

Munira Khayyat, *A Landscape of War: Ecologies of Resistance and Survival in South Lebanon*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780520389984 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520389991 (paper); ISBN: 9780520390003 (ebook)

Munira Khayyat's book is an ethnography of war in South Lebanon's border villages. The book, written with noteworthy sensitivity to social, anthropogenic, and ecological factors underpinning a landscape of war, consists of a prelude, an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, and a coda, which locate the work primarily in the broader literature on the anthropology of war.

In the prelude and introduction, Khayyat first defines what war is to her, especially the July 2006 war, in which the Israeli air force pulverised most of the areas administered and governed by the major Lebanese Shi'a party Hezbollah, namely, Beirut's southern suburbs and the southern borderlands, on which her ethnographic research focuses. As a "moment of creative destruction" (p.xvii), war to her is described as an "intimate object" (ibid.) which has been shaped and revived since her childhood, when war and life came to co-exist. The author sets the ground to her key concept of "ecologies of resistance"—"more-than-human relations" that persist throughout "seasons of devastation" (p.4) and through which humans manage to "thrive in necropolitical worlds" (p.7). Acknowledging the normalcy of war, Khayyat repeatedly asserts in the book, does not mean either normalizing or romanticizing it. It instead means documenting "the (resistant) will to life in war" as a "source of a theory of war" (p.13)—a "theory of war from the South" (p.11) illuminating how it is "generative of lifeworlds" (p.13). Khayyat resists war depicted and cemented as "exotic otherness" (ibid.): that otherness is ours, is everyone's, if war is intimately related to the contemporary violence of industry, capitalism, and exploitation.

While the author sheds light on the "heterodox genealogies" and vernacular "practices of resistance" (*al-Muqawwama*) against the Israeli enemy (p.8)—namely, alternative grassroots narratives and strategies of Resistance which Hezbollah has built upon and then monopolized, while blending in the surrounding landscape of war—the examined ontology of war-and-life *in* the factual history of Lebanon and the South, and of the physical environment are not a priority for the author: the research emerges as vernacular but metaphorical and representative, rather than factual and time-bounded, which is a usual approach in the

anthropology of war (e.g. Glowacki et al. 2020). Moreover, it is an ethnography centred on the lived time of Khayyat's interlocutors, rather than the temporality of her own ethnographic work.

War as a conceptual object, to the author, means acknowledging how war can make worlds even as it destroys them. Importantly, she argues that war is "continuous with life" in the broader Global South (p.20), leaving the reader with the desire to learn more about the articulated relationship that the southern Lebanese borderlands have with other political geographies. If war is generative anywhere, what is the peculiar character of landscape, going beyond warscape, in Lebanon? The author, in this regard, defines how "landscape" does not merely refer to the land, but rather to an "embodied practice" and "inhabitation" of war, as well as the method through which she spells out vernacular theories of war. Theories that evidence how war can create subjects, relationships, as much as spaces, where "life is waged in war" and "war is lived as life" (p.31).

The book largely engages with the humanization and vitalization of war, but, intentionally, does not historicize it, as we might expect. With this choice, war is made an ontology of living. The landscape remains a medium which conveys and embodies the everyday ecology of life and survival, but it never scales down to mere physical environment, as often discussed in geography (e.g. Mercer 2024). While Khayyat sufficiently locates herself, her origins, and her social status in this landscape, she does not detail her insider-outsider positionality. Personally, I would have loved to know more about the latter, as it would clarify how this living environment used to be permanent to her previously, while, later in the book, through the use of "they" and "them", she seems to suggest that the intimacy with war turned into something exclusively lived by her field companions.

Chapter 1 explains how the history of Palestinian resistance intertwines with the Lebanese one: Palestinians were rounded up in refugee camps after the 1948 Nakba, while later enjoying the freedom of guerrilla action in South Lebanon, where they had to rely on the sympathy of local villagers until the collapse of that relationship (p.43). The chapter also illustrates the rise of the first Lebanese Shi'a party Amal, and the formation of an Israeli-allied militia called Free Lebanon Army, notably the precursor of the South Lebanon Army that would guarantee day-to-day control and governance in the occupied areas. Khayyat, in this context, mentions local collaborators and how, after the end of the occupation (May

2000), they had to fit into a new environment and a changed war society. In fact, Khayyat explains how some benefited from the occupation years, documenting how the so-called Resistance is not made of social homogeneity.

Chapter 2 details the field, showing how Israel was dominating her ethnographic interactions in contradictory ways, such as the paradox of embodying civilisation to some, while being a dominant tool to “test” who people are and how they relate to the Israeli occupation and enmity. In this section, the author importantly outlines her methodological strategies and fundamental ethnographic matters such as access to the field, which, in Hezbollah-held security strongholds, are not taken for granted even for autochthone researchers. The author recognizes how bureaucratic compliance with Hezbollah’s requests was a mere ticking the box for her, as, when accessing the field, she intended to go beyond the political imagination and will of the ruling party.

Chapter 3 analyses the ecology of tobacco farming, which is represented as the crop of continuity and survival, while telling a story of local alienation from labour and land (p.97). I find this the richest and most informative section of the book. This incisive ethnography of tobacco farming marks the political trajectories from colonial history to the enduring violence and neglect of the Lebanese nation-state. The tobacco crop is made of women’s and girls’ working hands, while males are more likely to venture outside of the landscape of war to make other opportunities. Tobacco farming also emphasizes the post-confessional character of rural life (which finally sidelines and nuances the enduring centrality of confessional belonging in Lebanese society). Hence, Lebanon’s intersectarian ways of living and surviving are unearthed, while “sectarian difference is muddled by the undertow of shared labor” (p.109). However, the post-confessional entanglements of everyday labour yet coexist with the sectarian discourse, which emerges in some ethnographic accounts, and points, again, to social heterogeneity in this landscape of war. In other words, tobacco farming is the epitomization of everyday resistance and an intimate dimension of life within a violent, global political economy.

Chapter 4 discusses life in a war landscape as a “multispecies affair” (p.128), in a context where South Lebanon was turned into a minefield due to the massive use of cluster munitions. Thereby, transformed into a deadly weapon, the environment per se can disrupt these ecologies of living. Cognizant of the continuous grassroots attempt to turn tragedy into

opportunity, Khayyat affirms how she did not identify fear but “irreverence and gumption” (p.136) among tobacco farmers and goat herders, as they strive to revitalise life and livelihood among death. But, as a reader, I wonder how something like fear might coexist with and even underpin human irreverence. It would have been interesting to read more about irreverence as collective attitude. This chapter powerfully points to animal–human collaborations in supporting ecologies of survival and resistance. It also serves as a reminder that human-centred analyses of war fail to capture the wholeness of the ecosystem.

Chapter 5 utilizes the examples of Mleeta’s war exhibition (the Museum of the Resistance opened in 2010) to show how Hezbollah has been claiming South Lebanon’s landscape as its own cultural and moral capital. Or, better said, the imagined capital of a cohesive community that supports and nurtures the Resistance conceived and managed hegemonically. This resistant ecology is here described as *maskun*, that is, inhabited by spirits; spirits which empower the landscape to survive.

Chapter 6 sets out South Lebanon as a space of epistemic and moral “murkiness” (p.183), where people yet think and live differently *versus* the homogenizing force of continual war. Ambiguity and contradiction characterise the life of some, making the landscape of war fragmented and morally uncomfortable; such as the author’s experience of speaking with people who remember the time when Israel was occupying Lebanon and local collaborators could benefit from that geopolitical moment. Nonetheless, Khayyat shows how this (unusual) nostalgia does not challenge these people’s support for Hezbollah. Such contradictions complicate the moral landscape of war; if the aim is understanding these war ecologies, we should not try to reconcile these tensions, the author suggests. It is here possible to sense Khayyat’s ethnographic effort of protecting, surfacing, yet resisting and questioning, these uncomfortable narratives of complicity with the Israeli occupier.

In the conclusion, the author reasserts her key arguments about life being rooted in processes that seek to extinguish it (p.214). Ultimately, Khayyat does not make proximity to and intimacy with war essential for navigating her ethnography: she tells us where she stands in this landscape only as much as we need to access the book with clarity. Readers engaging with ethnographic methodologies and theories may understand this as an under-estimation of the ethnographer’s role and influence over the field. In my own interpretation, the author’s intention is pinning down neither the *very event and factuality* of war, nor her own

embeddedness in her research and in war. From my perspective, she invites us to focus on a universalizable parameter of war and life, ruination and survival, tackling them as unavoidable antinomies of collective ecologies (and ecosystems) of life. While in most of the contemporary academic literature on the Global South, war, atrocities, and ephemerality have become objects of research to identify and value resilience and agency, this book reminds us of how life itself is waged in ruination and destruction, while life and war, indeed, are not oppositional ontologies in material history.

Finally, I have found the notes fundamental rather than marginal: they strongly corroborate the arguments made, with the purpose of merging the author's analytical and intimate selves. This ethnography, posing a challenge to those not used to dense anthropological language and conceptual imagination, is primarily for an audience made of readers ready to engage with Lebanon and war as a muddled ecological and moral landscape, as well as of anthropologists of war and thinkers of the Anthropocene.

References

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July 2024