2017): 37–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2017.1322206; Leila Zaki Chakravarti and Mona Abaza, "Ethnography in a Time of Upheaval—Egypt before and after the 'Arab Spring,'" openDemocracy, March 18, 2017, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/ethnography-in-time-of-upheaval-egypt-before-and-af/.

[7] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 3 (1995): 409–40.

that those scholars already had the answers. Several answered calls like hers, possibly inspired by similar experiences in Egypt.[8] For some, like those who had lectured in tents around the public squares in Beirut, this was a continuation of their political activism and collective organization as faculty. For others, it was a momentary and exceptional opportunity to teach about Lebanon and its politics.[9]

Figure 1. Public lecture by Jamil Moawad, political scientist at American University in Beirut, in Mansion on November 28, 2019, "A Regime Producing Crises. A Society Producing Revolution?" Photograph by author.

Nevertheless, providing answers was not always easy. The difficulty was in knowing—as political beings balancing our political position against academic rigor—what path to suggest. In this obscure moment, with its many challenges,

[8] For example, see Malak Roushdi and Reem Saad, "Beyond the University Gates: The Story of the Free Social Science Knowledge Circle," in *Mélanges offerts à Madiha Doss: La linguistique comme engagement*, ed. Aziza Boucherit, Héba Machhour, Malak Roushdi, and Madiha Doss, 245–52 (Le Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2018).

[9] For example, see Jamil Mouawad, "Teaching Lebanon's Politics in Times of the Uprising," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, January 2021, 473–80, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916232.

I believe that the academic's role as a researcher and a learner needs to take precedence over the role as teacher.

The Ethnographer as Keeper of the Record

At the start of the protests in Lebanon in October 2020, public political discussions were happening every day, filling the squares with enthusiasts both young and old. While some political groups organized discussions to promote their views and political agendas, newly emerging political groups opened up the space to listen and consult with a large body of demonstrators, hoping the discussions would become a space for wider political debate in which the public could voice concerns and the group could make decisions on how to move ahead. It was a brief moment of possibility, for many a discovery that they were not alone in their frustration with the system and their vision for a different Lebanon. Speakers criticized the pillars that allowed the regime to sustain itself, including sectarianism, the control of the banking sector in a service-based economy, and widespread corruption.

At first, in the excitement of the moment, I situated myself in these revolutionary squares as an ethnographer. I took notes on the public discussions, usually attending a regular daily meeting that Beirut Madinati and Lihaqqi (two political groups that had emerged a few years earlier) alternated in organizing. I tried to write down key opinions and questions, observe who the facilitators were, and record how many interventions were made by men and how many by women. I made notes on my conversations with the people I encountered in the square. I recorded many of the key discussions, hoping that I could revisit what had been said and that, in the emergent moment, I was witnessing the shaping of a new vision of Lebanon.

Witnessing at such a time is no task for an individual researcher. It needs institutional infrastructure to sustain recordkeeping until researchers have reflective distance and analytical space away from the demands of everyday living in regions and periods of crisis.

After a few weeks, during which people voiced frustrations and anger in the protests and on social media, the squares started hosting more discussions that were specialized. For example, there were sessions on the pollution of the Litany River, reform of the

electricity sector, and the rights of people with special needs and the history of the disability movement.

Soon, though, the meeting spaces were attacked by counterrevolutionary groups, and as the weather became colder and the chances of political break-through seemed slim, the crowds faded. Those who were angry had their moment of glory, and the longtime activists spoke, but the vision of a trans-formed nation was not realized.

Figure 2. Public discussion in the Azarieh Square in downtown Beirut on November 10, 2019. Photograph by author.

Scheper-Hughes argues for the role of anthropologist as a witness and she "positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being."[10] Yet as a "clerk of the records" (as Scheper-Hughes suggests anthropologists should be, following John Berger), I could do little but "record." The fervor of a fast-changing sociopolitical context and my inability to get any distance from the situation made me hesitant to draw conclusions. I was too critical of simplistic political discourse in answer to the complex challenges to be able to take a clear political stance, and most people in the square

[10] Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical," 419.

had neither the time nor the interest to take part in an analytical discussion of social scientists who still wanted to raise questions rather than offer answers.

This is not to say that there was no role for engaged social scientists as public intellectuals. Many gave public lectures, wrote op-ed pieces, and even organized and led protests. Several think tanks and development actors assessed the context and recommended action.

My question is about the possibility of research, particularly ethnography, that takes its time and anchors the moment in a longer history. Researchers' attempts at fieldwork, at recording analytically and critically, remained mostly individual and fragmented and waned in the absence of institutional vision and support. Even the recordings of the talks and discussions disappeared in the timeline of the social media where they were posted. Witnessing at such a time is no task for an individual researcher. It needs institutional infrastructure to sustain recordkeeping until researchers have reflective distance and analytical space away from the demands of, and psychological toll on, everyday living in regions and periods of crisis.

Many months later, I still have a half-full hard drive that is still an incomplete record of such a precious time. This record is an important resource for future research, but I am left to wonder what use "the record" is when there are few institutional and national archives and the city, country, and region do not want to remember all these bitter moments.

The Ethnographer as Bridge Builder

After a few weeks of fieldwork, I realized that it was important to capture the conversation of skeptics, those choosing not to join the demonstrations, who stood at the margin of the squares, outside of the media's gaze. Despite the thousands waving flags and demonstrating in the streets of Beirut, many opposed the demonstrations, because of or in spite of their political affiliations. The conviction of some in the square was strong, but the schism between them and some of those who shared their grievances but could not find their voice in the protests was widening. In commissioned research for an international organization, we sought interviewees who reflected the spectrum of positions toward the political crisis in Lebanon. We noted that many of our interviewees operated in closed bubbles of like-minded people that functioned like echo chambers for their own opinions. There were very few exchanges between those in the square beyond those repackaged through a biased media lens.

Since the start of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011, a plethora of quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted or commissioned on the reverberations of the Syrian conflict in Lebanon, including monitoring Lebanese perceptions of Syrian refugees[11] and investigating the relationships between refugees and Lebanese host communities, as well as qualitative conflict analysis. This research sought to inform humanitarian actors, sensitize them to the possible implications of their intervention on community relations, and support peacebuilding efforts.[12] Research under this rubric sought to explain the terrain to humanitarian and civil society actors. We took our research a step further and attempted to present our conclusions to the research participants, from whom we heard widely varied perspectives.

In an online call, around fifteen participants gathered to hear what we learned from fieldwork and what we gathered from the words they had provided. This was not a research validation meeting—a common practice of nongovernmental organizations that seeks to test the validity of research findings with a few community members before a piece of writing is finalized, which we had already conducted for that report. The objective of the call was to allow research participants to hear what participants with different political viewpoints had to say. We hoped to strengthen participants' understanding of each other across lines of division by exposing them to research that is inclusive of their perspective and that of others. It was an invitation for participants to reflect on their positions after hearing from those on the other side.

The conversation remained polite, partially because of the limits of the online platform. Participants who assumed that others shared their position were occasionally faced with counter-opinions that used our findings to validate the need for reconsideration. This was far from the kind of dialogue session that peacebuilding organizations typically host. Rather, it acted as a space for participants to reflect on where they stand in a broader range of opinions. Little came out of this conversation, however, especially since it was a one-time event. The revolutionary voices were dominant, and at a time of such political agitation, few had the composure to listen to opposing opinions.

Nevertheless, the whole episode was a reminder for us as researchers to accept anthropology's invitation to study beyond the familiar. In an exciting political moment like the one we lived through, how can we ensure that our political

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[11] ARK Group (on behalf of the United Nations Development Programme), *Regular Perceptions Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon*, Wave VI, August 2019, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/71599.

[12] Some of this research (most of which is in English) is available at https://data2.unhcr.org/.

engagement does not lead to an omission of voices outside the binary of power and resistance? Ethnography's comfort with—if not embrace of—complexity allows for a more nuanced depiction of polarization and a possible path for broader societal reflection in times of crisis.

The Ethnographer of New Imaginaries

The succession of mostly unfortunate events since the financial collapse in 2019 and the explosion in 2020 casts a morbid shadow on most of the work I do and the field notes I keep. Many recent conversations have been less about pulling through difficult times or acting in solidarity with those who are struggling and more about the anguish of having lived through multiple waves of shock—literally and figuratively. Since 2020, conversations have centered on concerns of the moment: the corrupt political class, the depreciation of the Lebanese currency, the economic difficulties caused by the COVID-19 crisis, the frequent power outages, and the Beirut blast and its effects. Months after the blast, neighbors and friends were still recounting stories of the moment when "it started raining glass" and showing pictures of their bruised and injured bodies and destroyed homes. Lebanon today could offer another story about suffering, with which anthropology has concerned itself all too often: the story of a suspended revolution against an exploitative neoliberal regime. However, I am driven to search for a different kind of story.

> Anthropology's gift is allowing us to consider the "possibility of being other than what we are" and opening up new imaginaries of the future that could lie ahead.

In a keynote speech for the 2013 conference of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, Ghassan Hage differentiated between the critical sociological tradition and critical anthropological tradition. The first seeks to uncover relations of power and processes of domination, whereas the second considers alternative realities and spaces that lie outside of domination and resistance to it.[13] In a way, anthropology's gift is allowing us to consider the

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[13] Ghassan Hage, "Towards a Critical Arab Social Science," *Critical Legal Thinking* (blog), April 8, 2013, https://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/04/08/towards-a-critical-arab-social-science/.

"possibility of being other than what we are" and opening up new imaginaries of the future that could lie ahead.[14]

In the density of experiences of recent years in Lebanon, relations of domination are hard to miss. Directing our gaze to such realities, and even toward the resistance to domination, entraps our imagination in these binaries. The crisis in Lebanon (and elsewhere) is one of political imagination, a kind of hegemony over people's imaginations that leads to an inability to anticipate an alternative future.

A different engagement with the world, our fields of research, and the people we learn from can allow us to discern "alter" possibilities.[15] In a lecture given in Beirut in October 2019, Hage invited us as anthropologists to "discern in what exists the possibility of the future," to note as ethnographers "what is emerging in the cracks of existing reality." In practice, this means reframing our research questions and how we approach the field. One example of such an approach is in research on social and economic solidarity among refugee communities in Lebanon conducted under the KnowWar project.[16] Another example emerges as a group of Lebanon-based researchers write weekly ethnographic diaries in an attempt to capture some of the intensity and transformations of an exceptional period in the country.[17] At a time of acute political crisis and economic collapse, these diaries give glimpses of hope and the myriad means of survival, be they friendship, poetry, or a newfound appreciation of nature and agriculture.

Honing a practice of ethnography that is speculative and attentive to an emergent moment, accepting of uncertainty, and open to possibility allows for paving alternative paths. It is what Anand Pandian describes as a "creative anthropology, one that shares in the transformative powers of experience and the genesis of the worlds."[18] With this task at hand, we can turn to the questions of method.

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[14] Ghassan Hage, "Critical Anthropological Thought and the Radical Political Imaginary Today," *Critique of Anthropology* 32, no. 3 (2012), 290, https://doiorg/10.1177/030825X 12449105.

[15] Ghassan Hage, *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2015).

[16] "Knowledge Production in Times of Flight and War: Developing Common Grounds for Research in/on Syria," KnowWar, August 5, 2019, https://www.scpr-syria.org/know-war/.

[17] Muzna Al-Masri and Michelle Obeid, "Ethnographic Diaries," *Rusted Radishes*, November 22, 2021, http://www.rustedradishes.com/ethnographic-diaries/.

[18] Anand Pandian, *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 14.

The Ethnographers(s), in the Plural

Ethnography in the ambiguity and urgency of the present moment becomes an unprecedented opportunity of learning and becoming, of opening new horizons and witnessing the shaping of future worlds. The weight of this promise and our responsibility is not to be carried by individual researchers operating in competitive and fragmented milieus. Yet as the university struggles under the weight of oppressive regimes, neoliberal economies, and colonial epistemologies, the spaces of knowledge production seem too narrow.

Together, as community of researchers, our project of discerning new imaginaries is a dual one, first vis-à-vis our field sites and research participants, and second in relation to the research communities we want to nurture and the institutions we uphold.

Muzna Al–Masri is an anthropologist, researcher, and consultant. Her research interests include everyday political practice and clientelism and the intersection of conflict and politics with humanitarian aid and energy. She earned an MA in conflict transformation and peacebuilding from the Eastern Mennonite University and a PhD in anthropology from Goldsmiths, University of London. She has held postdoctoral fellowships from the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (2016–17) and the Orient-Institut Beirut (2018) and is currently a Ford Foundation Global Fellow (2020–23). Al-Masri is a cofounding member of the Ethnography and Knowledge in the Arab World Working Group.