



The Selfie and the Other: Consuming Viral Tragedy and Social Media (After)lives

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An object that tells of the loss, destruction, disappearance of objects. Does not speak of itself. Tells of others. Will it include them?

—Jasper Johns, via *On Photography* by Susan Sontag

On December 27, 2013, Lebanese teenager Omar Bekdash took a selfie on his smartphone: “The guys always take selfies, so this time I decided I would take one,” Bekdash later told the *Daily Mail* (Rasmussen, 2014, para. 8). The resulting image is low resolution, a picture of four teenage boys hanging out on a bench on a nondescript street in downtown Beirut. Behind them in the image is a gold SUV that one would not notice had it not been circled in red (see Figure 1). In a matter of moments after the selfie was taken, the SUV exploded, mortally wounding the boy in the red sweatshirt, 16-year-old Mohammad al-Chaar.

Six others were killed in the bombing, including Mohammad Chatah, former finance minister, ambassador to the United States, and the likely target. Seventy-one additional people were injured, and the attack was blamed in English-language media reports on Hezbollah and its support of Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian regime, as the ongoing war in the neighboring country has exacerbated sectarian tension and divided the country, often violently, into pro- and anti-Assad camps.

With the publication of the selfie of al-Chaar and his friends, the initial act of participation in the photograph becomes central to a number of different circulating discourses. In Lebanon, al-Chaar becomes a focal point of a growing campaign against the flagrant politicization of civilian deaths. As the story moves into international English-language news, its focus shifts to the selfie, the image of al-Chaar, and away from his death and the larger context of the bombing. The death of Chatah and the online news media articles about it do not garner the kind of viral social media attention that the selfie of Mohammad

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al-Chaar gains, nor does Chatah become a focus of the subsequent #notamartyr campaign, presumably because as a political figure, he constitutes an “appropriate” target of violence, in contrast to the “innocent” al-Chaar.



Figure 1. The selfie taken by Bekdash in December 2013. Al-Chaar is in the red hoodie. The car bomb is in the gold SUV circled in red, upper left.

The bilingual English–Arabic #notamartyr campaign takes up a number of tactics—vigils, testimony, on-the-ground political organizing, and a hashtag, #notamartyr, often accompanied by a diversity of messages about the author’s right to live in Lebanon without dying for Lebanon, for the victims of violence to not be described as martyrs. The hashtag is often written on a piece of paper and held up by the author in a selfie. The campaign is internally directed within Lebanon, but it also builds on the selfie’s establishment of a grievable subject in order to reach and be legible to Western media. The campaign, in a post–Arab Spring context, is taken up by the media using the language of democratic movements and the ability of social media and hashtags to force popular change.

I assert that the identity of the victim, as constructed by Western and particularly U.S. media, is key to framing stories about violence in Beirut. By examining the ways in which this selfie has circulated and been used in Western English-language media, I argue that the practice of selfie-taking makes the third-world selfie taker legible as a grievable subject for Western social media spectators.

Methods

I follow a growing body of work that analyzes the selfie and digital photography in relation to technologies of the self, surveillance and visibility, killable bodies (Mbembe, 2003), grievable lives (Butler, 2004), and the burden of evidence. In the argument that follows, I use critical media and visual cultural theory to trace the movement of the al-Chaar selfie from its initial closed social context to the broader context of Western media consumption. I collect a number of headlines from popular English-language media sources with a particular focus on the online edition of the Associated Press and the media aggregator site BuzzFeed as representative sources of U.S. media consumption. In particular, I follow an AP story both because this story was syndicated to the majority of the other sources that I cite but also because the AP as an American media corporation is at the center of news as a salable commodity, as a single organization that increasingly determines newsworthiness and is often the single source of framing for news stories read throughout the world (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2008). I focus on online media, including media aggregators, because of their increasing relevance to widespread media consumption—the BuzzFeed story is derivative of the AP article, but it further removes context and receives more reader engagement.

This case study contributes to a much-needed theorization of the selfie not only as a genre of photography but also as an exceptional case in the corpus of visual evidence of warfare and violence. The selfie of al-Chaar, circulated among Western audiences, reads as a frivolous and quotidian act against those audiences' necropolitical framing of the subject (Mbembe, 2003).

I encountered the selfie of al-Chaar as a rupture in my social media feed; I participated in the practice of retweeting my sympathy and solidarity, amending hashtags, being *interested*, expressing sentiment, although I failed in this case to *move on* (Sontag, 1977). This car bombing was widely reported, and more in-depth stories about, for example, the targeted assassination of Mohammad Chatah do exist. Yet, it was not until I looked for them that I found these stories, while it seemed that my Facebook wall, my Twitter feed, my Tumblr dashboard were inundated with al-Chaar's face. By comparing the AP and BuzzFeed stories about al-Chaar's and Chatah's deaths, I argue that it was *not* al-Chaar's death but the *selfie* that captures the moments before the death that constitutes a spreadable media story for Western audiences (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) in a way that the more complicated and historically embedded death of Chatah does not.

I read the multiple selfies—the photo is taken by Bekdash and is covered in the media as an event because of the death of al-Chaar (attached to the death of Chatah), and it then spurs the taking of responsive selfies by online networks of Lebanese citizens and expats via the #notamartyr campaign—alongside work from critical cultural studies in order to talk about the lives behind the selfie, the ways in which the media frames violence, and the politics that this framing supports or enables.

Papacharissi and Oliveira (2008) note that the framing of news stories about terrorism presents a "perceived reality" through a "process of recurring selection and emphasis" of limited aspects of an event, which has the effect of backing certain actions, especially "moral judgements" and "policy responses to the event" (p. 53). The use of episodic frames to describe violence in Beirut—focusing on single, isolated

events and victims—makes the event of the car bombing that killed al-Chaar, Chatah, and five others palatable to a U.S. media audience but also negates deeper coverage and the ability to provide context and continuity for what otherwise becomes another act of terrorism prescribed to a vague and threatening Muslim Other in the War on Terror.

“Beirut ‘Selfie’ Teen Dies”

A majority of the initial reports on the death of the “Beirut ‘Selfie’ Teen,” Mohammad al-Chaar, despite slightly differing headlines, are the same syndicated article from the AP. The AP had previously published stories on the bombing as it developed, most notably a December 27 article titled “Car Bombing Kills pro-Western Lebanese Politician.” This story frames Chatah’s death within its relevance to the West and also includes references to Chatah’s recent tweets. While the story on Chatah’s death has significantly more shares logged on the AP site than the article on al-Chaar’s death, the opposite is true of the BuzzFeed articles (which are derivatives of the AP stories): The story on Chatah’s death shows few traces of readership or engagement and has a total 11,989 views as of June 12, 2014, while the BuzzFeed article on al-Chaar’s death shows evidence of the ways in which this story spread, with 78,152 views as of June 12.

The syndicated AP article is also frequently accompanied by either the selfie or the selfie paired with images of al-Chaar after the bombing, lying bloodied on the ground or being carried by frantic first responders. The word “selfie” often precedes the words “slain teenager” in the headline; the selfie is the subject of the article, and the action is the ability of the selfie to “capture” the “slain teen’s last moments” (Brager, 2014, para. 21). These are some of the online headlines:

December 27, 2013 <i>The Houston Chronicle</i>	“In a Selfie, a Slain Lebanese Teen’s Last Moments.”
December 28, 2013 <i>The Daily Beast</i>	“Beirut ‘Selfie’ Teen Dies.”
December 30, 2013 <i>Fox News</i>	“A Selfie Just Before Death in Bombing Turns a Teen into Symbol of Lebanese Caught in Crossfire.”
December 30, 2013 <i>The National Post</i>	“‘Selfie’ Captures Slain Teen’s Last Moments Before Powerful Car Bomb Set Off in Ritzzy Lebanese Shopping District.”
December 30, 2013 <i>Buzzfeed</i>	“Photo Taken Before Beirut Bombing Shows Teenager’s Final Moments.”

December 30, 2013 <i>San Diego Union Tribune</i>	"In a Selfie, a Slain Lebanese Teen's Last Moments."
December 30, 2013 <i>The Huffington Post</i>	"Selfie Taken Before Beirut Bomb Blast Shows Slain Teen's Last Moments (WARNING: DISTURBING IMAGE)."

I have not been able to locate the original publication of the selfie—the *Daily Mail* article reports that Bekdash "wanted to record their day with a selfie and post the image to Snapchat" (Rasmussen, 2014, para. 8). Snapchat is designed for ephemerality—the image is meant to disappear (Jurgenson, 2013). It is unclear how the image went viral or at precisely what point this occurred, as the original online AP article does not include an image of the selfie. Instead, the AP story features a slideshow of 11 photographs from the aftermath of the bombing through al-Chaar's funeral. The slideshow integrates images of mourning friends and family holding studio portraits of al-Chaar with photographs of al-Chaar's prone, bloodied body being maneuvered by first responders, in which the viewer cannot see his face—there is no gaze, our eyes do not meet. Azoulay (2012) writes of atrocity photography, "the assumption is that the photographs show or perform something that is already over and done, foreclosing the option of watching photographs as a space of political relations" (p. 20). This is the failure of the viral selfie and the media's framing of their reporting. Despite the single frame of the image, its violence is not episodic; it is not constrained to the temporality of the photograph.

There is a momentary identification in which the (Oriental) selfie taker becomes grievable for the (Western) consumer. Lebanese blogger Gino Raidy tells CNN that al-Chaar's death was the "straw that broke the camel's back, because 'he was taking a selfie, which all of us do every day . . . and in a safe neighborhood, supposedly'" (Jamjoom, 2014, para. 6). The selfie as a widespread practice in Beirut social circles, read as Westernized, makes the selfie taker *familiar* to a selfie-obsessed Western audience. A map showing global Twitter usage reveals a bright, dense cluster of usage in Beirut (GNIP, n.d.). While Twitter usage alone is certainly not a reliable indicator of all social media or smartphone usage in the country or region, it is an indicator of the particularly high usage of social media technologies in Beirut, organized along lines of metropolitan access.

Al-Chaar is a relatable victim for Western consuming audiences because of his participation in the selfie and further because of the details of his obituary—he is represented as an upper middle class, English-speaking, secular, urban teenager who wants to move to America and play for the NBA. His consumer practices also make him familiar—the group of friends had gone to the downtown business district to hang out at Starbucks, and in AP images of al-Chaar's prone body, his feet are clad in white Nikes (the victim's face is covered by the bodies of first responders, but the Nike swoosh is visible to the camera's eye). He is legible because of his desire to participate in American consumer culture.

The conditions of al-Chaar's death within an Orientalist discourse of modernity—a particular Lebanon, a nation of martyrs endlessly embroiled in unavoidable religious violence and a moral battle between the premodern and the modern—are reproduced by the repetition of representation (Mitchell, 2000), by the syndication of the AP story and the retweeted, shared, and liked selfie. NBC reports "Mohammad Chaar *looked* like a typical teenager. Dressed in a bright red hoodie, he looked straight at the camera as he posed with his friends for a 'selfie' . . . *It seemed harmless*—except Chaar, 16, happened to be in Beirut" (Nassar, 2014, para. 1, emphasis mine). Hadid's (2013) AP story emphasizes al-Chaar as a pro-U.S. Sunni victim, collateral damage to the murder of a pro-U.S. Sunni politician by the Shia Hezbollah terrorist organization with ties to Iran and Syria. In covering the story, media aggregator Kicker further misrepresents the specificity of political and sectarian violence in Lebanon by framing the event within a narrative of a religious clash of civilizations: "Lebanon is tiny. Which makes conflict difficult to avoid—especially between Christians (40% of the population) and Muslims (60% of the population)" (Cain, 2014, para. 6).

Even as a consumable victim, as the story and the selfie move into a Western and especially a U.S. media context, al-Chaar and his death become subject to the dominant narratives of the War on Terror. His cosmopolitanism is contrasted by the attachment of his death to the specter of Hezbollah, the "bad Muslim," the terrorist. Tropes emerge that attach al-Chaar's death not only to democratic struggle within Lebanon or encroachment from authoritarian Syria but also—explicitly in the Kicker article—to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as predominant U.S. media referent. His death becomes *about* a larger narrative, the always-already violence of the Middle East, the clash of civilizations, the "not like us" nature of the Orient—sympathy-inducing but exotic, not quite coeval. Western media audiences are engaged in a kind of fascinated cannibalism of the Other, a consumption of the dead or vulnerable bodies in this viral photograph (Rony, 1996). "Fascinating cannibalism" describes the mixed reaction of "fascination and horror" by consumers of images and the actual bodies of "people who are labelled Savages" (p. 10). The selfie of al-Chaar becomes a liminal space in which Western social media consumers access the familiar and grievable, and their own sense of unbridgeable distance.

On January 2, 17-year-old Ali al-Khadra and 17-year-old Malak Zahwe are killed, along with three others, in a suicide bombing in Harek Hreik, Beirut. On January 21, 18-year-old Maria Jawhari, along with four others, is killed in another bombing, in the same neighborhood. Although al-Khadra, Zahwe, and Jawhari are memorialized within Lebanon, their faces added to the #notamartyr protests, the three do not receive much attention in the United States beyond a small number of reports on Maria Jawhari's apprehension, posted on Facebook: "This is the third bombing I escaped from, I don't know if I'll die in the fourth" (al-Saadi, 2014, para. 1). This Facebook post went viral within Lebanon, appended to Jawhari's Facebook profile picture, which happened to be a selfie.

The failure of U.S. media to give much attention to these teenagers' deaths may have been related to al-Chaar's death as the original catalyst for the #notamartyr campaign or the particularly haunting nature of the selfie taken moments before the bomb went off. Cynically, I wonder also whether Zahwe and Jawhari failed to become symbols in U.S. media because they wore hijab—a visible marker of otherness, of the requirement to labor in mourning, to "work to forge new ties of identification and to

reimagine what it is to belong to a human community in which common epistemological and cultural grounds cannot always be assumed" (Butler, 2006, p. 27).

These other teenage victims were residents of Dahieh. Sharmine Narwani, in a 2013 article for Al-Akhbar English, notes that Western media headlines consistently describe this neighborhood as a "Hezbollah stronghold." Because they live in Dahieh, these other victims are framed, by association, as members of a terrorist organization rather than as "innocent" civilian victims. The #notamartyr campaign was launched to decry the collateral damage, the civilian victims, in the face of a lack of political accountability; however, in the U.S. narrative, Hezbollah can only ever be a terrorist perpetrator, never the victim. These geographic associations become more stark as the context and audience shift.

Grievability on Social Media

My reading of al-Chaar's selfie is informed by Ariella Azoulay's method of looking at photographs of Palestinians in newspapers in Israel and getting the sense of the photographed subjects looking back. Azoulay's questions about the photographed subjects are anxious but politically productive:

At whom, precisely, did they seek to look—was it truly at me? . . . What am I supposed to do with their look? . . . What happens to my citizenship in the encounter with this look? What happens to it in this encounter with their catastrophe, knowing that they are more vulnerable than I to catastrophe? (2012, p. 18)

Azoulay describes a civil contract of photography that creates a kind of cosmopolitan citizenship; rather than being consumable because of his legibility as a consumer, al-Chaar becomes grievable as a fellow citizen in the rubric of citizenship as a "shield that protects on the basis of consent and the possibility of exercising it" (p. 352). After al-Chaar's death, one is confronted in the selfie with the violation of a shared citizenship, a break in the contract, and, in Azoulay's formulation, an injunction, a responsibility to act.

However, Judith Butler (2006) critiques "the familiar as the criterion by which a human life is grievable" (p. 27) and the ways in which the Other is dehumanized to the extent of being spectral—violence "fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated" (p. 22). She challenges a Western audience to think about whose lives we value and whose deaths we grieve. Butler writes, regarding the number of Iraqi children killed in the Gulf War, "do we have an image, a frame for any of those lives, singly or collectively? Is there a story we might find about those deaths in the media? Are there names attached to those children?" (ibid.). I expand this line of questioning to include grievability in any conflict. Butler's theory can be seen as complementary to Edward Said's (1978) deconstruction of Orientalism as a concept that perpetuates a binary between Orient and Occident and depicts the Orient as unable to represent itself. Therefore, this reproduced construct of the Orient has more to say about the metropole—the colonial center—that produced it than the Orient as such. Further, Said outlines the ways in which the imperialist concept of Orientalism continues to operate in international policy regarding the Middle East. Orientalism functions in media to cast Arab and Muslim people as completely Other (Alsultany, 2012). It is the "establishment of a biological caesura" that renders Arab and

Muslim people as not only ungrievable but killable to non-Arab, non-Muslim Western audiences, who, in a kind of virtual sovereignty, seem to have the “capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (Mbembe, 2003, pp. 17, 27).

In the optics of warfare, the selfie—in terms of the gaze and of grievability—is the opposite of the “bug splat,” the ultimate ungrievable victim. The “bug splat” has caught on in military parlance to describe drone kills because of the grainy, video-game-like image and dehumanizing (in)visibility from the drone. Taking the selfie agentially pulls individuals from the anonymous crowd of victims. It gives a global audience some “definite form or figure” out of the anonymous masses of the rally, “the assembled crowd” often captured by aerial photography as an impersonal swarm (Mitchell, 2012). It places their faces in the public eye (their gaze in relation to my gaze), and perhaps, through the reassuring mimetic gesture of the smile, calls for identification, for the spectator to ask, following Azoulay, “What am I supposed to do with their look?”

Hamza Shaban (2013), comparing the Boston Marathon bombing to violence in the Middle East, critiques the ways in which the easily digestible becomes viral and, in contrast, how “those events [that] weren’t as sharable/viral/likable/worthy-of-(re)tweet” fail to become viral or to get much media attention at all (para. 14). One of the issues with this easy shareability, following Butler’s grievable lives, is that it lends itself to sentiment without context, often paired with an exploitative, sensationalist interest—tying “the concepts of upvoting and trending to human loss” (para. 19). Shaban astutely notes the contradictions of *hashtag sympathy* or *hashtag activism*: “Under the ceaseless pressure of shareability and virality, tragedy on social media often resembles disaster porn . . . confusing the spread of symbolic images for enduring political achievement” (para. 1). The spread of the selfie of al-Chaar and the #notamartyr hashtag is conflated with a sense of actual violence prevention. Shaban’s critique of shareability, read with Butler, also begs a critique of why this selfie, rather than an image of al-Khadra or Zahwe, for example, went viral in the United States as an icon of familiar identification and as the subject of fascinated cannibalism.

The selfie is a mundane practice, one that, despite having some limits with regard to who has access to the technologies of its production, is to an extent, democratic. The selfie, like much content on social media, is released and proliferates into social media networks for the purpose of being looked at, “to be seen” (Marwick, 2012, p. 380). The selfie is attached to hashtags and the possibility of garnering likes, comments, reblogs, and an attendant commodifiable fame, and it is also subject to what Marwick (2012) describes as “context collapse,” the ways in which social relations are seemingly flattened on social media, despite the fact that “clearly hierarchical social roles” consistently re-emerge, “demonstrat[ing] that power exists and is reinforced even when technologies attempt to categorize all connections within the category of ‘friends’” (p. 380). When social media content bleeds into mainstream media—the context collapse of the mainstream media reporting on a selfie meant for a small group of friends—when the selfie as object of self-making becomes newsworthy, the selfie ceases to be agential and becomes an object of another’s political narrative.

The Second Life of the Selfie

After the initial news reports of al-Chaar's death, a second round of English-language reports take up the afterlife of al-Chaar's selfie as a galvanizing image. On January 6, Buzzfeed aggregates "41 Powerful Messages From A Selfie Protest In Lebanon." On January 7, NBC News reports the headline "Teen's Death Sparks Lebanese selfie protest: #NotAMartyr." On January 8, Kicker posts a piece titled, "When a Selfie Is a Protest: Lebanon's #notamartyr Movement." A CNN online story, last updated January 23, 2014, carries the headline "Outraged Lebanese Protest Teenager's Death with #notamartyr Campaign." The language of martyrdom, like the language of the hero in relation to U.S. soldiers in the War on Terror, is generally used to describe combatants. When ascribed to victims of terror attacks—like the language of the hero attached to the victims of 9/11—"martyr" ascribes nationalist and even sacred, sacrificial meaning to the otherwise meaningless deaths of innocent victims of violence toward political utilization.² Many of the #notamartyr posts, whether from Lebanon or the Lebanese diaspora, contain some English-language content. The dual register of the bilingual message of the English #notamartyr hashtag is constructed to reach and be legible to a Western media audience while building a local antiviolence movement in response to the death of Beirut teens, including al-Chaar.

The campaign is taken up by the Western media largely on the terms of the hashtag itself—that Lebanese protestors are taking selfies that have gone viral and that the protest has to do with young people in Lebanon not wanting to be described as martyrs. Like al-Chaar's death, the campaign is presented within dominant discourses about the Middle East, in this case, the Arab Spring. A campaign that largely targets discursive and actual violence becomes read within the context of democratic revolutions across the Arab world, in particular the perception of the 2011 uprising in Egypt as a "Twitter Revolution" (Gladwell, 2010).

Following Shaban's (2013) critique of hashtag activism, Zeynep Tufekci (2012) explains that "networked symbolic actions online" do not, in fact, constitute activism but could operate as a gateway, opening up the opportunity for individuals to then take action. What, then, do hashtag campaigns do as a communication tactic that is intended for broad outreach? For example, the #NotABugSplat campaign responded to the bug-splat optics of drone attacks by installing a giant portrait, easily viewed from a drone camera, of a Pakistani child whose family had been killed in previous attacks in the Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa region of Pakistan. The image and action, released online and titled with a hashtag, was clearly symbolic and largely intended for Western social media consumption. The actual effect on drone pilots would, if anything, be indirect.

Similarly, there is an emotional politic to retweeting or liking another's declaration that they are not a martyr. At the same time, this action does not alone have a particular effect on Syrian politics, on the Hezbollah party, on the larger government of Lebanon, or on U.S. foreign policy. At most, such actions

² This CNN video offers useful comments from Lebanese bloggers and activists involved in the project: "'Not a Martyr' Campaign Gains Traction." *CNN*. January 21, 2014. See <http://edition.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/world/2014/01/22/jamjoom-pkg-lebanon-not-a-martyr.cnn.html>

can either lead to another, offline action or can operate upon its natural target: the traditional media. Hashtag campaigns with an epistemic target—unlike the sort of action-based hashtags of campaigns like #Kony2012 or #BringBackOurGirls—do have the potential to shift the framing of news stories about violence, not toward further episodic grievability, but toward a sustained attention to complex and systemic global relations of power.

Conclusion

The selfie, in its original production, effects a kind of agential looped gaze in which the photographer and the photographed are conflated subject positions. This is visible in its simplest and least burdened sense when looking at the selfie taken by Omar Bekdash—an individual taking and posting a picture to say, “Here I am, as I perceive myself and as you will perceive me, with some friends, on a normal good day, for no particular reason.”

And yet, once the image is online, it has a second life in the eddies and pools of the stream of massive amounts of obscuring data, subject to the (limitations of) the Web as a democratic space and to the different determining algorithms and the vagaries of social media consumers and online news audiences—and the possibility of going “viral.” The selfie travels but is subject to disjunctures of meaning, to misinterpretation and appropriation. What does it mean that these selfies went viral, that they spread across networks, carrying information and affect? How long does the tragedy trend? What work is done by hundreds of retweets of the #NotABugSplat project? What results from a social media obsession with a selfie of four Lebanese teenagers or the paucity of attention to the Dahieh victims?

By considering the selfie as a site of confrontation and context collapse that engenders different modes of vacated looking and ethical seeing, another portrait begins to emerge, of self-representation and representation in the media landscape. Al-Chaar’s selfie opens up space for new conversations about the optics of violence and citizenship in the age of social media. Once the selfie is taken and goes viral, spectators must ask what to do with this Other self we face. This is increasingly urgent in a landscape in which social media is ascribed the power to topple governments, killing is increasingly remote, and a sense of shared humanity—the ability to grieve for a dead teenager, whether killed by a Hezbollah car bomb or a U.S. drone attack—seems increasingly distant as well.

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