

# Objects of transgenerational memory: challenging hegemonic historical narratives of war in Lebanon

*Lynn Hodeib*

*Abstract:* This article examines how objects embedded in the domestic life of the generation of the Lebanese civil war and the subsequent generations evoke stories that disrupt the state's hegemonic production of history. The article explores stories surrounding two objects that survived the war, and took on residues of memory later heard and retold by the subsequent generation. These objects illuminate ways in which the legacy of intergenerational memory is produced and transmitted—and how these alternative spaces and stories emerge in present struggles, including the October 2019 revolution. In the first section, the article examines how material objects operate as intergenerational symbols of the experiences of war and as media for the process of narrativisation. In the second section, the argument explores the role of the material as a witness to what resists language and as a locus to memory's temporality. In the third section, the article looks into the affective dimension of the material object as it provokes an opening to narration and challenges linear understandings of history. This search through material and domestic objects seeks stories that resist closure, and is essential to understanding today's struggle against the Lebanese political class.

*Keywords:* Narrative, affect, memory, objects, temporality, transgenerational, Lebanon.

*Note on the author:* Lynn is a PhD candidate in Theatre and Performance Studies at the City University of New York, a creative arts therapist, and a performer based in New York and was born and raised in Beirut. Lynn has acted in, sound designed and managed multiple theatre productions between Beirut and New York. She is a playback theatre performer in Big Apple Playback Company in New York and Wasl, Laban theatre organisation in Lebanon. As a researcher, she explores transgenerational memory from the Lebanese civil war in spaces of theatre, protest, and objects. In 2019, she staged *Malja'86* (Shelter'96), a theatre piece based on interviews and stories of objects inherited by the subsequent generation of war. She holds a BA in Psychology with a Minor in Theatre from the American University of Beirut, and a Masters in Drama Therapy from NYU.

## The bowl

*This bowl is called tasset al rahbeh and originally it belongs to my grandmother. My mother taught me how to fill it with water, make a prayer, and then drink from it. I remember drinking out of the bowl as shelling happened outside. When I think of the bowl, I see an image of soldiers creeping on me behind my back, trying to break into our house. Growing up, this image kept recurring and I always thought it was an actual event I experienced when I was a kid. ... My mother was always reluctant to share what happened during the war. ... But I recently asked her about the bowl and I found out that I did not live at the time of the incident and that the image of Israeli soldiers invading the house was my mother's experience and not mine, yet I believed it lived in both of our memories.*

Sarah (personal communication, 2019)

*Tasset al rahbeh* (bowl of horror) is the Arabic name for a small metal bowl in which Quranic texts are inscribed in a circular form. As the name suggests, the bowl is known historically in the Levant for its use in popular Arab medicine to cure fear and panic. Through the bowl, Sarah—a member of the second generation of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90)—describes a memory associated with the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, before she was born. She recounts her mother's experience of seeing soldiers approaching her house, an event that took place soon after the Sabra and Shatila massacre carried out by the right-wing Christian Lebanese militia in alliance with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in September 1982.<sup>1</sup> The bowl is one of many objects that witnessed the Lebanese civil war and were passed down to the subsequent generations.

## The tray

Growing up, my parents never spoke of the war. If they did, they would only mention events and clashes between political parties in passing flashes, or express their longing for pre-war times. I learned that a weighted silence—a common reaction to traumatic experiences—was their only response to more personal questions about their lived experiences. However, after the start of the 17 October 2019 uprising and during the coronavirus lockdown in spring 2020, the silence broke.

<sup>1</sup>During the massacre in the Sabra neighborhood and adjacent Shatila Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, between 460 and 3,500 civilians were killed. Responsibility for the massacre rests with the right-wing party and militia known as the Phalange (Kataeb Movement).

My mother told me that she decided to go and check on the house in Burj Hammoud that our family had evacuated during the war. She said she had never visited since they were displaced in 1976. I asked her about the visit and wondered what made her think about going during a pandemic. She described the building, then told me about the room where she was almost shot. She mentioned a tray that I have seen at my grandmother's house since I was a child. She told me how a bullet went straight into the tray above her head. She described how a sniper had probably been following her shadow, how she took the tray and went back downstairs, how she stared at the hole all night long. The story haunted me for days. I dreamt of the house and the sniper that night and kept thinking about the tray. I had pushed for stories about my family before, but this was the first time my mother chose to share a memory herself.

When the Taif agreement was signed and ratified in 1990,<sup>2</sup> the notion of '*La ghalib, la maghlub*' (no victor, no vanquished) became a foundation to the pact between Lebanon's sectarian political parties, which are still in power today. This marked the onset of Lebanon's neoliberal regime. With the amnesty law of 1991,<sup>3</sup> the ruling class attempted to enforce a state-sponsored amnesia for their atrocities and massacres, including the fate of 17,000 forcibly missing and disappeared people.<sup>4</sup> Compounding the censorial measures imposed over the events of the past, the silence surrounding the memory of war speaks to Lebanon's political and social order, which shapes the discourse of public and private memory. The dominant ideological discourses aim to obscure the public's collective memory of war, and yet objects such as Sarah's *tasset al rabeh* and my family's tray survive and disrupt this script.

Between 2019 and 2020, I conducted a series of interviews with the second generation of the civil war in Lebanon about objects inherited from the past generation. My search was not only for the stories of these objects, but also for the narratives left silent since the end of the war. In the story of the bowl, Sarah and I found a fragment of a buried and censored collective memory. In my mother's retelling of the story of the tray, I discovered the familial and personal space through which I began to investigate transgenerational memory. While writing from a personal and auto-ethnographic space holds challenges, it allowed me to start asking questions of my

<sup>2</sup>According to Hassan Krayem, the Taif agreement was arrived at as a way to provide 'the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon' (1997: 411–12).

<sup>3</sup>General Amnesty on 26 August 1991. The Lebanese National Assembly approved a law granting amnesty for war crimes, governing crimes committed during the Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990 (O'Ballance 1998: 213).

<sup>4</sup>In Lebanon, the fate of the estimated 17,000 persons who were forcibly missing and disappeared between the years 1975 and 1990 is unknown until this day (Beyhum 2020: 3–15). For more, check the work of *Act for the Disappeared* (<https://www.actforthedisappeared.com/>).

own family's history, and motivated me to ask others about their stories. My own experience of transgenerational memory pushed me to investigate how the remnants of the past—such as the material object—are channels through which we, as a subsequent generation of war, can access our position within narrative and history. I am interested in how we partake in constructing narrative, shaping memory, and finding alternative processes of historiography—especially within the current struggles against the Lebanese ruling class.

This article is concerned with the marginal and residual forms of memory residing in the materialities carried across generations. The argument examines how objects embedded in the domestic life of the generation of war and subsequent generations function as placeholders for narratives that disrupt the hegemonic and the linear within the production of history. This analysis explores stories surrounding these two specific objects that illuminate the ways in which subjects remember, narrate, and deal with the legacy of trauma and memory across generations—and how these alternative spaces of memory inform our ongoing and present struggles.

### The object as symbol

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud introduces the notion of multigenerational transmission of trauma by addressing the relation between trauma and its enduring impact on the individual character.<sup>5</sup> The individual becomes the vehicle through which traumatic happenings are carried over and established in the ongoing future or history of families, people, or nations. Similarly, when examining the impact of the Holocaust on the generation who survived it, Nadine Fresco writes about the 'deathly silence' of the survivor/parent and of the transmitted 'wounds of memory', linked to the parents' silence, which profoundly alter the children's experience of time.<sup>6</sup> Schwab described this transmission as a 'transgenerational haunting', which is often mediated through private individual and familial histories.<sup>7</sup> These haunting legacies of trauma tend to reside in family secrets and in other forms of silencing. Marianne Hirsch points out that the 'post-memories'<sup>8</sup> of a generation once removed from the event become 'as full and as empty as memory itself'.<sup>9</sup> In the context of the Lebanese civil

<sup>5</sup> Freud (2016: 23; first published in 1939)

<sup>6</sup> Fresco (1984: 416)

<sup>7</sup> Schwab (2010: 13-14)

<sup>8</sup> Post-memory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch 2008: 102-4).

<sup>9</sup> Hirsch (1997: 9).

war, the ‘deathly silence’ points to the ways in which the so-called ‘war generation’ is prevented from accessing their subjective, affective, and embodied memories. It also speaks to what Weissman describes as a ‘psychic split’ experienced by the subsequent generations who are born into the post-war silence.<sup>10</sup> I argue that this psychic split is not only a result of the inheriting of traumatic memory, but is also an outcome of living in the same spatial sites of their parents’ trauma, under a continued state of war in its symbolic, economic, social, and political structures.

The story of the bowl does not represent a memory of a time past. Rather, what it embodies cuts through the present moment and across generations, to simultaneously inhabit the past, present, and future. Examining this physical object as a locus for the performance of post-war memory allows one to pose the following question: How does the object facilitate the symbolisation of experiences of war? How can the material hold what is inaccessible in—or at least resistant to—language? How does the material take on the residue of unresolved and often unspoken traumatic events? In the case of the *tasset al rabeḥ*, the bowl takes on the subject’s interwoven memory, shared by Sarah and her mother, embodying two generations simultaneously. This dual memory is symbolised by the multiple associations Sarah has in her regular interactions with the bowl. The object evokes both an intergenerational ritual and a recurrent image of soldiers breaking into the house. Sarah associates this with the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut, an event now engraved in Lebanon’s historical memory.

Sarah did not live through her mother’s experience of the invasion, but she carries its residues, which can be described as a post-memory through which the children of survivors attempt to fill the gaps of what is unsaid, and rely on imagination containing the reverberations of ‘the transmitted wound’.<sup>11</sup> The case of the *tasset el rahbeh* indicates how the object in itself becomes ahistorical. It does not have a position in history, until it is spoken of in relation to the transgenerational ritual or the event itself, thereby mediating the entry into narrative. The bowl’s role as symbol<sup>12</sup> is also manifested through the cross-generational ritual of drinking from the sacred water. This ‘totemic ritual’<sup>13</sup> perhaps depicts what cannot be expressed in words in response to threat. I suggest that in the absence of the word, ritual comes in as an embodied narrative rather than a spoken one. The object, in its role of symbol, can be considered the presence of such absence.

<sup>10</sup> Weissman (2004: 21–4).

<sup>11</sup> Fresco (1984: 43–6).

<sup>12</sup> I use symbol to point to the object’s role in the realm of the Symbolic order. Lacan notes that the word is ‘a presence made of absence because the symbol is used in the absence of the thing’ Evans (2006: 1–6).

<sup>13</sup> Totemic ritual as an archival technique: as a means to record, understand, and remember (and forget) the great event of human prehistory ‘totemism helped to smooth things over and to make it possible to forget the event to which it owed its origin’ (Freud 1978: 144, first published 1913).

In Sarah's experience, there also seems to be an element of what Jacques Lacan describes as the 'Imaginary',<sup>14</sup> which pertains to a pre-linguistic and perceived or imagined visual that operates on the basis of identification.<sup>15</sup> It also speaks to what Walter Benjamin describes as the imaginative character of memory in his principle of construction.<sup>16</sup> Within the constructive part of remembrance, memory is worked upon through a collage of historical images that elicit a shock-like encounter with the past, sometimes defamiliarising the present. This gap between the image and the word highlights the function of the object in the Symbolic,<sup>17</sup> and in the production of narrative. However, even when the object mediates the entry into the Symbolic register, the compact void of the unspeakable—what cannot enter language—points towards what remains as excess or a residue. This residual, I argue, is held by the object and pertains to the Lacanian order of the Real, which I will discuss in later sections.

The case of the tray is also an example of how the encounter with the past surfaces in moments when the social and political structures of the present are being shaken. This is represented by my mother's return to the house she fled during the civil war, at a time when the country had just witnessed a new uprising, followed by the lockdown triggered by the rise in Covid 19 infections. The October 2019 uprising brought together decentralised movements protesting the oppressive social and economic practices of the ruling class. The uprising stirred collective memory in spaces of protest and evoked marginal narratives from the civil war, as the bodies of protesters reclaimed public spaces that the ruling class had blocked off from public access since the end of the war, such as Beirut's dome and the National Theatre. My mother's sudden urge to revisit her old neighbourhood, and her remembering and telling of the story of the tray, was perhaps triggered by this affectively charged time, followed by the stagnation and isolation of the pandemic. As Pierre Nora writes, 'memory is absolute' and 'takes root in the concrete, in spaces and ... objects'. The tray in my mother's story is perhaps what Nora also conceptualises as a 'lieux de memoire', and as both 'a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name' and a site that is open 'to the full range of its possible significations'.<sup>18</sup> As the tray provides a cross-generational entry to the Symbolic, it carries the memory of the event itself, but it also becomes a site of significations that brings me, a member of the second

<sup>14</sup> 'Lacan regarded the "imago" as the proper study of psychology and identification as the fundamental psychical process. The imaginary was then the ... dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined' ('Translator's note', in Lacan 1994: 279).

<sup>15</sup> Lacan (1991: 210).

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin & Jennings (1996: 587).

<sup>17</sup> 'The Symbolic Order pertains to the Realm of language, narrative and representation. It is the social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions and the acceptance of the law (big Other)' (Lacan & Fink 2006: 67).

<sup>18</sup> Nora (1989: 7).

generation, closer to the alienated past. The memory of the tray surfaced at a time where the subsequent generation was publicly evoking the social, economic, and political trauma and legacies of the past, in relation to the uprising and current struggles. The tray can be considered a site of memory that unfolds ‘an invisible thread linking unconnected objects’,<sup>19</sup> highlighting the key role of collective memory in mobilising the affective and psychic of our current movements.

For some contemporary frameworks of trauma studies, transgenerational memory is examined only through the individual psychological mechanisms affected by historical trauma. Some areas of the field also developed important psychological frameworks that foreground the symptomatology and embodied manifestations of such experiences.<sup>20</sup> However, this article argues that the psychologisation of collective trauma, as effective as it may be with regard to presenting descriptive frameworks, risks reducing the experiences of the subject to a master-narrative of suffering. This approach to understanding trauma merely assesses the effects of events past and sometimes risks reinforcing a subjectivity of victimhood in the process of narrativisation. As Fassin and Rechtman describe it, the modern framework of trauma produces a specific discourse of memory, time, and mourning, where there is an unprecedented ability to talk or experience oppression and violence.<sup>21</sup> I suggest that the master-narrative of suffering present in some descriptive and apolitical frameworks of trauma moves the subject further away from their position and agency in narrative. In the case of the subsequent generation, the position of victim also limits the grounds of signification of transgenerational stories, especially when subjects are still living under the systemic and structural violence that inflicts these external traumatic events.

In the specific case of Lebanon, where I argue that the discourse of memory is subject to systemic repression, such approaches to memory further suppress the channels that allow stories to be told transgenerationally and influence how we understand and participate in current struggles in relation to past events. Such frameworks position the ‘past’ and its narratives in an illusory historical and chronological linearity, further distancing the events of the civil war from the political and social structures of the ongoing oppressive regime. Within the structure of sectarianism, narratives of war are often reduced to a discourse of victimhood, especially through certain frameworks introduced by international non-profit organisations (INGOs). The approach of many ‘peacemaking’ INGOs in dealing with the past reinforces the identitarian discourse of sectarianism, and falsely frames conflict as a result of failed coexistence. Civil society interventions, such as fostering ‘civil, non-violent dialogue’,

<sup>19</sup> Nora (1989: 23).

<sup>20</sup> For reference see the work of Herman (2015) and van der Kolk (1996).

<sup>21</sup> Fassin & Rechtman (2009, 30–1).



reinforce the active depoliticisation of subjects and their narratives. The existing literature on the role of INGOs highlights the damaging reproduction of narratives of victimhood, and the influence of international funding on the ideological framing of memory discourse.<sup>22</sup> While there has not been significant academic work on the NGOisation of the memory of the civil war in Lebanon, there are strong parallels with broader analyses of NGOisation. For instance, NGOised interventions in the form of ‘conflict resolution’ programming in the aftermath of clashes between the communities of Bab al Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen in Lebanon’s northern city of Tripoli<sup>23</sup> provide a clear example of the neoliberal NGOisation of narratives of war. I argue that the ideological frameworks through which mainstream NGOs operate position violence at the heart of intergroup identitarian differences. This approach obfuscates an understanding of the conflict as the product of systematic manipulation of Tripoli by the Lebanese ruling class, which has incited sectarian clashes for political and economic gain. This ‘economy of victimhood’<sup>24</sup> solidifies the ground of ideological identity-based narratives, and reinforces state-centric discourses that ultimately preserve the status quo. These discourses portray sectarian identities as entities within themselves, when the sectarian system is in fact the structural building block that guarantees the reproduction and continuity of its laissez-faire capitalist regime. As Mahdi Amel described, the construction of sectarianism in Lebanon camouflages other social cleavages, such as class, and masks the actual structure of political control.<sup>25</sup>

Objects and materialities provide an alternative space of engaging with memory, pushing against the ideological sectarian discourse on memory and history. In an attempt to find the affective, embodied, and subjective through materialities, this article looks for the remnants of events experienced by the generation of war and how they impact and influence subsequent generations in their battle against the ongoing crimes of the ruling class. Exploring this alternative space is an attempt to free narratives from predetermined frameworks, therefore looking anew at how Lebanon today wrestles with the silence, and deals with war and post-war experiences. Through the material, I look for the space through which we can mourn what we have lost and uncover what defines our present struggles.

<sup>22</sup> For more on NGO frameworks of victimhood: see Abu-Assab *et al.* (2020); Kosmatopoulos (2012); Jad (2003).

<sup>23</sup> Armed conflict between Sunni Muslim residents of the Bab-al-Tabbaneh and Alawite Muslim residents of Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli (1976–2015).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Economy of victimhood that is ultimately dependent on funding provided by states in the Global North’ (Abu Assab *et al.* 2020: 482).

<sup>25</sup> See Saouli (1991: 86–9).



The discourse of memory in Lebanon is not only impacted by censorial measures imposed by the state.<sup>26</sup> While forgetting is an organic and necessary process of remembering and dealing with traumatic memory, literature on post-war memory commonly assumes that collective amnesia constitutes the phenomena affecting collective and social memory in Lebanon.<sup>27</sup> This article argues instead that Lebanon is not amnesiac towards its past, but that the war is actually ongoing, omnipresent, inscribed in the Symbolic order and coded into the social, political, and economic structures of Lebanon. The erasure of narrative and memory is enforced by a state of repression also inscribed into various spatial and temporal realms of what is called the ‘post-war era’. The Symbolic order signifies the continuation of war through the establishment of a clientelist system, designed by and serving the interests of the ruling class. It signifies the war through neoliberal policies that shape the spatial memory of Lebanon, its structural violence and militarisation, and the social relations determined by the ideological structures of the sectarian system. Spatially, this state of repression is manifested through the construction of Solidere, a \$2-billion firm managing the reconstruction of Beirut’s central business district after the civil war. As Makdisi puts it, the construction of Solidere was a violent process of ‘purification of all historical associations’, where buildings were rendered ‘to pure space, pure commodity, and pure real estate’.<sup>28</sup> It is also manifested in the continuous covering up of mass graves and the erasure of neighbourhoods, such as Beirut’s Ghalghoul, which was reduced to a series of parking lots after the war.<sup>29</sup> As for the discourse of war, the ruling class only invokes war memories to contest or defend the post-war confessional balance of power, or to advance intra-sectarian political privileges. This evocation of ideological discourses indicates how the regime recreates itself at the level of the Symbolic order, and also points to how it recreates the ideology of ‘the sectarian other’.

The state of repression through which the regime reasserts its ideological premises points to the practices of narrative erasure. Repression here pertains to the symbolic over-coding<sup>30</sup> at the level of the social and political, thereby shaping desire and subjectivity. Psychoanalysis considers that the subject comes into being in the process of subjecting itself to the symbolic codes within which it finds itself placed.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup>I use the term ‘state’ to refer to the Lebanese ruling class, authorities, government institutions, and security forces.

<sup>27</sup>For more on collective amnesia: see Launchbury *et al.* (2014); Nagle (2017); Haugbolle (2010).

<sup>28</sup>Makdisi (1997: 661–7).

<sup>29</sup>See Battah (2017).

<sup>30</sup>‘Metaphor (Law) and metonymy (code)—which produce competing notions of the subject—an enfranchised, conscious, linguistic subject and a disenfranchised, coded, object’ (Matviiyenko & Roof 2018: 48).

<sup>31</sup>Bucci (1995: 15–19).

Repression, as Lacan describes echoing Freud, is not some undefined mass exerting weight against a door we refuse to open, but it is inseparable from the phenomena of ‘the return of the repressed’.<sup>32</sup> Repression pertains to something that continues to function, and continues to speak in the place where it was repressed.<sup>33</sup>

When it comes to the cross-generational memory of war, the repression that the subsequent generation of war experiences is also tied to an alienated memory and history, especially when this memory is not lived but inherited. Alienation here pertains to the erasure of the subsequent generations’ position in relation to the struggles of the past and the ways in which these movements erupt in their social and political realities today. The story of the bowl is an example of such an eruption, where Sarah re-encounters the material object through the realisation that the memory is not actually her own. It is at such instances that the material remnant ruptures the coded symbolisations and leads us to ask: How does the encounter with the material object disturb the Symbolic order, allowing the subject to access their personal, affective, and embodied memory?

### **Object as witness**

The stories of the tray and the bowl illustrate how narrative is evoked in the presence of the subsequent generation of war and point to the ways the construction and narration of stories occur in the cross-generational space. The object also introduces another role that the material carries, which is that of witness. I argue that the role of witness points first to the temporal function of the object cutting through past, present, and future and unfolding the nonlinear nature of time and history. Second, it underlines the ways in which the material object holds the remnants of the unsymbolisable, and thus is simultaneously present in the Symbolic order and outside of it.

First of all, by looking into the intergenerational space of narrative, I seek to explore how narrative is continuously constructed and transformed between the generation of war’s telling and the subsequent generation’s listening, and retelling. I argue that what constitutes the transgenerational space is not only the crossing of memory between the past generation of war and the present or subsequent generation, but also the ways in which narrative surfaces and transforms within this space. By stepping away from the traditions of materialist historiography and by positioning the object

<sup>32</sup> ‘Repression itself ... reproduces substitutive formations and symptoms ... indications of a return of the repressed’ (Freud 1957, first published 1915).

<sup>33</sup> Lacan (2019).

as a locus to access collective memory, I seek to understand the ways in which the subject not only enters history through the remnant and the marginal, but also produces history through their own narrativisation.

As Benjamin describes, remembrance is simultaneously a creative ‘constructive’ and ‘destructive’ process.<sup>34</sup> Benjamin recognises that memory constructs the past in the same movement as it destroys its linear form. The concept of construction is that of a collage, or a juxtaposition of past and present ‘in the cause of defamiliarising or estranging that present from itself’.<sup>35</sup> As for the destructive end of remembrance, it points to the retroactive process of narration. It indicates the ways in which articulating the past historically means to grasp it as a memory capable of retroactively altering the past.<sup>36</sup> Remembrance, in other words, does not occur in homogeneous time, as seen through the stories evoked by the bowl and the tray. Rather, it evokes the structuring of time; time becomes configured around the significance of a particular memory. This phenomenological description of time experienced in memory resonates for Benjamin with time experienced historically, socially, and communally.<sup>37</sup> The constructive and destructive processes of remembrance shed light on the ways in which the material object—an element that evokes a sense of estrangement from the present of telling—brings that present in conversation with the past event.

Examining this constructive and destructive nature of remembrance, one can see a distinction between the past as it ‘really was’ and as it is remembered. Going back to traumatic narrative, Freud recognises that trauma has the structure of myth, where human history differs from chronological time, specifically because it is subject to myth.<sup>38</sup> From a psychoanalytic view, this mythical structure of traumatic narrative points not to the past, but evokes a discourse on the present. The process of remembering does not necessarily discover ‘what really happened’ or produce a discourse on the past as a product of its time, but it is rather a process that takes on meaning retrospectively. As Freud stated, ‘the very temporality of subjectivity is unequivocally retrospective’.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, this retroactive process of remembrance also speaks to the ways in which narrative is shaped and transformed in the presence of the listener, and the ways in which the subsequent generation of war partakes in the process of remembrance, influencing what is being spoken and unspoken, and ultimately retelling the story

<sup>34</sup> Wilding (1996: 2).

<sup>35</sup> Wilding (1996: 51).

<sup>36</sup> Wilding (1996: 62).

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin in relation to ‘the temporality of the calendar’ (1969: 261).

<sup>38</sup> Shepherdson (1995: 10).

<sup>39</sup> For temporality in psychoanalysis and the retrospective orientation of Freudian theory, see Bowie (1993).

from their position as post-war subjects. In the case of the tray, the evocation of memory occurred during the stagnation of the 2020 coronavirus lockdown that followed the October 2019 uprising; these two ongoing events stirred affect, memory, and the discourse of war. The time and space through which my mother tells the story of the past underlines the role of our generation as listeners partaking in the process of remembrance, at a time where we represent the forefront of movements happening on the street.

The analytic take on narrative and remembrance also illuminates the process of historicisation and the mythical structure that configures it. As Lacan writes, ‘History is not the past. History is the past in so far as it is historicised in the present—historicised in the present because it was lived in the past.’<sup>40</sup> In Benjamin’s words, remembrance is history’s ‘original vocation’,<sup>41</sup> as it is not far from the structures of the individual remembrance. He also argues that history is incomplete, and ‘open’<sup>42</sup> as it is always being reconstituted and created in the present. This incompleteness underlines how history is produced by telling. In the case of Lebanon, Benjamin’s framework sheds light on the ways in which dominant narratives, symbols, and state ideals shape what is considered to be historical—and what is left out. As Benjamin suggested, ‘articulating the past historically ... means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger’.<sup>43</sup> Moments of danger appear both in the stories of the *tasset al rahbeh* and the tray: the *tasset al rahbeh* evokes an image that pushes Sarah to investigate its source and articulate it in relation to a moment in history. The memory associated with the tray is evoked when spaces of the past, such as the house from which my family was displaced, are revisited at a time when political and social structures are being shaken. Historic trauma is also ‘made known through moments of truth that flash up retroactively through the individual’.<sup>44</sup>

By examining the ways in which the intergenerational space engages in the process of remembrance and narrativisation, I turn the focus to the object’s role of witness, which underlines the relationship of temporality with how we remember and how we tell our stories. I argue that the object as witness inhabits the past, present, and future and underlines the nonlinearity of time and our experience of it, particularly when we remember and tell stories. In the case of the tray, the object plays the role of witness at the moment of the event (my mother’s near-death experience with the sniper). It is also a witness to the after-event (displacement), and the time in which it is spoken of in the cross-generational space. This temporal ‘cutting through’ highlights how the

<sup>40</sup> Lacan (1991: 12).

<sup>41</sup> Wilding (1996: 2–3).

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin *et al.* (2003).

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin *et al.* (2003).

<sup>44</sup> Brooks (2016: 7).

object is simultaneously the representation or embodiment of the subject (the generation of war) at the time of the original event, and the remnant that gazes upon what happened, inhabiting the present in the past and vice versa. Moreover, I suggest that the object as a witness is both inscribed in the Symbolic register and present outside of it. The tray acts as a symbol to my mother's experience and brings her closer to her position as a subject in the narrative. However, the tray also triggers what goes beyond the Symbolic, and what becomes implicated in the work of remembrance intergenerationally.

As witness, the material moves against the temporality of commodity capitalism and its influence on the discourse of memory. Under the neoliberal capitalist Lebanese state, time and memory are both subsumed by an ideology of 'moving on' and 'putting the past behind us', which sustains and re-creates the political, economic, and social symbolic of memory. I suggest that the material object interrupts the state's imposed linearity of time within the capitalist discourse of memory in Lebanon by evoking the past within the present. The subsequent generation—cut off and alienated from the embodied and affective memory—experiences the imposed linearity of time that distances the struggles of the past from those of today and reinforces a commodification of time and memory. In contrast, the material object inhabiting past and present illuminates the ways in which the events of the past comment on the present.

By examining the temporal nature of the material object within its symbolic role of witness, I suggest that the material cuts through the political and social Symbolic order and disturbs the ideologically imposed linearity of time. The cutting through of the Symbolic brings into question the role of what is un-symbolisable and what cannot be spoken, both in the experience of the generation of war and the subsequent one. I suggest that the un-symbolisable is held by the object, and is part of what escapes the Symbolic register. In Lacanian terms, what cannot be symbolised belongs to the register of the Real. The Real pertains to what is impossible to represent and master, but is always calling for symbolisation. Encounters with the Real, as it is associated to trauma, seem to dislocate our representations of reality but also provoke the construction of new representations. The Real escapes our attempts to symbolise or represent it, and escapes social reality, which is organised through images and symbolic structures.<sup>45</sup> I suggest that the role of the object as witness, as being both inside and outside the Symbolic, also belongs to the paradoxical nature of the Real. I argue that the Real is evoked by the object in the world of the subject as a remainder or residue. In the same way that Freud conceived repressed trauma as an interruption to the mental life of a subject, this interruption implies an outside to the Symbolic.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Feldstein *et al.* (1996: 181–4)

<sup>46</sup> Freud (1936: 18–21).

In the same vein, this interference implies repulsion from the Real to any linear temporal periodisation. I suggest that it is the register of the Real, manifested through the encounter with the object, which brings the temporal question of memory and the process of the narrativisation to the forefront. As Harris put it, the objects embedded in history evoke an explosive power that tears apart the present.<sup>47</sup> Benjamin speaks of a messianic arrest,<sup>48</sup> which represents a moment of interference in a temporal or experiential series, and brings about a radical ‘now-time’<sup>49</sup>—a flash that ruptures time’s continuity and provides a glance onto an alternative present. In other words, and particularly in the world of the subsequent generation, there seems to be an experience of what the Lacanians describe as the ‘return of the Real’, where the return is figurative. The ‘return of the Real’ involves an eruption of contingency, and a disturbance in the symbolic world of the subject.<sup>50</sup>

Interferences or eruptions from the Real are present when Sarah, who thought that her memory is what triggers fear, encounters a past alien to her, which in turn shakes the grounds of her present associations and significations. Through the encounter with the object, the process of remembrance and narrativisation can bring to light what is cut off from our subjective and embodied memory, and perhaps what is unknown and redemptive of the past and the present in it. Redemption here highlights the incompleteness of historical narrative, and calls for continuous forms of signification. I suggest that the material remnant is the portal into a shift in the symbolic structure of our narratives. The material serves as a medium through which we rework and rewrite the stories that brought us to the present, and which continue to shape our realities intergenerationally.

### **Object as affective opening**

Interviews with the subsequent generation demonstrate how the generation of war expresses memories of that time through a technical description of events, or flashing of images removed from the subjective and personal memory. When addressing the past, the generation of war also tends to resort to nostalgia for the pre-war time. Expressions such as ‘Beirut was the Paris of the Middle East in the past’ or ‘Lebanon was like Switzerland before the war’ came up in several interviews with members of the generation of war. However, when it comes to the stories of objects retold by the

<sup>47</sup> Harris (2010: 4).

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin & Jennings (1996: 396).

<sup>49</sup> McCole (1993: 4).

<sup>50</sup> Wilcox & DeLillo (2002: 121–2).

subsequent generation, memories seem to be charged with affect. In this section, I look into the ways in which the object allows us to examine memory's affective reservoir and the ways in which affect complicates the trajectory of remembrance and narrativisation cross-generationally.

The distance of the generation of war from their embodied and personal memory speaks to the ways affect is also cut off from the way they remember and narrate the events of the past. For the generation of war in Lebanon, the past manifests as nostalgia for the 'pre-war era', aside from the haunting silence around memories of war. Hook indicates that unreflecting forms of nostalgia fail to subject the past to adequate examination<sup>51</sup> and considers that the past is fixed and sealed off in a unique remoteness. This past thus becomes a static utopia, irretrievably lost, and shut off from any meaningful relations with the present.

Nostalgia is not a remembering that induces pain, but instead seeks to remember what has yet to be imagined.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the loss of a pre-war home for the generation of war in Lebanon only ever existed in a future. Nostalgia experienced by the generation of war in relation to the pre-war years can be, in effect, emotions produced by the unresolved nature of the past and its traumatic residues. Building upon this notion, Boym considers that what drives restorative nostalgia is essentially anxiety, rather than longing. He argues that nostalgia 'is not the sentiment of distance and longing'; it is rather 'the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and restored tradition'.<sup>53</sup> Nostalgia in this case becomes a protective shield against the anxieties of history.

In relation to remembrance and narrative, nostalgia participates in dismissing the political reality of Lebanon's pre-war situation. I refer here to the ways nostalgia, by painting a picturesque image of the pre-war era, eclipses marginal narratives that present alternative interpretations of what led to the outburst of war. These include the social movements in the decade before the war, such as the Ghandour Factory strike in 1972,<sup>54</sup> the student movement rising in 1968,<sup>55</sup> and the fishermen's movement in 1975<sup>56</sup> that protested the oppressive economic practices of the regime. All of these can be traced to the present movements and their demands.

<sup>51</sup> Hook (2012: 220–5).

<sup>52</sup> Bonnett (2010: 25–8).

<sup>53</sup> Boym (2002: 44–5).

<sup>54</sup> Ghandour is one of the oldest and largest Lebanese-owned industries, specialising in food processing and the manufacture of candy and baked goods. The government's crackdown in response to the strike caused the death and injury of many workers.

<sup>55</sup> See Farsoun (1973).

<sup>56</sup> Strike in response to the attempt of former President Camille Chamoun to monopolise fishing along the coast of Lebanon.



When it comes to the following generation, the relationship between affect and memory is influenced by the ways in which the generation of war recalls and transmits the past. I hypothesise that the subsequent generation experiences a melancholic relationship to the past, shut out from its reality. According to Freud, in melancholia, the loss of object is ‘unknown’ and as Agamben suggests in *Stanzas*, it is the appropriation of an object of desire that cannot be had in reality.<sup>57</sup> I suggest that the subsequent generations of war hold a position in relation to the past that is melancholic, thereby influencing their relationship to loss, desire, and identity when the object of loss is unknown.

For the subsequent generation, melancholia places memory in a backward-looking and frozen attachment whose grounds, I suggest, are disturbed by the physical object. While there is not space in this article to explore the full complexities of melancholia, I reference it in order to underline the affective nature of the gap between what is spoken and unspoken of the past. The melancholic symbolises the ways in which we are cut off from relating to our losses or desires. Melancholia, in this case, can be understood as a representation of that which appears alien, external, unstable, and uncertain. One sees this in the anxiety that haunts Sarah’s relationship to the memory of soldiers, as it simultaneously seems alien and familiar to her. What is uncertain is also evidently influenced by the structures of repression that further encode the relationship of the subsequent generation’s with the unknown lost object. This melancholia is also a ‘melancholia of representation and signification’.<sup>58</sup> What cannot be signified indicates the transgenerational experience of what has not been mourned and thus not symbolised in narrative. I consider that mourning is not merely a means to ‘work through’ the past in order to put it behind us, but a process that can instil movement to produce new symbolic representations, especially as past struggles break into our present moments.

By investigating the material object as an affective repository that triggers embodied memory, this article suggests that the object breaks through the structures of nostalgia that render remembrance as a form of imaginary escapism for the generation of war, and influence the ways in which the following generation positions itself in relation to the past inhabiting the present. I suggest that the material object, eliciting affect, opens the possibility for narration across generations, and shakes the grounds of temporality within remembrance. I consider that the affective states triggered by the material object rupture the stagnation evoked by nostalgia and the blockage or fixation produced by the traumatic. As Enderwitz suggests, ‘the affective turn breaks with the linguistic paradigm. It shifts attention to the body, to relations, forces and

<sup>57</sup> Agamben (1993: 20–1).

<sup>58</sup> Enderwitz (2015: 100).

intensities: towards a “being-in-the-world” that is not reducible to language and cognition.<sup>59</sup> I suggest that the affective triggered by the material creates an opening in two ways. First, it opens the temporal structures of remembrance. Second, it shakes the grounds of narrative and signification, by bringing up desire, loss, and what shapes subjectivity. In other words, affect—when triggered by the material remnant—creates a hole in the Symbolic register and elicits questions about our stories and histories that erupt in the form of affect. This rupture, evoked by affect, underlines how stories are continuously told, represented, and deconstructed as they navigate the space between what is—and is not—symbolic. I include the story of the tray in my analysis to understand how, as a member of the subsequent generation, I participate in the process of remembrance and ongoing construction of narrative. The story of the tray illuminates how affect moves across generations. It also reflects how my own associations, from witnessing and participating in the uprising, partake in constructing the transgenerational narrative.

From an analytic lens, affect, sometimes enigmatic and disorienting, opens the pathway to a constant interplay of signification, where some affects relate to meaning (the Symbolic) and others relate to the falling away of meaning (the Real). In the case of the *tasset al rahbeh*, the object evokes the mother’s affective memory in association to Sarah’s experience with the bowl. The moment Sarah tells the story from her position and relationship to the object, affect moves her to find new representations to her experience as it relates to her own subjectivity. It is also the moment at which affect complicates the trajectory of time and remembrance, evoking a queer temporality.<sup>60</sup> In this case, affect belongs to the register of the Real, defamiliarising the present and unsettling meaning. I borrow here Benjamin’s terms and suggest that affect comes in to ‘blast open the continuum of history’.<sup>61</sup> The *tasset al rahbeh*, as a signifying name to a bowl, speaks to the function of the object in relation to affect. The bowl, at a basic level, can be considered a witness to the fear induced by the state of war. The *tasset al rahbeh*’s function in relation to the subject, however, indicates how the object elicits what seems to go beyond the emotion of fear. Indeed, as affect theorist Brian Massumi describes, affect is pure intensity, and a bodily register that ‘is not semantically or semiotically ordered’, while emotion is ‘an intensity owned and recognized’.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the bowl and its symbolic associations both soothe the fearful child from the perceived threat and open a space that holds what goes beyond signification.

<sup>59</sup> Enderwitz (2015: 1–5).

<sup>60</sup> See Freeman (2010).

<sup>61</sup> Benjamin & Jennings (1996: 396).

<sup>62</sup> Massumi (1995: 85–8).

Affect is what drove Sarah to ask questions around the bowl. It is also where she found an entry point to her position within the story, and where narrative found new grounds of signification. Similarly, the tray, as a placeholder to the moment where the sniper shot the bullet, elicits affect moving beyond meaning (partly translating into a dream). What is left out from the story appears as an enigma. This enigma pertains to the raw state of the Real register, lacking symbolic articulations. In the case of the bowl, even when memory is associated with the original event (Sarah's mother's memory), the affective residual comes in to deconstruct these associations by implicating Sarah's experience, thereby taking the story to a new space of signification.

By navigating the space between the Symbolic and the Real, the material eliciting affect mediates the subsequent generation's entry into narrative, and opens the pathway to connecting with losses and desires which are at the core of subjectivity. For the subsequent generation, the act of narrating the experiences of the past speaks to the ways in which narrative does not end at the moment of reception. In other words, what occurs in the transgenerational space is not merely an act of inheritance of memory or story. I suggest that affect here is what shakes the course of narrativisation by implicating the subsequent generation's subjectivity. It is also what initiates the work of historical interpretation cross-generationally.

For instance, nostalgia—and arguably melancholia—assumes an origin to memory, a beginning and end, and a temporality that brings about a closure to signification. From the position of the subsequent generation, the material object evoking affect dislocates this assumed origin and highlights the fragmentation of memory within the process of remembrance and its narrativisation. That the story of the tray came up during lockdown, and after the beginning of October's uprising, highlights how memories of war are triggered by affectively charged times. By complicating the temporal trajectory of memory, affect negotiates the space between 'then' and 'now' and ruptures the assumption that narrative has a clear origin. This opening elicited by affect appears in the bowl's story, where Sarah realises that the memory is not originally hers, and experiences a sense of destabilisation to what is being signified. As Sami Khatib describes when referring to the Benjaminian messianic redemption, the restoration of the past's repressed potentialities is an opening that 'ex-poses the present as changeable' and configures the rewriting of history as a destabilisation of the 'solid ground of the present as historical outcome of the past'.<sup>63</sup> From a psychoanalytic perspective, an affect evoking deconstruction within narrative can be considered an intergenerational transferential process mediated by the material object. It is also an interminable process that leads to the work of interpretation.

<sup>63</sup> Khatib (2017: 17).

The messianic redemption called upon through the material object leads us to discuss how we relate the narrative to what is happening in Lebanon today. The past lives in our current movements and speaks to them; we experience this in the encounter with the affective material to narrative and its endless shift of signifiers. This article is not concerned with memory as merely a process of inheritance or preservation, but also as an opening to the ‘repressed potentialities of the past’. In looking into how this past inhabits our current spaces and seeps into the cracks of what is unsaid, we attempt to find an opening onto the past, present, and our imagined alternative futures. In a country where the regime and state institutions have all but annihilated our historical memory, the search through material and domestic objects is a search for stories that resist closure.

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