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Sounds of War: 'Lie'

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SUSANNA HAST, APR 6 2018

This is an exerpt from *Sounds of War: Aesthetics, Emotions and Chechnya* – an E-IR open access book by Susanna Hast.

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You can listen to all the songs featured in this book on the companion website.

I don't make songs about Chechnya anymore. I have not in a long time. The songs arrived in a rather compact timeframe, at a time when I realised it was one thing to study states and structures, and another to study human life. War touched, and touch could not be intellectualised or articulated with jargon. Lie was the last one. When I took it down, sitting on my living room floor, I realised that something had changed. I no longer considered the songs separate from my own life, but began to see how I was writing from my own dark places. Lie became more personal, and once that happened, all songs became personal, and I saw them from a new perspective. That is when seeds of doubt were planted. Seeds of doubt about what I was doing in the first place. What was I singing, and why? Returning to Ranciére (2016), art affects by defining ways of being together and being separated. The songs can be seen as defining togetherness and separateness. That is the territory where the songs move, for me. The impact of aesthetics is unpredictable – it is in the moving of bodies, the rearrangement of the sensual. The songs are a dialogue about the ethics and aesthetics of researching war. I did not only write myself in, I let the research write something on my body, and I changed.

"Lie"

Forget-me-not objects rising from beneath,
sharing stories of lived lives of people

Handcuffed to the trees the spirits pled for mercy,
and they're numb and they regret
not rejoicing to the full
When they still had the chance
When they still had the chance

But you know they played music very loud,
and I know how they played to the night
How they played to the night

It's a lie to say I don't
It's a lie to say I won't

It's a lie to say they're dead,
when born to the painful
Cause items from beneath

are not those of the never-land

Real people held hands
They painted the walls
They cried out loud
They cried out loud

It's a lie to say I don't
It's a lie to say I won't

One last time
Floating in the air
Catch them stories

Read them aloud
And hold them dear
And hold them dear

They Painted the Walls

This book has sought aesthetic insight into lived experiences and emotions in Chechnya. The focus has been on embodiment as a research method and the body as the site of emoting. Sources included two autobiographies (Baiev et al. 2003; Terloeva 2006), three documentary films (*Barzakh*, *Children of Beslan*, *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia*), one motion picture (*12*) and interviews (with Ali and Said 2017). Film, in particular, allows a reading of the body though senses. It provides access to spaces I could not have travelled to and points of view I would not have thought of.

In the documentary film *Barzakh* (Chapter four), a woman is painting the ceiling of her house. Painting a ceiling is hard work. Arms begin to hurt after a while because you need to keep them straight up. I wonder why she is doing the painting, why not a young brisk man, for example? Are they gone, the young men who could help her? I wonder why the process of painting seems so inefficient and slow. The brush is too small for painting a ceiling, and the paint looks watery. Is she just trying to pass the time? Is she repairing something which will never be finished? Painting appears again later in the film, when men are standing in a cell where people were tortured and killed. A man tells how they had to whitewash the bloody walls and floors. Paint away with fresh white the colour of deep red blood. Paint away the proof, clean up the mess as a part of the collective punishment.

The material world is affective too, and deeply so. Remembering and forgetting are attached to places and spaces. Russian soldiers violated the homes of Chechens, looting, breaking and even defecating inside their houses or inside a mosque as Politkovskaya (2003) describes. Soldiers violated the home of Milana Terloeva (2006) too, using books as toilet paper, destroying art works and her spring dress – a violation completely unnecessary and very personal. There is nothing rational about defecating all around someone's home. Emotions are constitutive of war. The scene of the painting encapsulates the rebuilding of lives only for everything to be destroyed again. In the torture cell, the imprisoned were painting over the sins of the torturers, knowing that the walls will be covered in blood soon again. In the material realm of war, money paid for the victims in Beslan meant a calculation of how much their suffering was worth. Baiev's care for the cow Zoyka makes the reader realise that Zoyka is a dear companion to her family, a valuable life in herself, not just a provider of milk.

I began my research focussed on compassion. Compassion, which I define as embodied courage and vulnerability – a connection between individuals or groups. If we only focus on studying violence in war, we risk becoming voyeuristic and hopeless. I ended up expanding the study to include love and children's agency which I felt merited attention because the themes pushed forward from the material. Love, because it comes so close to compassion, yet has its own peculiarities through the intimacy of the relationship. Children, who are in need of protection and whose role in war can be underestimated. With this book, I have tried to emphasise how war is not something that just

happens to children and to women, and suggested that we need to engage with our emotions as researchers and spectators, *with an enhanced awareness of corporeality – the kinaesthetic-emotional relationship to the other.*

In this book, I have conveyed stories of compassion as embodied. I have taken the *Bodhisattva Never Disparaging* (Chapter three) as the model of compassion which is indiscriminating and manifests corporeally. I have theorised emotion through neuroscience as emoting in the body, and through enactivism, the singularity of body and mind. This enabled me to shift attention to the far ends of the radar, to think about compassion through Khassan Baiev's hands, his miraculous rescue from the pit, and the female nurses who worked alongside him. The corporeality of compassion is exemplified in the experience of Milana Terloeva (2006) who was touched by the pain she saw in the eyes of the man who came to tell his story to the journalists. It is not just the story about the murder of his family, but his entire face which revealed suffering before the man began to talk.

In Chapter four, I took embodiment a step further by suggesting that dance can be a form and expression of compassion, as well as resistance. Bodily movement, kinaesthesia and choreography transmit emotions from the self to the other. The body is a site of powerful war experience, and the body is the site of healing. Trauma is a physical state as much as a psychological one – the entire body responds to trauma. Because the entire body needs to recover from trauma, to stop signalling danger, I propose, the dancer can tap into her own body as a site of healing, hope and also compassion. Dance and movement therapy have been developed as a means for a body-based tool for healing. In a community in which formal dance therapy is unavailable, the practice of dance can still work as a method of self-healing.

The metaphor of the eagle signifies the dancer's freedom, and freedom in general, in Chechnya. The dancer remembers and lives freedom in the moment. In the film *Barzakh*, dance brings a relief and it connects people. In the film *12*, compassion manifests through synchronous embodiment. Members of the jury remember suffering in their bodyminds while the accused young Chechen begins to embody hope through his dance. Bodies become out of joint, they change together. Emoting, rather than 'rational deliberation' causes the jury members to finally vote not guilty and abandon their prejudice. The film shows how compassion is embodied; for the jury members, compassion is not a strategy or a performance, it is lived. At the same time, *12* comments on war in Chechnya, and how war continues to be lived.

In Chapter five, the children in Beslan, Kronstedt, Grozny and Ingushetia are not reducible to representations of helpless victims. They embody agency, they form and express political opinions based on their experiences. Children, even if in need of protection, are capable individuals who affect their environments. When we categorise children through their victimhood, we can miss the important role children play in the society. If we do not listen to them or see them, we miss their insights, creativity and coping mechanisms. The scene of Hadijat taking away the children from their sick mother is an example of the difficulty that comes with judging compassion by behaviour. In war everyone is abandoned. The experience of abandonment travels from the carnal level throughout the society, all the way to the international. As Milana Terloeva (2006) writes, Chechnya was abandoned by the rest of the world. Yet, even in the most horrific conditions of war, Zina and Deni fell in love in a Russian detention centre. In Chapter six, I discussed how relationships are broken by war, but also how love can work its way through the most challenging of circumstances. The politics of love lies in the aesthetics, arrangement and rearrangement of sensual settings. Love is a transformative power. This is why I would like to see more research on how war ruins and enables love.

Collective Emotions

Traumatic experiences weigh heavily on collective emotions. As Bleiker and Hutchison (2008a: 387) write, "We believe there is evidence to suggest that an active engagement with emotions can actually be a source of political imagination, inspiration and hope." A politics of grief then involves questioning pre-conceived ideas about how individuals and societies can best deal with past violence. Bleiker and Hutchison hope that by addressing collective emotions, it will be possible to cultivate empathy and compassion. In Chapter two, I introduced the history of war in Chechnya, and discussed how history and historical memories are part of the collective identity. As an example, Ali (2017) told me that, under Kadyrov, difficult history is being erased from the public consciousness. He tells me that in

Chechnya, people are not allowed to talk about the deportations of 1944 anymore, as if they did not happen. Moreover, Kadyrov has forbidden the mourning day of February 23rd and introduced a new national holiday – a solidarity day – to be observed on May 8th, the day his father died. This is an attempt to rewrite history for the purpose of constructing a new national identity.

Overcoming collective trauma requires dealing with it openly and publicly. We have no indication that such a development is taking place in Russia. The Russian government has denied atrocities such as abductions and torture, and families affected have had very little possibility to seek redress through the domestic judicial system (Van der Vet 2013). They have had to file applications to the European Court of Human Rights with the help of NGOs. Amnesty International (2009) stated with regards to the decision by Russia to end the counter-terrorism operation in Chechnya, that, "normalization is not possible without full accountability for the gross human rights violations of the last 10 years." Acknowledging, commemorating and remembering are important. There is no such climate or political space in Russia or Chechnya in which emotions and trauma could be collectively engaged with. There is no space in which collective fear could give way to healing.

Hutchison (2016) writes about collective trauma as a social phenomenon beyond individual PTSD. Collective trauma affects how people and governments perceive security issues and identities. Trauma isolates individuals but it also shapes political communities. Hutchison (2016: 4) refers to *affective community*, a community welded together by shared emotional understanding of a tragedy. In the case of Chechnya, collective trauma has a long history. Resistance, endless hope and tradition have been seen as the only means to survive as a people. Shaming is part of that heritage although shame is not something that helps people survive, but the contrary. Shame isolates and traumatises, in Chechnya and elsewhere. Shame is the dark side of vulnerability and a hindrance to healing and compassion.

Compassion is a central social emotion, and thus important for understanding war experience. I regard compassion, kindness and love in war as forms of resistance because they provide hope as opposed to fear, anger and resentment – emotions typically associated with war (see Petersen 2011). Baiev helping the Russian doctor Sasha escape is an example of grassroots resistance to war and its affective economy (Baiev et al. 2003). Chechen wedding dance is an example of how people do not let war defeat them or let resentment and fear define them. Despite the stillness of the scenes in *Barzakh*, Chechens dance at a wedding.

One can dismiss examples presented in this study as anomalies which require no paradigm change. We can keep to disembodied readings of politics, see the private experience as irrelevant to the larger structures of war and politics, and narrow the study of war as lived experience to pain and suffering. But neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran writes about how he typically studied only a few patients but ended up discovering more than just the particularities of individual cases; he learned things that helped him formulate general theories about perception, memory and consciousness (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998). One person who manifests compassion in war is not an anomaly – she is proof of the capacity of the human being. Perhaps by looking into compassion, love and vulnerability, we can learn also about collective emotions related to experiences of war. Through this we can develop more practices which promote peaceful co-existence.

Collective emotions are, in my view, wonderfully visible in the choreography of Chechen dance. The dancer and the spectator both participate in the production of knowledge and insight. Dancing raises the possibility of remembering the forgotten self, and the synchronised tapping of hands at a wedding produces muscular bonding and potentially, well-being. Rhythm is collective, it means attuning the inside with the outside. Synchronous movement between bodies has been shown in clinical trials to induce compassion, yet we need to investigate muscular bonding specifically in the context of war and conflict – a challenge I am embarking on next. Involuntary, or non- conscious, bonding can be excited through collective movement – I call it the boundless body not because bodies become one, but because people are touched by each other throughout the body whether they like it or not.

During this research, I have come to see compassion as something ordinary, subtle and discreet. One does not have to be a heroic individual in order to be compassionate, although some individuals seem to be extraordinarily brave. It is easy to look at the lives and stories of people who have become famous for their activism. Yet, compassion is not a

state of exception or the quality of some supreme individuals, but part of daily life and even mundane encounters – the ability to meet other bodies in dance, to discuss with other bodies in the war context, to show vulnerability, to see another person, to enjoy what there is to enjoy, to laugh, to clap hands and tap feet, to submerge in the dance – resists conflictual and violent meetings between bodies.

Bleiker and Hutchison (2008a) write that dealing with the trauma of war is a major political challenge. Reconciliation requires conscious political engagement with complicated collective emotions. What I suggest here is that we need to know what to look for when we want to engage with compassion. How we excite compassion and alleviate suffering depends on our under- standing of what compassion is and how it is embodied. The question is not only about how political elites can advocate for compassion, or how they can make compassionate policies, but how compassion can take root in people amidst war. Traumatic events can, in fact, pull people together, as Bleiker and Hutchison write. In order to stop the spiralling cycles of violence, collective emotions need to be addressed. Traumatic memories are passed down from one generation to the next, not only socially-politically but even genetically. For example, during and after war, children are born with disabilities caused by pollution from the war but also the stress and PTSD symptoms experienced by pregnant mothers. Emotions are not just personal, but we begin to comprehend collective emotions when we analyse at the micro-level.

Milana Terloeva's grandmother, who lived through Stalin's deportations, said to her granddaughter, "We will rebuild, like we always do. We have no right to despair. We are condemned to hope" (Terloeva 2006). How did Terloeva maintain hope in the aftermath of the second war? By going to the destroyed, but still standing, Grozny University, like so many other youth. They tried to create an illusion of normality. The children and youth affected by war craved everything ordinary. Education was an ordinary privilege even though it posed serious risks. Despite the ruins and sadness all around, Terloeva looks back on her student years in Grozny as happy times.

Wanting normalcy after a traumatic event is not about denying trauma or the need to mourn. In Beslan, the families could not continue their lives because life was stolen from them. The families in *Barzakh* could not continue living either because they hoped that the stolen lives would be returned one day. They kept searching, filing papers and waiting. So the woman keeps painting the ceiling with the small brush and watery paint. The fact that Milana Terloeva went to her beloved university is an embodiment of hope. Keeping to the illusion of normalcy was to have hope. There would be a future.

Their War, Our Music

[…] love and hate and anguish, the qualities of kindness and cruelty, the planned solution of a scientific problem or the creation of a new artefact are all based on neural events within a brain, provided that brain has been and now is interacting with its body. The soul breathes through the body, and suffering, whether it starts in the skin or in a mental image, happens in the flesh (Damasio 1995: xvii).

I believe it is of the utmost importance to value corporeal knowledge in science and in daily life. It is not even radical to be curious about the way the body moves, breathes and is. The body dances and it kills, and immersing oneself in the aesthetics of the body can lead to hidden insights. Bodily awareness is ordinary in many disciplines and practices. For some reason, the real living tissue seems to be off-limits for International Relations, unless it is studied as an object of politics – an *object body* – controlled, influenced, hurt, and acted upon. Yet, as an observer of aesthetics, there is no path to a discovery of the authentic lived body. To get to know the subject body, it would be necessary to interview people about their felt states. Such interviews were not possible in this study.

We act through the body. We act through the body as researchers too. As we act, we feel. As we feel, we act. As we perceive, we remember. As we remember, we perceive. We emote all the time. When I take my own body on stage, I take a risk. Every single time I perform, I come back to the questions: What are these songs supposed to mean? What are they supposed to do? Then I ask myself, *how* can I sing about war? Should I convey melancholy and sadness? War is about suffering after all. But my study is not, and people can dance to this music. So I never really wanted the listener to feel sadness, sorrow, guilt, or pity. To feel compassion, yes, and to begin to think anew.

We experience through an interaction of bodies, our lives are not separate and wholly private. We can never see what the other person is seeing, or feel what she is feeling – that is the private experience – but we never experience anything fully alone. Our experiences are interactions with the environment which includes all living beings we encounter. It is not only the mind-body separation that is problematic, but the separation of self from the environment is yet another illusion. When this illusion is shattered, we can see how war affects everyone – war travels within experiences and narratives through space and time.

I have taken this research through art outside the academic context. I have taken the songs to peace and discussion events, to bars and concert stages. These moments themselves have become pieces of art. These practices have also enabled randomness and the spontaneous participation of people from different walks of life. As an example, I gave my mobile phone to a spectator to film my performance which makes that person part of the artistic work (see: https://www.susannahast.com/sounds-of-war). This particular video is for a piece I made called *Dark place / Bright place* from a Valentine's Day peace walk event in Helsinki in February 2016. The idea was to narrate war but without offering an auditory representation of suffering. I used more cheerful music with the narration on violence (the dark place), and darker sounds for the part that takes the listener to a bright place. I wanted to suggest a different affective state with the text and the melody because, as Rancière (2008) suggests, aesthetic influence is a conflict between different orders of sensing. I wanted to prove that the body and the melody are involved in the emotional meaning-making then and there. I wondered if the listener would be disturbed by the conflict between narration and melody. But to my surprise, someone in the audience told me afterwards that it was easier to listen to the violent stories because of the funky melody. The melody made listening to the lyrics tolerable. That is, the melody and text together created a learning experience.

The point of researching war is not voyeurism, and research does not need to focus on violent images and stories. Research should provoke thought, sensibility and kindness. Then the performance becomes a dialogue in which the performer is willing to be seen, and the audience has the patience to participate. As I stated in the first chapter, research methods, theories and even scientific communication intertwine. I try to practise what I preach: connection. Later I received similar feedback – that the songs have an impact because they might not be easy or comfortable to listen to when you know the background. If successful, performance becomes an exercise in vulnerability and an analysis of power structures. When I perform, I am no longer arguing or educating, but I am still producing embodied insights. Doing art, I notice, I am doing research. I am making research and artistic practice ontologically one. This practice is not about self-indulgence, it is about making myself a political subject. Moreover, I could not do this alone.

Our music is like an unnatural soundtrack to a war experience which is not mine. The music in this book is not about the authentic voices of war; it is an aesthetic addition to a soundscape of war. Songwriting and performance are acts negotiating difference. It is not my war, but my body singing. The songs exist as if in-between bodies. As I perform, my body becomes so political it hurts. I keep thinking, what have I got the musicians playing with me into. They did not do the research with me, but on stage, they are doing the research with me. I want to smile, but I stop myself because it feels wrong. I want to dance, but that also feels weird. For a moment, I lose myself in the music, but then return to an uncomfortable state. I think of Baiev and how it felt wrong for him to listen to music in the hospital because it would seem like they were having fun. The body follows the beat, and there is nothing wrong with that. I wanted to make songs that inspire the body to move.

In the course of this research I have come to understand that in music, science and art meet spirituality. I believe spirituality helps to overcome the shame that can come from making oneself vulnerable. Throughout this project of understanding compassion, shame has been my loyal friend and dear companion. There are many practical implications for shame, but what they have in common is hiding. Shame is an ethos of our time, and yet it is invisible. Shame silences, prevents dancing and turns some people into killers. Shame is fundamentally political and in many ways gendered. Shame gives structure to power relations and defines good scholarship. When I wrote *Pit* I was not thinking about ever performing it. There was nothing performative about the song and so there was no shame. I simply felt joy from the creative process. The people who shared their stories overcame the shame they might have felt from being seen and known. This is a politics of compassion. These stories are vulnerability's good side. I have merely tried to collect and tie the stories together. We need to make these stories visible because we need to understand different points of view if we are to imagine alternatives to violence. Those in power must not be the only

ones allowed to create knowledge. I am concerned over my own use of power in the position of the specialist. I began songwriting because when I present myself as a singer, I give up the authority of the academic. This manifests concretely when my performance is not taken as scholarship, and when I am not referred to as a researcher while performing.

Sounds of Compassion

We are musical beings. The art of storytelling is common to music and science. In order to speak about music-making as a research practice together with the political, a new word was needed and it is *musistance*, or musical resistance. Musistance challenges sterile and disembodied academic ideals. Musistance makes passion central to the production of embodied insights. It challenges the binaries of body/mind and thinking/feeling. Musistance breaks the boundaries of theory, methodology and analysis.

I now realise that art is not just a methodology or the object of study, but the heart beating, the essence and the edge of things. It is not just that art talks to reality, constructs it or interprets it, but that reality itself is artistic. Reality itself is poetic, musical, rhythmical and pictorial. Dissolving the boundaries and borders of art, science and reality are practices. I cannot work my way through it in language alone. I have tried to be as direct and honest as possible in my writing because music creates connections, and vulnerability is the space in which I need to move as a researcher. The songs are the heart beating in this research, and nothing I say or write expresses the heart, the essence, the edge quite like the songs.

I cannot claim to have an ethical relationship to my object of study because I do not know how to eliminate power, or what a truly equal collaboration or consideration for the other looks like. Something which started from intuition has had to be reasoned later, and that reasoning has limitations. I have had to invent explanations of songwriting, which were not there when I wrote the songs. The songs haunt me, because I am haunted by the stories and images of people's experiences in war. Singing is my attempt to underline a spiritual, uncanny, 'not knowing' part of research to treasure, not hide or deny. I hope one day I can transmit my own experience of songwriting as a practice to someone who needs it.

The songs are a witness of war, a witness of conviction, a hopeful witness. Musistance is political and it relies on the affective power music. This affective power is why music has been a tool of propaganda and resistance alike – music moves and motivates people. Music speaks and communicates directly with the body – it is carnal knowledge that expresses the unsaid. Music creates connections and is an exercise in vulnerability. Vulnerability is a space of resistance and compassion. Music underlines how deeply human we are.

Musistance is having the imagination to shift the focus from the study of illness to the good which is already there. Musistance is a human revolution, subverting hegemonic and violent practices in IR in favour of a view of the body situated as part of the world. Musistance is a politics of love and compassion which emerged from encounters with the heaven of life amidst the hell of war in Chechnya. We need this human revolution of love and compassion because structural changes are never enough if the human heart remains corrupt. I call this book *Sounds of War*, but it is even more so a book about the sounds of compassion. Because, *we are all condemned to hope*.

About the author:

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