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The Sensory Experience of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Using Memoirs to Complete the Picture

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INTRODUCTION

Language represents human interpretation of the senses from which all knowledge and understanding begins and ends. Scholars have largely rejected the use of sensory description as a tool of literary analysis despite the fact that many of the subjects studied in conflict studies and international relations (IR) involve incredibly sensorial experiences. In recent years, this pattern has begun to change, as feminist intellectuals¹ have begun centering the human experience within their research. Due to the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)² throughout the world, scholars have begun to look at phenomenological approaches to studying sexual assault, especially in conflict zones, where rates of SGBV spike (Bastick et al., Colombini 2002). Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)³ occurs in conflict zones racked with violence, chaos, and uncertainty, which ultimately creates a landscape designed to consume the five senses. Under these conditions, one questions whether the people living in such traumatic environments have any sense of agency⁴. Over the past two decades, scholars have extensively studied the effects of CRSV on individuals and society but remain ambivalent when wrestling with the idea of agency for the people who survive CRSV (Campbell et al.). Because of the subjective quality to human agency, many scholars continue to debate the definition today, which further reflects the importance of agency in the progression of humanity. In fact, many studies

¹ See Welland, Koelsch, Krystalli, Autcher and Wilcox in Bibliography

² The United Nations defines SGBV as “any type of violence directed against individuals or groups based on their sex or gender” (United Nations 2020).

³ According to the United Nations, CRSV “refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict” (United Nations 2020). CRSV is considered to be a specific form of SGBV.

⁴ Although there have been many interpretations on the definition of human agency, the most commonly used definition describes a process that expresses an “individual’s capacity to determine and make meaning from their environment” in a manner that directly results from their ability to feel a sense of control over their own lives (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, Parsell 2016).

have shown that the most effective method of enacting enduring societal change (including poverty reduction, decreased rates of violence, improvement on quality of life, etc.) rests on the ability to empower the community towards a goal that the individual can be invested in (Alkire, 2005). Thus, societal harmony and peace relies on the individual's sense of agency within a society, which implies that the individuals living in communities that face violence do not feel a strong sense of control or freedom. Although survivors are forced to endure rape and violence, does that mean they cease to be agentic beings? Much of the literature discusses how people who experience CRSV *regain* their agency post-conflict (Martin 2016, Utas 2005), as if this sense of control is something one can win or lose, but I challenge this notion by asking the following: How do people *retain* their sense of agency in moments of great tragedy? Specifically, how do women and girls retain their agency in the midst of being subjected to CRSV? What does the sensory experience of CRSV tell us about human agency?

IR scholars and more specifically conflict studies academics have long overlooked the importance of the physical body when discussing violence, an oxymoronic aim when investigating the act of bodily conflict. Noting the lack of literature on the sensory experience of CRSV survivors, this research paper investigates the link between the sensory experience and the agency of CRSV survivors. Drawing from current literature on CRSV, the first section of this research paper will demonstrate the various theorized motivations behind sexual violence during conflict and then go into the lingering effects of CRSV on communities throughout the world. The second section on human agency describes the traditional positions on the concept of agency, following the argument for a more inclusive version of the original term called embodied agency. Finally, the sensory experience will be explored in relation to agency, and the cultural impact on the embodied agent will be detailed in depth. These sections will inform the core of

this paper— a sensory analysis of real CRSV situations that have been told through written memoir.

Drawing on three memoirs (*When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* by Le Ly Hayslip; *Tears of the Desert* by Halima Bashir; and *The Last Girl* by Nadia Murad), this research analyzes four reoccurring sensorial themes (sound, sight, pain, and numbness) and how these scenes demonstrate embodied agency⁵. The first describes repeated mention of footsteps, as each women described their experiences with sexual violence, all three describe preparing themselves as the scuffing of the perpetrator's shoes fall away or come closer to them. The second discusses the embodied agency of these women as they refuse to look their attackers in the eye, which implies that the agentive experience does not need to always be one of complete control, but also of small acts of defiance. The third describes the feeling of fire within all women, although this sensation is associated with pain, fire is also a symbol of divinity, wisdom, and power. Finally, the fourth describes the numbness felt by the survivors and the despair that follows each person, which furthers the assertion that the sensorial experience is critically tied to agency, and furthermore that embodied agency gives individuals a sense of empowerment within their communities, which ultimately drives human growth and progress. These four sections will detail the importance of sensorial analysis and writing while stressing the strong link between senses and agency.

⁵ The way in which the body, mind, and spirit interact with culture and society to determine our perception of the world and the way in which we act within our communities (Koelsch, Coole 2005)

CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Over the past twenty years, research on CRSV has flourished within conflict studies which has produced many “nuanced theoretical and empirical approaches to analyzing its (CRSV) causes, dynamics, and consequences;” however, little has been done to address what it means to be a victim or survivor of these war crimes (Nordås & Cohen 2021, Campbell et al.). Sexual violence in conflict zones can take the form of rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, gang rape, forced prostitution, or other coerced sexual acts (Kreft 2025, Nordås & Cohen 2014). Despite this fact, the definition of CRSV has yet to be agreed upon in the literature, as instances of CRSV are often underreported, and range in both severity and substance (Nordås & Cohen 2021, Pankhurst 2010, Skjelsbæk 2001). The most commonly held explanation behind sexual violence in war stems from the idea of ‘rape as a weapon of war’ that can be wielded by generals as a military tactic (Card 1996, Kirby 2013). Academics in this house of theory suggest that rape is used to demoralize and humiliate the enemy during wartime (Nordås & Cohen 2021, Kirby 2013, Pankhurst 2010). While the notion of rape as political tool used in conflict does indeed provide some insight into the phenomenon, many feminist scholars say that framing rape as a ‘weapon of war’ takes away the fundamentally sexual and patriarchal nature of the act, which ultimately leaves us with an incomplete understand of CRSV (Baaz & Stern 2018, Dolan et al.). Likewise, studying CRSV as solely a tactic for warfare obscures the fact that rape and sexual violence is also committed during times of ‘peace’ as well as war. These inconsistencies in the literature demonstrate the need to center individual voices within CRSV studies because without understanding the body, emotions, and link between the two, there cannot be a wholistic picture of the problem at hand (Mac Ginty 2022).

From the famous Greek epic *The Odyssey*⁶ to the modern classic novel *Catch-22*⁷, instances of CRSV have inundated human popular consciousness, but these stories are often left out of the collective memory after real tragedy strikes (Dewey & St. Germain 2012). Because of the discrepancy in the number of women who report their experiences with CRSV, sexual violence in conflict zones is labeled a “silent and hidden” crime (Davies et al.). This not only affects the numbers that are reported but also silences the stories of those who have endured CRSV and likewise reflects a culture of shame surrounding the subject (Nordås & Cohen 2021, Pankhurst 2010). This feeling of shame often adversely affects the women who are labeled victims of CRSV, as they are made to feel responsible for the act. Studies have shown that people often associate the label ‘victim’ with pity, weakness, blame, and shame (O’Shea et al.), and thus scholars have begun to use ‘survivor’ to describe women who suffer CRSV instead. The use of human agency within academic work on CRSV has always been controversial because of the inherent power dynamics between ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim,’ however this debate further illustrates the inadequacy of our current understanding of agentic capabilities (Roiphe 1994, Koelsch). The model of sexual assault in which the women are helpless to stop the physical power of the man does not account for a broader understanding of active resistance or prudent decision-making on behalf of survivors. I will note here that many who suffer CRSV do not survive and are thus rightly labeled victims; however, the analysis of three women who survived CRSV grounds this research paper, and thus I will use the term ‘survivor’ for the purposes of clarity and accuracy. Likewise, the label ‘survivor’ has limitations, for the connotation of the

⁶ The women of Troy were taken as sex slaves after Trojans had lost the war to the Greeks during the events of *The Illiad*. Even the historically renowned Greek hero Achilles took the Trojan princess Briseis as a concubine during the war with the Greeks (Homer).

⁷ While on military leave in Rome during the events of the second World War, the protagonist, an American soldier named Yossarian, finds his comrade Aarfy has raped and murdered a local maid who takes care of the corridors the men stay in while in Italy (Heller 1961).

word instills a sense of responsibility onto the survivor (Koelsch). Although some may argue the idea of both the perpetrators *and* survivors of CRSV having some form of agency depicts an inauthentic experience, as it may suggest some responsibility on behalf of the survivor, the lived experience of these women cannot be ignored, and that means having agency in unexpected moments, and that need not be a negative. Indeed, an in-depth study into one's experience of CRSV requires "accounting for patterns of violent and coercive behavior deployed by perpetrators to exert power and domination, while also describing the victim's efforts to (re) assert power and control over the situation of herself and others" (Campbell et al.). By focusing on the lived experiences of survivors of CRSV, I will be able to determine how women and girls retain their agency through the sensory description of their experiences.

Sexual assault and rape are physically violent acts whose definitions implicitly indicate a lack of choice on the victim's behalf, but there is incomplete understanding of CRSV because of the sensory-rich nature of sexual violence. With the inherent suggestion of physical touch and close proximity, the body has acted of its own accord in past accounts of sexual violence, but this phenomenon is not what this piece will discuss in detail because these situations are not agentic in nature. Instead, the analysis focuses on sensorial commonalities between all three survivors of CRSV, as the western definition of agency differs from the realities of many women across the world, and therefore literature on CRSV, which primarily takes place in non-western countries, is incomplete, as my analysis concludes that embodied agency can stretch beyond the strict parameters that academics have arbitrarily set. The additional choice to study sexual violence as it occurs in war allows me to greater investigate the embodied agency of all three women, as their environments are similar despite their different cultural upbringing. The motivations of sexual offenders in conflict zones are vast due to the chaotic nature of war-torn communities,

rendering narrow approaches to studying CRSV, but focusing on the sensorial experience of the survivors exposes common threads between each case. The lasting physical, psychological, and societal effects of CRSV perpetuate the destabilization of communities already pushed to the brink of despair, but through text comparison between all three memoirs, agentic moments of resistance and survival appeared in the texts depicting CRSV.

The firsthand experiences of people who experience CRSV need to be explored more within the field of IR and more specifically in conflict studies because of enduring psychological and physical consequences that remain long after the conflict has ended. Rebuilding a society after periods of violence and destruction requires healing the souls of those who suffered under regimes of terror (Léger 2001, Parsell et al.). Survivors like Nadia, who lived as a sex slave under ISIS rule in Iraq, understand there are more than one way to experience death. She recounts her time in captivity as “part of a slow, painful death— of the body and the soul,” which expands upon this sense of a loss of agency (Murad, 119). People need to feel a sense of agency in order to establish a stable society, which requires acknowledging the periods where people had no control and chaos reigned. Understanding how people feel about themselves and society is the first step towards preventing CRSV, and subtle acts of agency appeared most prevalently across all three cultures described in the chosen memoirs. Finally, putting emphasis on the acts of agency may focus the study of CRSV back on the survivors, rather than attempting to deconstruct the violent actions of many perpetrators, focusing on the survival tactics of the women provides another missing piece to the puzzle.

AGENCY

Following feminist scholars such as Kreft, Koelsch, and Coole who understand that our understanding of agency is contingent on socialization, I argue that the traditional definitions of agency⁸ neglect the innate connection between the human mind and physical body. Focusing on one's ability to *act* upon their desires disregards the realities of many communities across the world whose feelings of agency differ due to societal, cultural, or political circumstance. Does this mean a large segment of mankind lives without *any* human agency? Does the western definition of agency not apply in other parts of the world? The intervention made in this piece asserts that embodied agency, or the effect that sensory inputs of the human body have on cognition, is a better term to use when discussing CRSV survivors. Aligned with Coole's thinking of agency, the theory of embodied agency exists on a spectrum of agentic capabilities as opposed to traditional "presuppositions anchored in modernity's ontological homage to a Cartesian dualism that separates minds from bodies and spiritual from material substances." (2005). To combat the problematic character of this westernized definition of agency, scholars such as Coole, Koelsch, and Wong have demonstrated the necessity to expand the concept of agency and have introduced embodied agency, which acknowledges the inseparable nature of the body, mind, and spirit. I expand upon this definition further by defining embodied agency as the innate and subjective process in which your social or physical body acts (or plans to act) free of perceived influence. In other words, I will be discussing embodied agency as a fluid state of empowerment situated in every living being and in every environment.

⁸ Although the definition of agency has been debated amongst philosophers, social scientists, and IR scholars alike, there has only been one traditional definition to human agency: the capacity for an individual to make choices and act of their own free will (MacGinty 2014, Parsell et. al)

While other academic works have argued that human bodies themselves have agency after death, my claim regarding embodied agency a more appropriate term to use in scholarly research seems mild, but the idea uncovers much about the connection between agency and the body. Centering the body requires recognizing the work of corporeality thinkers like Wilcox, Coole, Narozhna, and Åhäll who suggest that the body needs to be a part of the conversation on agency because of the inherent necessity for the sensorial inputs being picked up from the body that informs the degree of agency. Research into the perception of agency has found the body to be an active influence on the messaging coming from sensorial inputs, which suggests that both the body and the mind have a role in shaping our perception (Coole, 2005). Indeed, the body itself gives us the capacity for agency and resistance, as it molds our understanding of feeling and movement within the world (Wilcox, 2014). The state of our bodies determines the perception we hold of the world around us, and while IR and conflict studies more broadly focus on violence of war, the bodies that absorb the brunt of the violence are largely forgotten. Feminist scholars have attempted to fill this gap with phenomenological approaches to research, but scholarly theories on corporeality such as securitizing the body have remained at the outskirts of mainstream IR literature⁹. This has raised the barriers to entry for concepts like embodied agency to be more readily explored in the context of IR, but to do so, we must establish the connection between CRSV and agency.

During times of great strife within a state, the agency (as it is traditionally known) of an individual is inherently compromised; however, scholars such as Emirbayer and Mische believe that human agency has many theoretical dimensions to be analyzed through its own analytical

⁹ See Wilcox, Autcher, Koelsch, and Coole in Bibliography

category due to the temporally complex nature in which it functions within every individual (1998). I claim that embodied agency operates in flux, and therefore time and place must be a variable in which to measure the agency of individuals, for time and place can impact one's ability to work towards a goal. The ability for an individual to have full autonomy depends on their socioeconomic status, cultural stigmas, and access to health care (Bastick et al.), but that doesn't mean agency is unattainable. In fact, some scholars cite going about your everyday life in a conflict-zone as an act of resistance and agency, which ultimately reflects an embodied agentic experience (Mac Ginty 2014, Richmond & Mitchell 2011, Utas 2005, Welland 2018). Although this seems in conflict with the idea of agency as our ability to progress towards personal aspirations, embodied agency reveals an intertwined relationship between the capacity for action and the body itself (Wong 2018 & Coole 2005). One cannot move forward if the body cannot comply, which is why embodied agency is important to consider in the case of CRSV. Often times people being subjected to that type of violence have very little control over their bodies, and therefore we as scholars need to look deeper into what it means to have a sense of embodied agency when one's environment is restrictive.

There are many cultures throughout the world that have no word for agency, because the concept does not exist in the same way it does for us in the west. This demonstrates a unique issue with identifying agentic capabilities, as perception is key to deciphering the meaning of agency within a particular individual. Studies have shown the survivor's perception of the sexual assault greatly depends on the reaction of society as a whole, and this cultural bias extends to our sense of embodied agency (Koelsch). Sense of responsibility is often tied to agency, so when discussing agency of CRSV victims, the dualistic nature of agency must be noted, as cultural context can prescribe a sense of responsibility or guilt in survivors and victims (Koelsch). In fact,

the definition of agency itself has cultural implications, as the separation of the body and mind indicates a western way of thinking that does not accurately describe the experiences of communities to the south and east.

Utilizing sensory language to describe one's experience is not an innovative concept; however, within the context of embodied agency, this method of analysis assists in filling gaps within the literature that has neglected the physicalness of agency itself. Stallone suggests that the literature has failed to observe "the potential for victims' rational calculations and agency" which ultimately leaves readers "with the impression that sexual violence survivors are passive recipients of that violence" (2022). Because agency acts in tandem with the temporal dimension in which CRSV is being committed, using sensory memory as an analytical way to process how women strategically retain their agency creates a better understanding of what transpires physically and mentally (Welland 2018). Our bodies often absorb information from the surrounding environment before our brains have time to process and focusing on those little movements reveal acts of agentic embodiment that may seem like physiological responses, actually tell us more about what it means to have agency during a traumatic sexual assault and amid larger conflict more broadly. Likewise, focusing on the sensory experience allows me to directly compare and contrast the ways in which these women retain their psychological sense of self. Agentic embodiment will become apparent through the use of sensory language, as agency and the senses are inseparable within human experience.

SENSORY EXPERIENCE

Philosophers of the early 1700's posed a thought experiment that questioned the meaning of existence without the senses: "If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it

make a sound?” Although this inquisition does not apply directly to the study of CRSV, the quote demonstrates the intrinsic reliance human beings have on their senses. The concept of describing an event without a sensorial way to recall or illustrate their experience does not exist because sense is essential to life. The perception or processing of information based off the five senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste) is referred to as a sensory experience, but how do the senses interact with the conception of human agency? Sense is inherently tied to agency, as theoretical models have shown noise and touch to be integral towards developing the feeling of control over oneself (Constant et al.). Because of this connection, I use embodied agency as a way of including the physical feeling or sensory input that shapes the capacity for agency within a subject. Because this research grapples with the distinctively horrendous experience of CRSV, the use of sensory recall as a tool for analysis inherently fits due to the essential nature of the senses to the preservation of life. Afterall, how would we know we existed at all without a sense of place and time? Sensory recall is not often highlighted in academic literature as a common form of analysis, but is important to conflict studies, as violence happens between people who share chaotic sensory experiences (Muffly 2014, Welland 2018). In particular, it has been found that sexual trauma is closely correlated with the use of sensory recall (Peace et al.), indicating a need to interact with the sensory nature of CRSV.

In this way, sensory processing is vital for analyzing data, as “much of what we know and remember is based on our bodily and sensual experiences” (Alexander 2012). Likewise, encountering a violent or traumatic event can greatly affect your ability to use your senses effectively when processing information (Muffly 2014). This indicates that senses themselves cannot be strictly apathetic due to the biases of the mind and body’s own perception. Because the senses are the most innate form of environmental absorption (Piras et al.), it can be argued that

one's sense of agency is *reliant* on the sensory intake process. Does this mean sensory experience is not an objective one? Studies have shown that senses do differ depending on where one lives, suggesting a cultural and societal impact on the inputs we most rely on to navigate the world (Howes 2021). Ignoring the sensory experience because of perceived partiality creates a feedback loop within CRSV research that needs to be broken if scholars are serious about ending CRSV.

THREE MEMOIRS

I employ three memoirs written by women who had survived through inner-state conflict, and experienced CRSV as a result: *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* by Le Ly Hayslip; *Tears of the Desert* by Halima Bashir; and *The Last Girl* by Nadia Murad. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* reflects Le Ly's childhood and early adulthood in Vietnam during the American-Vietnamese War of the 1960's. Le Ly serves as a child soldier for the Viet Cong, before being exiled from the rebel group and forced on a journey through the countryside and into the big cities of Vietnam. *Tears of the Desert* depicts the life of a Sudanese woman named Halima who reflects on her childhood and the events leading up to the War in Darfur that took place in the early 2000's. As a female doctor in a largely patriarchal society, Halima has a unique perspective on the war and sexual violence happening in her country. *The Last Girl* follows Nadia, a Yazidi Iraqi girl whose village is attacked by ISIS and then taken into sexual slavery by the Islamic forces in the mid 2010's. Nadia persists through four months in ISIS captivity before ultimately escaping with the help of kind strangers and her brother who resided outside of ISIS controlled Iraq. Scenes of rape, murder, starvation, torture, loss of loved ones, violence, and death appear on the pages of

all three memoirs. Their stories are haunting reminders of humanity's most evil impulses, as they depict first-person accounts of sexual violence—the most selfish form of violence a human can subject another to. Though their writings are bleak, each author's use of descriptive language allows the reader a glimpse into their world, both culturally and sensorially. Because of the importance of the senses to embodied agency, the memoirs act as an optimal empirical basis for which my analysis derives.

Concerned with the sensory experience and embodied agency of CRSV survivors, this research paper utilizes memoirs because they are a first-hand account of the survivor's experience with conflict, violence, rape, and trauma. There have been a variety of mediums used by survivors of trauma to depict and process their experiences such as art, music, poetry, literature, research, and activism. These modes of storytelling are incredibly informational pieces of history that academics have long acknowledged but have not taken seriously in academic research (Sylvester 2013). The few who have succeeded in creating new and diverse scholarly works including Darby, Zehfuss, and Sylvester, have in fact used *fictional* works of literature within their research, whereas this report utilizes memoirs which are *non-fiction* pieces. While some scholars have criticized the use of personal memoirs as inherently bias and thus disqualified for use in serious academic research (Foucault 1980, Léger 2001), the *advantages* to using these personal experiences are the subjective thoughts, feelings, and questions about historical events (MacGinty 2021). Likewise, I found that the memoirs were much more detailed and descriptive than simple interviews that often do not last long enough to go through the subject's entire life. The use of memoirs also diversifies academic sources more broadly, as many scholarly works are written by white western writers (Nadar 2014). Given that much of CRSV takes place outside of the white western bubble, using memoirs was essential to the authenticity

of the research for this piece, as culture has a large impact on embodied agency. The utilization of memoirs in my research on the sensory experiences of women who face CRSV will create a different perspective for which IR scholars can better understand conflict as it relates to embodied agency and patriarchal systems.

Although I sought to pick three memoirs that varied in space and time, all three authors described a pre-existing culture of male dominance. Given the power imbalance that CRSV inherently create between men and women, the influence of patriarchal socialization cannot be ignored, as it inherently effects one's embodied agency. Each woman reflected on a time in which they witnessed their fathers physically harming their mothers. Le Ley notes that the Vietnamese phrase *do danh vo* indicated 'show of male power' or when a man physical disciplines their wife and children (Hayslip 1989). This indicates a large social power imbalance between men and women in the Vietnam that Le Ly grew up in, which limits her sense of embodied agency. Although these were not everyday occurrences for any of the authors growing up, the acts of domestic violence committed in front of them reflects societies in which men have much power and control over women during times of peace, which tells us much about the treatment of women during wartime. Demonstrated through numerous societal restraints, religious practices, and cultural taboos that all three survivors endured, the prevalence of male power is evident throughout all three texts. These patriarchal social structures undoubtedly play a role in the prevalence of CRSV, but these systems also affect the degree to which each author understands and conceptualizes their sense of embodied agency.

This investigation into the sensory experience of CRSV survivors draws memoirs into IR literature on conflict to describe the misunderstood concept of agency. Through the literary analysis of each memoir, this paper draws out the sensorial language used in CRSV scenes

within the books. Passages utilizing the five senses were drawn out to compare and contrast with CRSV scenes in the other two memoirs. Through my analysis of the documents, three common sensory experiences were detected: sound, sight, and touch. This discovery along with preexisting theory on agency resulted in the interpretation of embodied agency within each survivor. The following sections will dive into the analysis of the text, providing insight into the what the senses can relay to us about our own perception and agency. Each section will demonstrate the necessity for scholars to expand their understanding of embodied agency through my interpretation of each sensory experience. Ultimately the goal of scholars in the fields of IR, conflict studies, and CRSV is to end the prevalence of horrendous violence throughout the world, but without a greater understanding for different types of thought surrounding agency and free-will, the path to peace will remain hidden.

THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS

Before

The body has a way of warning human beings when danger is near which often gets labeled as an ‘animalistic’ or ‘basic’ instinct, but our sense of survival is really in a category all its own (Howes 2005). Our survival instincts are engrained within our sensory inputs because of our basic desire to survive. These senses are our way of understanding the world, and are the first to signal us to nearby danger. Within all three cases of CRSV described in each memoir, the authors noted the sounds of their attackers’ footsteps. This reveals how attuned people are to the sounds of movement when in states of distress. In *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, a

pregnant Le Ly recalls walking home alone on the dark streets of Da Nang¹⁰, when she suddenly hears “the sounds of shuffling feet” behind her (Hayslip, 202). This observation reveals two important details to both Le Ly and readers: (1) there is more than one individual behind her and (2) those people weren’t talking to each other. This recollection illustrates her innate sense of embodied agency, as her body and mind work in tandem to assess her situation. Her ears pick up the sounds, which the mind then processes, giving Le Ly the chance to act. Le Ly makes the decision to turn her body towards the sound and observes three young boys following her down the street. At first, Le Ly is not worried because the boys do not appear to be soldiers and they even smile at her, but when she doesn’t hear them talking, Le Ly knows she’s in trouble (202). This exemplifies the importance of place and time when defining embodied agency, as Le Ly recognizes that the absence of voices indicates danger for her because of her lived experience with boys and men during wartime Vietnam. Le Ly then accelerates her pace in response to the silence, but as she does, she hears “their footsteps speed up” behind her and is ultimately overpowered by the group of boys (Hayslip, 202). Le Ly’s heightened sense of sound warned her of nearby attackers and allowed her a chance to escape, but more importantly, allowed her embodied agency moments to prepare herself mentally for what was to come. Likewise, she identified multiple pairs of footsteps, and the speed at which they were moving. She also noted that the approaching people were not talking, which suggested to her that the boys were intending to attack. All of these indicators allowed Le Ly to make the decision to run and eventually fight her pursuers. This is just one way our sense of sound can *warn* us of danger and thus gives one an embodied sense of agency.

¹⁰ Located in Central Vietnam, Da Nang is the third largest Vietnamese city and acted as a large military base for the Republic and their American allies during the American-Vietnamese War.

In the Moment

While footsteps can indicate an attack beforehand, the sound also represents our tether to this world. After being kidnapped by the Janjaweed (a militia known for committing acts of sexual violence and ethnic cleansing in Sudan) for her professional involvement with medically treating a classroom of young girls who had suffered brutal beatings and rape by Janjaweed soldiers, Halima is blindfolded and taken to a dark cell, where soldiers then assault her as they did the young girls. The following excerpt describes her experience being beaten and raped by Janjaweed soldiers during this period:

“I stepped into the room, and without warning, the beating began. I was kicked hard in the stomach. As I doubled up with pain, further kicks and blows rained down on my legs, hips, and shoulders. I fell to the floor and tried to cover my head with my arms. A boot made contact with my face, a searing white light shooting through my eye socket. Another kick to the head, this one smashing into the fingers of my hand with a crunch of breaking bone.

The **scrunch of soles turning** on the bare concrete floor. **The dull thump of booted feet slamming** into my soft, fleshy parts. The silence. Tensing myself for the next blow, but none coming. Just silence, as I lie there scrunched in a ball on the cold hard floor. Silence- for a second or a minute, or an hour? I am in too much pain to register such things.”

- *Tears of the Desert* pg. 223

While recalling this harrowing attack, Halima accounts for each footstep from the moment she steps into the room, until the moment the footsteps of her attackers disappear down the hall of the building holding her in. This encapsulates the essence of embodied agency, as the mind and body work together in order to process the unjust treatment. Being able to decide for yourself first means understanding one's environment, even if that situation or place is not safe. This is exemplified in the scene above, for Halima describes the sounds of feet turning on the ground, indicating where her attackers are, and where they might be going. Likewise, she notes the sound of the soldier's boots hitting her, which tells her what is hitting her and likely how hard she is

being hit. Although Halima is powerless in this moment, her senses are still in overdrive, trying to give her indicators of what's happening to her. Furthermore, the sounds keep her alert to the attack, as physical attacks often overstimulate the body and start numbing the individual from the pain. Even if there is not necessarily anything she can physically do at that moment in time, being more informed about her predicament and that of her enemy's position allows her a sense of agency for future thought in protecting and eventually healing herself. Although CRSV can be difficult for a lone person to escape, this does not mean that one's agency is gone. Our senses are always trying to help us make sense of the world in tandem with our minds, which creates a spectrum of agentic capabilities that stem from physical reactions to mental agility. Even after the immediate danger no longer poses a threat, the fear of future torture and rape remains a stain that negatively effects how one interacts with the world around them.

After

The Janjaweed soldiers slam the door of the cellar shut and Halima hears the key turning in the lock as the soldier's boot crunch away from her. Not only does this inform Halima that the soldiers were gone from the room but also relays the message that they have left that area of the building complex all together. At this point, Halima's hands are tied up, her sense of sound is alert and ready to alarm her of the soldiers' comings and goings. Although these are small comforts, at least she has some forewarning, which allows her time to make decisions in how she will conduct herself. After the solitary nature of Halima's confinement registers in her mind, begins to kick a nearby wall to let her captors and nearby rats know that she's still conscious and alive with the ability to fight back (225). This expression of resistance reinforces my argument, as the sound of footsteps fading away give Halima the ability to physically and emotionally react in solitude. Embodied agency emphasizes the role of the body and its interaction with

surroundings that shape our perception of the world, and Halima's reaction after she hears the footsteps of her attackers trail off demonstrates her rage, contempt, and fight as she grapples with the invasive bombardment of violence that has plagued her life.

In Nadia's retelling of her abduction and enslavement by ISIS forces, she recalls being put on a bus in the dead of night with the other girls from her village after being separated from their families. The girls on the bus did not know where they were going or if they'd ever see their families again, and to add insult to injury, an ISIS soldier named Abu Batat walked up and down the aisle of the bus to molest the girls sitting in the aisle seats. The proceeding quote describes the sensorial experience of being on one of these ISIS buses:

“Abu Batat continued walking up and down the aisle, pausing in front of the girls he liked best. When I closed my eyes, **I could hear the swish of his baggy white pants and his sandals slapping against his feet.** Every few moments a voice in Arabic would come in on the radio he held in one hand, but **it was too staticky to make out** exactly what it was saying.”

- *The Last Girl* pg. 120

Dampening a sense like sight as Nadia does by closing her eyes, or as Halima does by being blindfolded, pushes the other four senses to the forefront and thus embodied agency becomes more prevalent as noted above. Nadia actively closes her eyes as a protective mechanism by which to process her abduction, but the sound of Abu Batat's pants and the slapping of her sandals keeps her connected to the reality she faces at the same time. Left in the darkness, all three authors proved that an embodied sense of agency relies on all physical sensations, and when sight is dimmed, the other senses are aroused to protect and detect threats. Although one might panic in traumatic situations such as these, the human body moves quickly in tandem with one's spirit and consciousness to keep alive the will of the individual.

EYES WIDE SHUT

Vision is an important part of the sensorial experience, for it is the sense most relied on in everyday life, and the target of manipulative motivations. Why are so many children afraid of the dark? Why does the darkness dispel all notions of time and place? When darkness consumes one's vision, the other four senses work in tandem to illustrate an alternative perception of one's surroundings. While Halima is forcibly blinded by her assailants, Le Ly and Nadia intentionally closed their eyes to protect themselves from the horrors of violence. While Halima did not have a choice in losing her vision, Le Ly and Nadia intentionally shut their eyes not only as a physical and emotional shield, but also as an act of defiance that is noted in Nadia's memoir:

“Salman hit me all the time. He hit me when he was displeased with the way I cleaned the house, when he was angry about something from work, if **I cried or kept my eyes closed while he raped me.**”

- *The Last Girl* pg. 172

Her captor and forced husband Salman becomes angered by her shuttered eyes due to the intrinsic value of sight which indicates a sense of control or power. Wanting complete dominance over Nadia, he becomes enraged, as her refusal to look at him indicates disrespect on the side of his slave. There is an aspect to one's sense of vision that encapsulates an understanding of the world around you, but during times of disorder, this sense must sometimes be stifled in order to gain control over one's sense of agency. Not only does closing one's eyes while being subjected to rape signify embodied agency through the intertwined reasoning of the body and brain but also signifies resistance to the sexual assault. Vision give us a quick sense of place and time, which provides the mind with information on which to act, but taking away that sense can also show scholars how the body cares for the mind (sometimes to its own detriment) by shuttering out

overwhelming images and sensory information. Being beholden to others does not necessarily indicate that one has no agency but instead indicates low levels of agentic capabilities given the surrounding environment.

The eye has long been a symbol for truth and knowledge, and those are both attributes coveted by Nadia, Halima, and Le Ly, who grew up in religious households that taught reverence in these beliefs. The eyes often tell us much about what a person feels and thinks, and while this may be labeled simply as body language, in truth the eyes are a primary actor in the embodied agency process. The catalyst of Halima's abduction and subsequent rape and torture, occurs on a sunny day, when a classroom of schoolgirls who have been raped by the Janjaweed soldiers appear in Halima's office for medical treatment, she notes the eyes of a girl who had been raped and beaten as follows:

"I reached for the little girl's face, one side of which was swollen and bloody. I probed around the wound. She'd been hit with a blunt instrument—probably a rifle butt—and needed stitches. But there were other, more urgent, priorities. **I checked her eyes: They were dead and glazed with shock. Unseeing.** But at least she was still conscious..."

Tears of the Desert pg. 212-213

The oldest of the girls that Halima treated that day was thirteen years old, the youngest just seven, and without adequate supplies, the children were treated without sedatives (Bashir, 216). The eyes speak to Halima because they show the "fear and agony" felt by the girls, while other sets of young eyes displayed an inward retreat to "a fairy-tale landscape of childhood innocence where the horrors had no way" of reaching them (Bashir, 212). These are forms of communication that our body reflects when our mind and spirit have lost the will to do so. Now while this could be conducive to the theory that these women and girls should simply be labeled

victims, this term does not appropriately address the agentic fight that these girls went through to retain sanity and agency during the attack.

While for some the eyes are a window into the soul of another person, for others sight indicates life and the persistence of our will to live. For twelve-year old Le Ly, who had been raped for the first time by a Viet Cong soldier from her village named Loi while another soldier she knew called Mau watched, the sound of rapping on the door of the nearby hut she had escaped to, and the sight of Mau meant death (Hayslip 113). Mau takes her into the jungle and pushes her to the ground, as he does so, Le Ly recalls the following:

“I squealed and **covered my face**, expecting him to beat me, but instead he sat on my stomach and aimed his rifle at my head.

‘I’m— I’m sorry, Miss Ly’ —his voice quivered more than mine— ‘but this is something I have to do!’

My god— here it comes! I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. I tilted my head upward to give him a better shot. I didn’t want him to miss or just wound me. I wanted him to end it— to end all this, to end everything now all at once. This was god’s mercy. I would wait for peace no longer.

But Mau didn’t fire. Instead, rough male hands again tore down my pants. **I opened my eyes to see Mau struggling feverishly with his belt, the rifle crooked absently in his arm.”**

- *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* pg. 114

Le Ly goes on to think about how easy it would be to disarm and even kill Mau herself, but then thoughts of the future and retribution cross her mind. Rife with “hate and fear and confusion,” Le Ly laid back and didn’t fight Mau as he raped her. Many girls and women don’t fight back against their attackers so that they aren’t murdered, but this has socially affected the way survivors perceive themselves, as many feel culpable for the rape as they didn’t physically resist. This cultural and social impact has huge implications for the manner in which survivors perceive their actions in the world, as many women decided to bury their past instead of confronting their truth.

BURNING FIRE

Fire has been a symbol of divinity, destruction, control, and superiority since the earliest recorded written works, and is often used as a sensory descriptor as demonstrated by all three memoirs. Particularly important to the people of Sudan and those who believe in Islam, fire is a symbol of divine light and punishment. Halima uses the burning sensation of the fire as a descriptor for her pain and agony while being tortured and raped. After her attack, she describes her pelvic region as burning, and she knows instinctively that it is infected (Bashir 229). Fire is an all-consuming force that wipes out everything in its path, and this is how Halima feels her life has burned after her horrific experience with CRSV. Later, when Halima is returned home and starts to recover, she describes herself as “a phoenix rising from the ashes,” of her own shattered dreams (Bashir 235). In this way, Halima owns her pain and past before symbolically burning the memories away to start again. The description of this burning sensation indicates the power of the moment for these women as they are brutally violated. Relating one’s experience to fire indicates an elevated awareness of danger and also alludes to a battle for control of their agency. Likewise, using ‘burning’ as a description in itself leads to a sense of being awake and alert in the face of tremendous danger. I think that the cultural, sensory, linguistic, and physical aspects to the use of burning or fire as a descriptor for understanding the experience of CRSV, and conflict more generally.

Fire is also used as a touch descriptor by Nadia the first time she is molested by Abu Batat on the ISIS bus which she detailed as follows:

“I closed my eyes again, praying that he [Abu Batat] would go away, and then I felt his hand move slowly across my shoulder, brushing my neck, and then **down the front of my dress until it stopped over my left breast. It felt like fire**; I had never been touched like that before. I open my eyes, but didn’t look at him, I just look straight ahead.”

- *The Last Girl* pg. 119

Using a descriptor like fire in the context of CRSV indicates a strong emotional response to the attack and demonstrates Nadia’s embodied agency through the use of poignant language to describe her physical and spiritual anguish. Likewise, Nadia describes the fire of Abu Batat’s touch before fighting back the next time he approaches her (120). This furthers the theory of embodied agency, as the results of her previous inaction coils within her mind ultimately resulting in Nadia’s resistance of Abu Batat’s next attack. Likewise, she continues the language of fire later by describing how the pain of the fire she felt in her chest evolved to a dull ache. Burn victims often describe feeling an ache after the initial sting of the fire dissipates and the skin begins to heal. This reflects the mental processing that Nadia goes through in the first moments of her abduction and abuse, as the pain of being molested dulls, the sensation wains, and her mind begins to try processing her trauma, but ultimately this cannot happen because her abuse become repetitive, signifying an unhealed wound disguised as a dull ache.

THE DITCOTOMY BETWEEN NUMBNESS AND AGENCY

The opposite of sensation is numbness, and when our senses are overloaded, the human body acts to protect our mind and spirit. As a last line of defense, the body and mind succumb to numbness during times of trauma and violence. That being said, this numbness does not indicate the theft of one’s agency but instead demonstrates the lengths to which our bodies and mind will go to retain its agency. The feeling of numbness often leaves one in a disoriented state, as

depicted in Le Ly's recollection of the aftermath of her rape. She describes her thoughts as follows:

"I tried to think but **my brain was as numb as my body**... I have been raped— I now knew the horror that every woman dreads. What had been saved a lifetime for my husband had been ripped away in less time than it takes to tell. Most horrible of all was that the act of making life itself had left me feeling dead. The force of Loi's twisted soul had entered me and killed me as surely as his knife. **He could shoot me now— I wouldn't even feel the bullet.**"

- *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* pg. 111

Le Ly is in a state of shock as she comes to grips with what she has just had to endure. Only twelve years old at the time, she was sexually assaulted by the very forces she fought to protect— the Viet Cong. This inflicts damage on many emotional, psychological, and physical levels, as Le Ly also lives in a culture that judges girls very harshly for having sex before marriage even if it is forced upon them. Often times, this numbness or disassociation acts as a protection or warning of the pain being inflicted on one's body and soul. Le Ly feels as if she has no future in this moment, and to fight this deflated sense of agency, the body numbs itself to the outside world, in the hopes that the mind will recover. The importance of the death of the soul cannot be overstated, for this spiritual defeat reflects Le Ly's feeling of hopelessness for her situation as her mind and body continue forward.

As Halima is gang raped by Janjaweed soldiers, she describes how her body and mind shut down as she is tormented, and because they don't kill her, she succumbs to the numbness. The body shuts down as a form of protection, and if the soldiers want them to feel pain, embracing the nothingness for a time, acts as rebellion against their attackers' wishes.

"I stared at him with dull, unseeing eyes. **I saw nothing.** I was in a far-away place where my god had taken me, **a place where they couldn't reach me anymore. I was safe there.** It wasn't death, which is what I'd asked for and begged for and prayed for. But it was the next best thing— the next best thing that my god could do for me in the circumstances."

Halima claims that it is her god that took her away for the time being, but she herself has control over her body, and though no human can intentionally numb themselves to pain without medicine, Halima demonstrates embodied agency through this unintentional act of numbing her brain to the torture she endures. Likewise, this callback to escaping within one's own mind represents embodied agency further, as the mind creates a safe scenario while the body and spirit absorbs the violence.

The repeated act of rape and violence to a person causes all senses, even that of fear, to disappear as Nadia notes in *The Last Girl*. After months of sexual abuse, rape, and beatings by the ISIS commander that bought her, Nadia describes that she "...lost all fear of ISIS and of rape. I was just numb." (Murad, 186). She goes on to describe a life in which "your body doesn't belong to you, and there's no energy to talk or to fight or to think about the world outside. There is only rape and the numbness that comes with accepting that this is now your life." (Murad, 186). While the dismal scene that Nadia paints for readers seemingly describes a life without agency, it also indicates that give up hope drives much of this listlessness. Her body unconsciously knows how to buy Nadia the time she needs to escape her captor by numbing her experience so that she does not completely give up. The embodiment of agentic sensation reveals to us our most primal nature, and Nadia's experience details this conclusion through her depiction of CRSV, as she is subjected to rape repeatedly— unlike the others, she remains in the numbness long after the rape, as if it were the only way she knew how to live after being assaulted. Although all three authors described this numbness as a soul sucking void in their lives, I also argue that the numbness proves how the body and mind fluctuate greatly when enacting embodied agency.

CONCLUSION

Investigating the sensory experiences of CRSV survivors has produced an enormous amount of insight into the ways in which our physical body interacts with the mind. In the aftermath of state conflict, the individual and collective stand on unstable ground as mistrust and trauma haunt those who remain alive. Building back a strong sense of embodied agency in people is critical to transitioning from war to peacetime because the ability to feel control over oneself builds confidence and security. This paper has revealed the importance of sensory description in analyzing CRSV, as it has illuminated the importance of an all-encompassing definition of embodied agency to survivors of CRSV. While it is clear that CRSV is a serious war crime that has not been properly addressed, other phenomenological approaches to conflict studies and IR more generally need to be explored. My research into three memoirs reflecting each author's experience of CRSV has provided insights into the ways in which we (the inner self and the body) instinctively fight for agency, even under moments of duress. From physical acts of self-defense to the echoes of footsteps long had, the sensory experience is a large and vast area of scholarship that has yet to be connected to mainstream academia. The personal experience of people who have experienced great violence like CRSV needs to be further dissected in order to understand the complex layers of these phenomenon, as sensory heavy subject like conflict and assault require an experience-based approach to research. Through the experiences of Halima, Le Ly, and Nadia, my analysis has concluded that embodied agency in the context of war does exist, even during moments of seemingly complete domination. The importance of this finding cannot be understated as violence is incredibly sensory in nature and thus cannot be discussed without including personal depictions of CRSV. Everything from language to mathematics is sensory based, and scholars must account for this reality when

grappling with the embodied agency of CRSV survivors, as agency (like us) inherently relies on the five senses.

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