Encountering Wounds and Transforming Research through Fieldwork alongside the Subalternised

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His main interests are in Post-, anti-, and decolonial work, ethnic and racial studies, inequalities, Islam and Knowledge making on which Ali has published multiple peer-reviewed and non-academic articles and essays. His current research focuses on the lived experiences of discrimination and exclusion of visibly Muslim Lebanese citizens with a particular focus on the role of urbanity and space in these experiences.

Abstract

In the summer of 2018, I began qualitative fieldwork for my PhD dissertation investigating Islamic visibility in Lebanon's political sphere. As I began fieldwork, I quickly realised that practicing Lebanese Muslims, including those with significant political activity, did not find my topic and research question pertinent. For them, it was anti-Muslim racism across spheres and scales of life in Lebanon that was worthy of research, analysis and redress. For them, it was wounds they carried, wounds inflicted by global Eurocentric modernity, that I needed to visible, analyse, and seek to find amends to. Meeting this, my research project and questions were redirected and transformed into an exploration of lived experiences of anti-Muslim racism on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Consequently, the encounter with subalternised communities and the choice to listen and obey their requests formed a transformative juncture of my career and activism, as well as my own self and concerns. Accordingly, a 'fieldwork of listening' alongside the subalternised emerged as a powerful and generative site from which social science research can be transformed, identifying and orienting itself to the lived problems of those on the darker side of western modernity

Text

Lebanon is a small multi-confessional country on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean with a complex multi-party political system. An ex-French colony, the nation 'never existed before in history. It is a product of the Franco-British colonial partition of the Middle East'

(Traboulsi 2007, 75) established under Christian Maronite domination. Today, the country functions through a complex system where power is shared among Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims under a westernised neoliberal order (Baumann 2019). During 2018, I began fieldwork on my doctoral project exploring emerging Islamic semiotics and visibility within the Lebanese political scene with a focus on Lebanese Muslim women's experiences and Islamic dress' emerging and growing presence within formal and state politics in the country. The methodology for the project consisted of in-depth interviews and focus groups with photo-elicitation with Lebanese citizens involved in political spaces. Questions asked covered participant's political participation, relation to political parties, to the state and its institutions, and to their community activities and activism. Throughout, questions focused on linking these issues to participant's Islamic beliefs and practices. By adopting a reflexive and qualitative methodology of interviews and in-depth conversations with participants, space was made for participants themselves to orient discussions and consequently significantly shape the knowledge being generated in the field.[1]

As I began fieldwork in Beirut, I encountered much interest on the part of women wearing Islamic dress to participate in the project. With significant ease, interviews were scheduled and conversations began. From the very start, interviewees were enthusiastic and most conversations went beyond the scheduled time. Two of my early interviews unexpectedly turned into double-interviews where participants came with a friend who was 'really excited about the project and was wondering if she can join, even if just to listen', as a young university student with whom I had my very first interview explained.

Yet, as I went through my data at the end of the first month of fieldwork, having conducted around 6 in-depth interviews, I realised that the data collected around political participation, elections, party-representation and formal state-centred organisation, was meagre. Further, reflecting on my conversations with participants, I began to notice that I lacked the rich, layered, and in-depth insights on political change and emerging political presence I pursued. For example, participants were not interested in discussing their involvement in electoral processes or in advocacy at the levels of the parliamentary or legal systems in the country and how their Islamic beliefs and practices impacted such behaviours. Similarly, they were not interested in delving into the role and impact of the country's political parties in hindering or facilitating the growing presence of Islamic symbols within the Lebanese political sphere or what meanings such symbols take on. Indeed, as I went through the collected data, I began to realise that much of it was not about formal or state-level politics at all, but was rather about lived experiences of being a visibily Muslim in Lebanon at the level of the everyday. Covering various spheres of social life, including the economic, the domestic, and the public, I began to realise that significant data revolved around participants' experiences of discrimination and exclusion as a result of being a visibly Muslim within much of Lebanese society – even though this was not a part of my interview protocol nor of what I had envisioned to be part of my project. Thinking through this, I realised that it was participants who were introducing the question of discrimination, and who took the initiative in putting forth such experiences. In one interview, I was told by a participant that she 'assumed' the project was about discrimination since that is what is really most challenging for practicing and individuals easily identifiable as Muslims in the country.

[1] This fieldwork raised a number of ethical concerns, from my gender as a male researching a female-only object to my training and position within the westernised academy researching lived experiences in the Eastern Mediterrenean. An exploration of these concerns neverthless remains beyond the scope of this reflection, refer to Kassem (forthcoming).

Consulting with my supervisors, I decided to begin including a question on experiences of discrimination during subsequentinterviews. The reception went beyond anything I had anticipated. From receiving 20-minute narrations to interviewees sharing stories of deep privacy and much pain, I quickly realised how important the issue is for women wearing Islamic dress in Lebanon and the extent to which they desired to speak about it. During my first focus group, I was even explicitly told by participants that 'the most important problem is discrimination, the most important thing that really needs research and that no one was looking at is our rejection and how they think we are lesser' [Beirut, 2018]. By the end of the second month of fieldwork, I had arrived at the conclusion that my project's interests did not align with the major problem my participants considered to be plaguing their lives.

After much reflection and discussions with my supervisors, colleagues, and gatekeepers in Lebanon, I decided to cease fieldwork around 6 weeks after it had begun, return to the UK, and rethink my project. As I reflected on my few weeks of fieldwork and the data generated, I increasingly felt that it was wounds participants carried, wounds inflicted by global Eurocentric modernity (Mignolo 2012), that my research needed to focus on. Such a shift seemed most important as it would allow me to engage and address what appeared to be the major issue for participants and to respond to their requests in line with a research where participants are engaged as co-creators of knowledge. Further, this was a shift that would permit invaluable insights and significant interventions and contributions to both academic as well as wider debates and challenges. Spending a little under two months in the UK, I consequently re-developed my project to focus on the question of lived experiences of discrimination. I then returned to the field, spoke to over 65 visibly Muslim woman over a period of fivemonths and consequently wrote a dissertation titled *'Coloniality, Erasure and the Muslim Hijabi's Lived Experiences: Lebanon as a Case-study'*.

This dissertation did not offer an analysis of the growing presence of Islam within Lebanon's sphere of formal politics and within the various spaces of the Lebanese state and its apparati. It also did not offer an analysis of Lebanese Muslim women's agentive work, as practicing and visibly Muslim women, within the realm and various scales of Lebanese politics and how Islamic beliefs and practices played a role in such work. Rather, it offered an invaluable case of anti-Muslim racism within the Arab-majority world, and even within Muslim-majority communities. Analysing this case, it generated multiple contributions across fields and divides and innovative insights into the scholarsip on questions ranging from anti-Muslim racism and post and decolonial theory to ethnic and racial studies, the sociology of religion, as well as the study of the West Asia region and Lebanon.

I am myself Lebanese, having been raised in Beirut. I had also been conducting research, including working alongside Lebanon's Shia Muslim community in particular, for a number of years before my PhD. I had additionally studied and taken various courses on Lebanese history, Lebanese politics, and Lebanese society throughout my education. Yet, I was oblivious to the harm and aggression visibly Muslim women experienced and the wounds this produced: these were invisible experiences for me, while my research and intellectual concerns laid elsewhere. Fieldwork here offered an invaluable corrective. If anything, my fieldwork powerfully brought forth the subtle and hidden nature of much wounding

aggression produced by global Eurocentric Modernity and the hegemonic structures of exclusions governing our contemporary world. In this sense, it made clear the potential of fieldwork approached as a listening exercise to make wounds visible; offering them as powerful sites of research and scholarship. Based on this, multiple avenues of future research and invisible wounds emerged. For example, parallel fieldwork across the Muslim-majority and Arab-majority geographies promises an invaluable intervention to rethink dominant narratives and assumptions around anti-Muslim racism and lived experiences. Research around the entangling/intersecting nature of these experiences, incorporating factos such as a skin colour, citizenship, and gender, further emerges as a promising avenue of future research based on this work. Questions of national identities, social differences, and steryotpes, prejudices, and hierarchies produced at the juncture between the global and the local all further emerge as important questions of further critical and participatory research across geographies and spaces. Ultimately, the encounter with subalternised communities and the choice to listen and obey their requests formed a transformative juncture for my career and activism, as well as my own self and concerns, and opened up multiple avenues and possibilities for future research.

In elaborating on the decolonial invitation for a different kind of social research, and focusing on W E Du Bois's work, Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues that decolonial research 'requires detachment and wonder' and 'demands responsibility and the willingness to take many perspectives, particularly the perspectives and points of view of those whose very existence is questioned and produced as insignificant'. (Nelson Maldonado-Torres 2007, 262) In line with this invitation and my experiences presented above, I here conclude that research with the sublaternised must be oriented as a project of making visible the invisible from the invisiblised position, heeding their calls and labouring against their lived problems.

Problematising the assumption situating researchers as 'the experts', my experiences in the field have ultimately allowed me to humble my position as an academic researcher and to envision my engagements with my participants as an opportunity to listen and heed their calls. In this sense, the takeaway argument from these experiences is that research questions and hypothesis, as well as fieldwork preparations including interview protocols, must continuously be subject to reflexive scrutiny in light of the experiences in the field and must be oriented to the problems and challenges of the subalternised. Indeed, showcasing the importance of empirical fieldwork with subalternised communities, these experiences embodyhow the encounters of the field can transform a research project, and how it is important they be allowed to do so.

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