



‘A Close and Unbreachable Distance’: Witnessing *Everything and Nothing*

Christopher Harker¹

Department of Geography, University of British Columbia
1984 West Mall, Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z2

Email: charker@geog.ubc.ca

Abstract

This paper began life as my attempt to bear witness to *untitled part 1: everything and nothing*, a videotape made by Vancouver based artist Jayce Salloum. However, in doing (or attempting to do) this, I found myself bearing witness to a great deal more. Because in approaching Salloum's tape, I couldn't help but encounter Soha Bechara, the ostensible 'subject' of the piece. And meeting Soha also meant coming across Lebanon, albeit an always-already partial version. Working my way through these entanglements, I dwell on intimacy as a form of relating, and the proliferation of subjectivities that *everything and nothing* enacts. And in recounting the intricate spatial formation that developed as a result of this process, I also want to argue that enactments of witnessing are both inherently geographical and affectively charged.

Introduction

In this paper I want to explore the possibilities of apprehending cross-cultural difference in a Western context which remains dominated by Orientalising mediations of Arabic cultures and people. In order to do this I look at the representations made possible by witnessing Canadian artist Jayce Salloum's tape

¹ © Christopher Harker, 2007

*untitled part 1: everything and nothing*², a conversation between Salloum and Soha Bechara, a member of the secular Lebanese Resistance (see figure 1). I will argue that this tape is particularly compelling to think about in light of Giorgio Agamben's thesis on witnessing for three main reasons. Firstly, *everything and nothing* foregrounds intimacy as a politicized means of representing others.



Figure 1 Still from *untitled part 1: everything and nothing*, courtesy of the artist.

Secondly, this intimacy is what allows *everything and nothing*'s witnessing of Soha, and in turn Soha's witnessing of Khiam where she was detained without trial for ten years (six of which were in isolation), to create an interstitial geography which weaves its way through Khiam, Paris and the audience of the film. It is this geography which creates the potential for an intersubjective moment between the audience and the film which draws out the ethical potential of witnessing. Third and finally, *everything and nothing*'s creation of such a geography demands that we consider the importance of the medium of witnessing, something Agamben passes over with little comment.

² This tape is part of a larger ongoing video project – *untitled* – which can be seen as a gallery installation and as separate single channel pieces in a cinematic format. The other main parts are currently *untitled part 2: beauty and the east*, and *untitled part 3a/3b: occupied territories... footnote to the book of setbacks/ as if (beauty never ends...)* a soon to be completed work in progress.

Witnessing Agamben

The notion of witnessing that I am using in this paper is drawn from Agamben's text *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Witnessing is Agamben's means of developing 'an account of ethical response to biopolitical subjection' (Mills 2003) and in particular to the Nazi camp at Auschwitz. Agamben begins thinking about witnessing through the Latin word *superstes*, which 'designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it' (Agamben 1999, 17). As the title of his book suggests, the witnesses Agamben draws upon are survivors of Auschwitz; people who have lived through the events there, and can therefore bear witness to them. However, as Agamben notes, these survivors bear witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to. Their very nature as survivors means they have experienced a privilege of sorts rather than the common destiny of most prisoners. They therefore speak by proxy, on behalf of the 'true' witnesses, who were prevented through death from bearing witness to their experience. This picture is further complicated by Agamben's suggestion that the 'true' witnesses, even if they had lived, would have nothing to say. The dehumanizing processes in Auschwitz reduced many prisoners to what were called *Muselmänner*, the name in the camp for those who had lost all will and consciousness, and existed in a semi-vegetative state. These 'true' witnesses were denied a voice or even thought by very experience of Auschwitz. '[T]heir death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves' (Levi 1989, 84). It is in this manner that the survivors bear witness to something that it is impossible to bear witness to. Hence Agamben's notion of witnessing is the marking of an impossibility of speech within speech itself, and thus a disjunction between two impossibilities. 'Language, in order to bear witness, must give way to non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness' (Agamben 1999, 39). Witnessing is the bringing of language to that which does not have language, in what Agamben terms a zone of indistinction, where ultimately it not only becomes impossible to link, but also to separate the two. Importantly, this is where the ethical force of witnessing lies – in resisting biopolitical efforts to separate the living being from the speaking being, or in other words 'to make survive'. Such efforts can be seen not only in Auschwitz (Agamben 1999) but also in contemporary spaces of exception (Gregory 2004a).

How does this notion of witnessing relate to *everything and nothing*? The tape features Soha Bechara, a member of the Secular Resistance during the Israeli Occupation of South Lebanon, who was incarcerated in Khiam detention centre after attempting to assassinate the head (Antoine Lahad) of the South Lebanese Army (SLA), Israel's proxy force in the South during the Occupation. The forty one minutes of footage takes place entirely in a small dorm room in Paris, where Soha was living in 1999 after her release from Khiam. Essentially one shot, the

material was edited only to remove repetitions in the dialogue. Jayce says in the notes which accompany screenings that he 'asked her about the distance lived between Khiam and Paris, and Beirut and Paris, and what she left in Khiam and what she brought with her, a story about flowers and how she never puts them in water, how it felt for her now to be under such demand, and who she was, and what the title of the tape should be, and a few other things' (Salloum 2004). In its most succinct form, Salloum summarizes the film as 'just time and a conversation, and intense intimacy at a close and unbreachable distance' (Ibid).

In what follows I want to thread my way through this 'time and conversation' to disentangle three interconnected layers of witnessing. Firstly, I will analyse Soha and her witnessing of detention in Khiam and the broader detention of Lebanon. I will then move on to how Soha is witnessed in *everything and nothing* through a specific form of intimacy. Finally, I will bear witness to how Salloum is able (through intimacy) to multiply Soha's subjectivities (a process I will explain later in the paper). In doing so I will elucidate the intersubjective potential of *everything and nothing's* act of witnessing, a potential which is resolutely geographical. Exploring *everything and nothing* in this way will allow, at the conclusion of my paper, some consideration of the difference audio-visual media make for enactments of witnessing, or in other words the importance of style. As will become clear, the use of the word style refers to both the medium (videotape) and the specific audio-visual techniques used within that medium.

Soha and Khiam

There is something about Soha Bechara, a certain sort of 'charisma' in front of a camera, which makes her very compelling to watch, and subsequently write about. Maybe it's the look she has in her eyes - accentuated by the dark rings underneath - that at points during the film can appear very serious and concentrated, at other times thoughtful, and at other moments yet again gentle and compassionate. Perhaps it's the sound of her voice, speaking a language (Arabic) I don't understand, rising to a crescendo as she talks about resistance, then pausing and trailing off as she discusses other detainees. It could even be the occasional smile she gives the camera, and the way in which it still puts a slightly stupid grin on my face every time I see it (see figure 2). The truth is I honestly don't know. However, it is clear to me that in order to think further about *everything and nothing* I must begin with Soha and what she bears witness to³.

³ My intention here is not to divorce the ways of seeing and hearing Soha from the film itself. To the contrary, I want to suggest that the film itself, as a mediating device, plays an important role in co-constituting Soha and her 'charisma', which I explore further in the next section of the essay. However, in order to write about this complexity, I must temporarily simplify by focusing just on Soha.



Figure 2 Still from untitled part 1: everything and nothing, courtesy of the artist.

To suggest that Soha Bechara is a witness is entirely in keeping with the way she projects herself. During her conversation with Jayce, she explicitly conceptualizes what she is doing as witnessing.

All these meetings give us the chance to talk, and act as witnesses.
This is why I will continue to speak out, to witness.⁴

In *everything and nothing*, Soha comes across as a powerful and passionate orator, and in this way she bears a striking resemblance to Agamben's key exemplar, Primo Levi. Levi sees himself as being like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who cannot help but tell his story to everyone and anyone he meets (See Agamben 1999, 16). In continuously talking about Khiam in conference presentations and interviews Soha, like Levi, speaks for those who 'touched the bottom' and therefore cannot bear witness to what they went through. The following description which she gives of herself at the end of the conversation also bears a striking resemblance to the way Agamben describes Auschwitz's witnesses emerging from a zone of indistinction between the survivors and those who touched the bottom.

⁴ All indented quotations are taken from *everything and nothing*, unless otherwise indicated. Unless prefaced with 'JS', the speaker is always Soha Bechara (SB). The translation is taken from the captions that appear on screen.

I am a person who seeks to preserve, at least her own humanity, and who is capable of maintaining it by her sacrifices for the others who herself and them are one.

Detention and Resistance

[Click here to view VIDEO CLIP 1](#)

My name is Soha Bechara, I was born in Beirut, from a village in South Lebanon that is under Israeli occupation⁵. I was born June 15, 1967. I joined the Lebanese National Resistance Movement (Jabhat al Muquawama al Watanieh Lubnaniya) in 1986. On (November 7), 1988 I was captured following an operation that I executed against the symbol of collaboration Antoine Lahad. As a consequence of this operation I was detained and I spent the next 10 years in El Khiam detention centre. It ended by my release on September 3, 1998.

This quote - the opening moment of *everything and nothing* – shows how the representational context created at the outset of the film is Soha’s detention in Khiam, after her attempted assassination of Antoine Lahad. However, in bearing witness to Khiam, Soha is not only bearing witness to the detention centre and what occurred there, but also to the broader detention of Lebanon and its people.

[Click here to view VIDEO CLIP 2](#)

After one year of my release, why have I accepted this interview? Why have I agreed to have this conversation even though our mission has not ended? To shed some light on what happens to someone in the post-release period, what the decisions are, the possibilities and choices, what is to come in the future and what each of us is planning to do after spending years in the detention centre. That is the reason I agree to participate in interviews, conferences, and various meetings. All these meetings give us the chance to talk, and act as witnesses. This is why I will continue to speak out, to witness. First because of what happened in Lebanon, not only since the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut, not only what took place in 1978, "the first Israeli invasion" and that should be placed between parentheses because that was not the first invasion. The first invasion was in 1948. Contextually this date should not be forgotten because it repeats the history that we share with many other nations living

⁵ The footage was shot in 1999, the year before Israel withdrew from South Lebanon, hence Soha’s use of the present tense when describing the occupation of her village.

through the violations of human rights, confiscation of land, the killing of children, transforming Lebanon into a military testing ground, one example being the massacre of Qana, where the Israelis tested new artillery, American weapons, and phosphorus bombs.

I look back - and it's there in front of me - to constantly see... a mother being detained daily, the child that is being detained every day, the youth, the elderly, even Lebanon, the land itself is being detained. The abduction is also evident in the dust that Israeli soldiers carry away in their boots and take inside Israel.

Soha bears witness to detention in its various forms for a number of reasons. First, she wants to elaborate what life is like during and after imprisonment. However, she also sees witnessing as being much more than just discussing certain experiences for the sake of letting people know what it's like. For her, these conversations are *part of* the resistance to the Israeli Occupation of South Lebanon⁶.

One has to acknowledge and share the conditions that one is living. Resistance for me is a mission and part of this mission is the talking about it.

Witnessing - talking about her experiences as part of the resistance - is therefore vital for two reasons. Firstly, she suggests there is an obligation on her part to share her stories with people who cannot imagine what resistance, occupation and detention are like, let alone the connections between them.

For me as long as there is someone raising questions, that automatically implies that he does not know. And as long as I have the capability to answer, it is my duty to answer.

We are on the turn of the second millennium and people are asking, "Is it really possible that someone was martyred, dying of torture because of excessive whipping and beating in a detention center somewhere in this world?" Or, "Is it possible that there still exists isolation cells that measure 90 cm x 90 cm x 90 cm (3' x 3' x 3')." Of course, this makes people interested... inquisitorial. This is human nature. They ask in order to satisfy their curiosity.

We live in societies of alienation, at times close but generally when it comes to subjects like resistance, or what it means to lose your land

⁶ The occupation 'ended' in 2000, the year after this tape was shot. However, to this day Israel still retains control over the Shebaa Farms area in South Lebanon.

it is difficult for others to understand, like what it means to struggle, or what occupation is. The French today, have heard how their grandparents lived through an occupation during World War 2, but that seems far in the past, over fifty years ago. They cannot touch or feel this experience now. Likewise for most Americans and the West in general, they have not lived through similar situations. For them it is as though seeing something, meeting someone who has lived this... reminds them of stories they have heard or that their grandparents lived through but they themselves had no way of feeling, no way of engaging with a witness to such events. This is why first hand accounts, testimonies are important.

As this last quote reveals, there is an important temporality *and* spatiality to Soha’s witnessing. She bears witness to something that exists in a different time-space for those living in ‘America and the West’. Soha’s witnessing of Khiam in *everything and nothing* emerges not only from a zone of indistinction between subjects, but also between geographies. That is to say it emerges not only from ten years spent in Khiam, *but also* from living in Paris where *everything and nothing* encounters her. She moves between Lebanon and France, neither fully inside nor outside one or the other. It is this position, or more accurately movement, which allows Soha to bear witness to Khiam by linking her experiences there with a French history of occupation; the abstract stories of grandparents with experiences to be felt and touched. In this manner Soha forces different time-spaces to intersect one another through her act of witnessing, so that they can no longer be easily distinguished or separated. This intersection is important because it prevents French (Western) audiences from consigning Soha’s experiences to another time or another place. The Resistance of which she is part is brought to bear on these audiences by means of this interstitial geography; an in-between spacing that brings ‘here’ and ‘there’, Soha and the West, into a common space through her act of witnessing.

Secondly, witnessing as a form of resistance to the Israeli Occupation is also a means of articulating a different future.

This history should be documented and preserved, remembered, and talked about in order to be able to know where we, who are a small drop in the world, are heading.

And it is this ‘we’, which as I will suggest later in the paper could be both Lebanon and also humanity at large, that Soha builds upon at the conclusion of the interview.

[Click here to view VIDEO CLIP 3](#)

One has to resist and work on oneself - for the cause - which in the end leads to the service of humanity in the broader sense and one’s

own personal improvement in a particular sense. Liberation of the land is the priority, and then continuing in political, economic, social, and cultural struggle. We have no boundaries, our boundaries should be the love that continues forward. If we want to define that movement, it goes beyond acceptance, beyond tolerance, it is the capacity to reach an empathy with the other in a way that encompasses everyone, democratically, with liberty, equality, and justice, and it's the creating and maintaining of a system that asserts itself without attacking, and without assaulting the other on a daily basis.

It is important to note in this last excerpt that Soha's witnessing is of a different nature from the sense of witnessing I have been discussing thus far. In this statement Soha is no longer speaking for those who cannot speak but rather in the name of democratic love and justice. In other words she is addressing the juridical concerns that Khiam provokes. This notion of witnessing is suggested by the Latin term *testis*, a third party at a trial (Agamben 1999, 17). It is important to recognize the difference between a witness who is concerned with justice through recourse to law, and Agamben's theorization of witnessing as a means of addressing the 'truth' of an event that lies beyond the law. As he notes, 'not that a judgement cannot or must not be made... The decisive point is that the two things not be blurred, that law not presume to exhaust the question' (Ibid). Hence while we must heed Soha's demand for justice, her witnessing of Khiam in *everything and nothing* raises other issues which exceed legal redress. In order to examine those issues, including representations of her subjectivities, let us now turn to *everything and nothing's* witnessing of Soha.

Intimacy as a form of relating

If Soha's witnessing of Khiam is the first layer of witnessing I have analyzed, the second layer - *everything and nothing's* witnessing of Soha - can be found already enfolded within the first. In an interview I conducted with Jayce⁷, he suggested that his relationship with Soha was one of allies in the resistance. She was trying to free Lebanon, as was he, and although his work in the cultural sphere was very far removed from her on-the-ground resistance fighting, they shared an affinity of goals. It is this affinity that I want to move on to now, because *everything and nothing* bears witness to Khiam and resistance only indirectly, through Soha. Salloum's approach to resistance, as a 'worker' in the cultural sphere, leads him to pursue different ends from Soha. I would argue that what *everything and nothing* bears witness to beyond Soha's experiences, is intimacy as

⁷ Personal interview with Jayce Salloum, 11th March 2004.

a form of relating: ‘just time and a conversation, and intense intimacy at a close and unbreachable distance’ (See Salloum 2004).

In spite of the fact that Jayce and Soha met only the night before the film was made, intimacy is a central part of their conversation. After moving to Paris following her release, Soha spoke of her experiences and the Resistance at an event where Jayce also showed *Taleen a Junuub* (Up From the South)⁸. After the event, Soha and Jayce went for dinner, and the next morning the taped conversation took place. As Jayce recounts, Soha was being ‘interviewed to death’ by both the Arabic and European press after her release from Khiam (Salloum 2004, n.p.). He was ambivalent about even asking to tape her; unwilling to add to the pressure and fatigue that all the interviews, conferences and meetings had caused Soha. However, as the film testifies, Jayce did eventually request Soha’s permission to film, and she agreed⁹. Based on the fact that they barely knew each other, I want to explore how intimacy is created under such circumstances. I also want to interrogate the ways in which a certain style of intimacy is enacted within the video, because as I will argue in the following section, it is intimacy which enables *everything and nothing* to multiply the representations of Soha.

‘Flirtation’

[Click here to view VIDEO CLIP 4](#)

JS: I have no idea what... that’s ok though... how...?

SB: Your questions are very sweet. [In French] Your questions are very nice.

JS: Thank you.

This is *the* moment that springs to mind when I begin to think about intimacy in the film. This instant of ‘flirtation’ crystallizes something that I sense is present throughout the tape, and is one of the ways in which intimacy is generated between Soha and Jayce, which the audience is then invited to share. Although I’ve called this affective resonance ‘flirtation’, this word is barely adequate for describing the sort of engagement that goes on during the conversation. I use it to give some sense of the encounter’s playfulness, rather than any sexual undertones. As Jayce suggests, flirtation in this context is more about describing a form of engagement on another level, or a form of social interaction designed to provoke

⁸ A previous work of Salloum’s dealing with representations of Lebanon during the Israeli Occupation.

⁹ This account is given in much more detail in Salloum (forthcoming).

the other person¹⁰. Perhaps this ‘flirtation’ is provoked by the question Jayce asks at the beginning and end of the tape: who is Soha Bechara? The very personal nature of this question also marks the encounter between Jayce and Soha as intimate.

Trust and (a lack of) Understanding

There are a number of other, less apparent ways in which *everything and nothing* witnesses intimacy, which implicate the viewer more directly. One of these is the way in which the audience is made aware that Jayce, who cannot speak Arabic, can understand very little of what Soha is talking about. He simply asks a question, lets her respond, and then asks another question.

SB: You don’t understand?

JS: I don’t understand but it’s ok.

SB: What I've been speaking about is ideas, mostly political ideas.

JS: I prefer to film... until the end of the time that we have now, rather than trying to understand what you are saying at the moment. Afterwards I will understand...

Intimacy is created in this scenario, through the demonstration of trust. Jayce, who cannot understand Soha, has to trust that she will open herself up to the camera, and say something that will be worth filming. Although not as apparent in the film, Soha also has to trust that the film-maker will use the recorded material in an appropriate manner. Jayce and Soha have not yet seen each other since this material was filmed, and although Jayce sent Soha the tape, he never found out what she thinks of it.¹¹ Therefore the trust involved in the process of film-making is re-doubled, as the film-maker has to believe that he himself is using the material in a manner Soha would find appropriate. The intimacy of trust is also present in the manner in which the film demands trust on the part of the viewer. As Jayce explains, because this work is deliberately non-sensational, the viewer has to trust that they will be rewarded if they spend time with this film.¹² There is no instant gratification. Rather, in the very act of watching, the viewer must work to become intimate with *everything and nothing*.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Jayce Salloum, 11th March 2004.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Audio-visual mediation

Intimacy is also created by the way in which the film is formally shot. The film consists of basically one shot – Soha sat on a bed – punctuated only by the sound of Jayce’s voice, speaking poor French from outside the frame. There are very few ‘effects’, save for a few edited sections, which removed material which was repetitious. However, the use of these very subtle mediation devices in fact allows the audience to see and hear more of the filming process than most documentaries would allow. This is further emphasized by the inclusion of Jayce’s request for Soha to change position on the bed, while the camera is rolling.

JS: Wait... can you move...

SB: You trap the ideas...

JS: Can you move a bit, like this?

SB: Like this?

JS: Like that. Yes. Can you put that here please? Don't throw it...

These tactics create the sensation of intimacy because they allow the viewer to think that they have access to the bare bones of the encounter, even while it is still being self-referentially mediated.

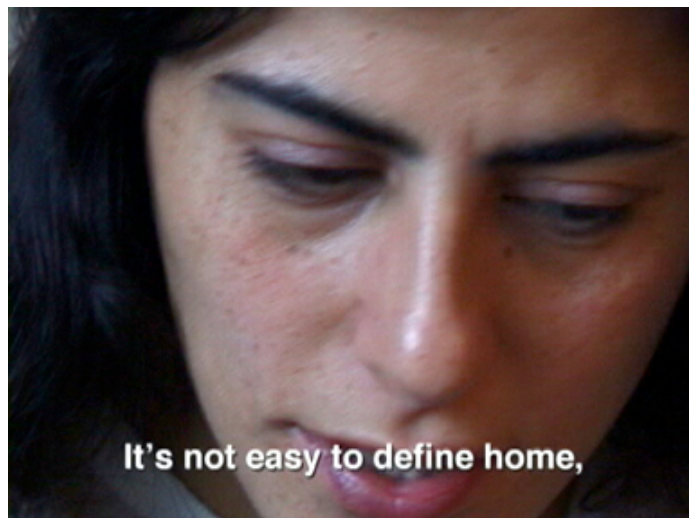


Figure 3 Still from untitled part 1: everything and nothing, courtesy of the artist.

Another very subtle camera effect, which nevertheless does a great deal of work in producing an intimate encounter, is the use of zooms and close-ups (see

figure 3). At various points the camera lingers on Soha's mouth as her lips articulate words or her eyes as they gaze into the distance while she considers her response to a question. These moments are good examples of what Laura Marks terms 'haptic visuality'. For Marks, haptic visuality is a way of seeing in which the eyes function more like organs of touch rather than delimiting clearly defined and outlined objects, as is the case with 'optical visuality'. Haptic vision works at a close and intimate distance, and thus sight becomes a matter of discerning surface textures, rather than distanced outlines (Marks 2000, introduction). The tight close-up of Soha's lips and eyes invite the viewer to pay very close attention to the darkened patches under Soha's eyes, or the way her lips rest on her teeth. These shots allow the audience to see Soha as though we are physically very close to her. As the camera touches Soha's face, it creates the sensation of brushing up against her cheek. This gesture, like a lover's caress, is incredibly intimate, and implicates the viewer in almost tangible ways with Soha as she speaks.

Complimenting the visual image, the audio track also draws the viewer into the conversation. The only sound is Soha's soft voice, speaking quietly to the camera. This becomes very apparent when I watch this piece on video at home, because I have to turn the volume up far more than normal to hear what she is saying. Even then, the almost whisper-like quality creates the sensation that I must be physically very close to Soha in order to hear what she is saying.

The Banality of the Everyday

The ways in which the quotidian is wrapped up in *everything and nothing* also helps create a sense of a close engagement. The space in which Soha is filmed, her dorm room in Paris, is very ordinary and also very personal. Being invited (as Jayce literally was) into this personal space is obviously an intimate gesture. This space also fulfils another function within the film. Mimicking the cell in which Soha was incarcerated, the dorm room subversively reenacts that space in which part of Soha's life is still confined every time she talks about Khiam¹³. It is through the creation of intimacy that *everything and nothing* is able to move us away from the sensationalized landscape of Khiam to the more private surroundings of the dorm room.

Similarly, some of the questions Jayce asks Soha about her everyday life both in Khiam and since her release, have a banality to them which makes them very personal too, especially because such ordinary things are rarely the focus of filmed conversations.

¹³ This is Soha's representational confinement as sub or super-human, which I elaborate on later in the paper.

SB: I am speaking here of things that I’ve never spoken of.

JS: Really?

SB: Yes, I have never spoken of all these accounts, everything I’ve just told you, all I’ve just said. It’s not new but nobody has ever asked me these questions before.

JS: I like those, the questions like that.

These questions include her thoughts about the distance between Khiam, Lebanon and Paris, what she brought with her and what she left in the detention centre, and what an ordinary day is for her. This ‘unusual’ focus on the ordinary enrolls a form of intimacy when filming Soha precisely because she has so often been asked to talk about the extra-ordinariness of detention, torture and life as a resistance fighter. Like an anecdote to more sensational accounts of her life, the banal and the quotidian – the way in which the film ends because Soha has other things to do – opens an avenue into her experiences that other interviews and conversations haven’t explored. And it is to Soha’s ‘life’ that I now want to turn, to converge with another layer of witnessing; one in which *everything and nothing* multiplies Soha’s representational subjectivities.

Many Humanities

Focusing on the ordinariness of Soha’s life is unusual because she is enmeshed in a particular representational lattice, which *everything and nothing* tries to untangle in places and to make more complicated elsewhere. In so doing, *everything and nothing* proliferates Soha’s subjectivities. It is important to note that these are subject *trajectories* rather than *positions*. This difference in terminology is important. While the term position might seem appropriate, since it often seems that the film ‘captures’ or stabilizes a certain subject performance, these performances are always being reinterpreted, and thus re-constituted every time the film is watched. Since Jayce Salloum attends most screenings of his work, the dialogues that have taken place around *everything and nothing* literally follow the film around as they become embodied in him. This paper in turn takes as its point of departure this ever-accumulating body of knowledge (through interviewing Jayce as well as attending a number of public screenings where he was present)¹⁴. Hence the word trajectories not only helps to emphasize the movement involved in these processes – their iterative nature – but also to emphasize that these processes, like any trajectory, are subject to changes from without as much as they are from

¹⁴ My thanks to one reviewer, who pointed out that the publication of this paper would produce yet another geographic dimension to this process of witnessing, as it could simultaneously be present in a variety of computerized locations.

within. Particularly in the case of Soha's subject trajectories, a number of the processes which I discuss originate from outside her, and ultimately this is where many of these trajectories return 'her' to.

'Living martyr' – being less than and more than human

There are two subject trajectories which circulate around and through Soha most frequently when she is encountered through mediated means. These trajectories also result from intimacy, but of a different nature – the more intrusive and exploitative intimacy which only wants Soha to perform two roles, although sometimes these two become one ('living martyr'). These roles are the former detainee of Khiam, who underwent torture and lived in isolation for six of her ten years in captivity, and the hero of the resistance, who after attempting to assassinate the head of the Southern Lebanese Army, defiantly survived her unjust sentence. Soha Bechara is introduced through these roles at the beginning of *everything and nothing*, in order to establish the ways in which she is commonly represented (see figure 4).



Figure 4 Still from untitled part 1: everything and nothing, *courtesy of the artist*.

These first two subject trajectories, which function side by side, can be thought of as Soha as less-than-human, or sub-human, and Soha as more-than-human or super-human. To activists fighting for her release, and in interviews and conferences afterwards, Soha becomes an individual who has been viciously oppressed and de-humanized. For example, in the press release accompanying the

English translation of her autobiography, Soha is introduced as the woman who after attempting to assassinate Lahad, was

Immediately apprehended, interrogated, and tortured for weeks, she was sent to Khiam, a prison and death camp, regularly condemned by humanitarian organizations. She spent ten years there, without trial. Six years were in total isolation, in a six- by two- foot cell, with one meal per day and ten minutes to eat¹⁵.

At the other end of the spectrum, we are presented with a larger than life hero of South Lebanon, whose picture adorns lamp-posts and mantelpieces alike (Salloum forthcoming). In an analogous way although for different reasons and purposes, Soha has also become a more-than-human figurehead of sorts for the whole *untitled* project. Her image is often used in promotional material¹⁶, and the installation is introduced as '*everything and nothing* and other works from the ongoing video installation, "untitled", 1999-200?'¹⁷

Finally, in Soha's paradoxical description of herself as a 'living martyr', the two trajectories combine to become one. These subject trajectories – the sub-human and the super-human – establish Soha as an exceptional figure. She is someone who is different from everyone else; to be pitied or worshiped. The consequences of these representations are in effect to produce another period of solitary confinement. Soha becomes scripted outside humanity once again.

Intimacy and intersubjectivity

It is at this point that intimacy, in the form I discussed in the previous section, proliferates the representations of Soha as a subject. Agamben suggests that witnessing is a vertiginous movement in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject (Agamben 1999, 120). The witness-subject is always already in motion, an intersubjective process taking place between things or people. It is through intimacy, that this claim is fulfilled in *everything and nothing*, as the intersubjective takes precedence *between* Soha and Jayce. This 'between' does not indicate a movement from one thing to the other, but rather, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, a transversal relationship, which sweeps one and the other away,

¹⁵ Soft Skull Press, Press release for Resistance: My Life for Lebanon. Available from author.

¹⁶ Examples of her image standing for the whole project that I am aware of include the front cover of the journal *Framework*, for its special issue on Beirut, in the Vancouver Cinematheque program, and on the post-card for *untitled* when it exhibited at the Daziboa gallery, Montreal.

¹⁷ See promotion material from Daziboa gallery, Gallery 101 and the Western Front.

like a river eroding its banks and picking up speed in the middle (Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 25). It is also through intimacy that Soha becomes intersubjective, not only with Jayce but also with the viewer.

[Click here to view VIDEO CLIP 5](#)

I am a person who seeks to preserve, at least her own humanity, and who is capable of maintaining it by her sacrifices for the others who herself and them are one.

Soha's self proclaimed entrance into a zone of indistinction with 'the others' resonates with Agamben's description of witnessing as a vertiginous movement outlined above. While this implicates Soha as a witness, the question remains who are these 'others'? This is a question that is never unambiguously answered. From the context of the tape, it is possible that she is talking about other ex-detainees of Khiam. Her role as a resistance fighter for Lebanon also implies that these others could be the Lebanese population at large. In the context of that particular section of the tape, in which she discusses the ideals of humanism at an abstract level, it seems to me when I am watching that these others could in fact be the very viewers of this film. We are also the people Soha is sacrificing herself for, and thus becoming one with, implicated by the film and the intimacy within it. It is through intimacy that the viewer is not only able to watch Soha on film, but also to enter into an intersubjective movement with her. Rather than being exceptional – literally standing outside the rest of humanity – intimacy establishes a fleeting bond between the audience and Soha. Through the creation of a space of visibility, *everything and nothing* establishes a relation between 'Us' and someone who might otherwise be thought of as a 'terrorist' (not human). In this manner *everything and nothing* as a form of witnessing is an explicitly geographical ethico-political gesture, one that calls (Western) audiences to the injustice of Soha's and Lebanon's detention.

Just human?

In witnessing Soha, I have suggested that she appears as both sub- and super-human, and as intersubjective, or becoming with an-other. Is it possible for Soha to simply become human? What exactly would it mean to become human? To pursue this line of questioning, I think we need to return to those moments when Jayce asks her about the very banality of her life, whether in Khiam, or after her release. I think it is in these sections that I experience Soha's excess; not the excess of her humanity which I have just mentioned, but rather the non-representational excess: that part of 'her' which cannot be represented on video. It is in these quotidian moments that Soha's affective and libidinal energies – what I earlier described as her 'charisma' – come most sharply into focus. This charisma not only eludes easy description, but also gestures at the complexity of a life that cannot be

captured on film. In witnessing Soha Bechara, *everything and nothing*, a videotape, bears the impossibility of representation within what it represents. It gestures at something I can almost sense when watching but cannot articulate. I choose to call this the becoming human of Soha, because this is precisely what constantly keeps escaping in her media appearances. The true originality of *everything and nothing* is its ability to witness this subject trajectory, albeit through gesturing at the impossibility of ever truly knowing Soha.

Let me be quite clear at this juncture. I am not suggesting that in *everything and nothing* Jayce Salloum is giving Soha her humanity back, as though he were offering a gift, which was never his to give in the first place. Rather, it is from the space between Soha and Jayce that this becoming human emerges. It is within this zone of indistinction which lies at the heart of this act of witnessing, what Jayce describes as 'a close and unbreachable distance', that this subject trajectory is created. In a similar manner, I am not bringing forth these subject trajectories from the film, as much as they are emerging from a similar space, generated in the process of witnessing *everything and nothing*.

Geographies of witnessing and styles of testimony

To conclude, I want to underscore two important and related points about the precise ethico-geographical nature of witnessing, and the media through which events of witnessing take and make place. Agamben, in his thesis on witnessing, suggests that in bearing an impossibility of speech within speech itself, the silent and the speaker enter into a zone of indistinction, such that 'it is impossible to establish the position of the subject, to identify the "imagined substance" of the "I" and, along with it, the true witness' (Agamben 1999, 120). In this paper, through witnessing *everything and nothing*, 'I' have entered into a zone of indistinction with the tape. However, there are a number of other enactments of witnessing contained within this one, because *everything and nothing* bears witness to Soha, and the ways in which she is known. Soha in turn bears witness to detention and resistance. Each of these enactments of witnessing is another vertiginous movement. In witnessing *everything and nothing* I hope to have also witnessed these other movements, and in fact it did not seem possible to do otherwise. Witnessing *everything and nothing* contains within it a citational structure, which in this instance ultimately leads back to Khiam. As I hope to have shown, key to this cascading of witnessing events is the spatio-temporal trajectories which link Khiam to Paris, and Paris to a variety of viewing contexts. This is what makes the act of witnessing a resolutely ethico-geographical one, as it draws attention to (and in the case of *everything and nothing* quite literally brings into view) the intersection of geographies that are frequently disavowed or forgotten in the 'West'. The colonial histories of France and Lebanon weave their way through *everything and nothing*, as do the personal biographies of Jayce Salloum and Soha Bechara as they are caught up in these movements. The multiple layers of

witnessing are also, deliberately, open to further spatial cascading, as a form of response to Manichean geographies that seek to separate an orientalist 'Them' and 'Us'. I would argue then that to witness is to create a geography of associations that specifically seeks to make marginalized 'connections' more extensive.

Let me elaborate on this point. In witnessing Soha in her dorm room, as I noted earlier on, we the audience are moved from the sensational space of Khiam to the mundane world of Paris. However, this movement from Lebanon to France does not disconnect these spaces, but on the contrary links them together. Combined with *everything and nothing's* use of intimacy, this trajectory allows viewers to reach back so to speak and (affectively) experience Khiam detention centre. This distance between Lebanon and France also allows Soha to reflect on her experiences in a way that would have not been possible without space (and time) between them, even as the dorm room's mimicry of the cell allows for the many layers of witnessing I have tried to work with throughout this paper. These different entanglements of witnessing are therefore a complex mixture of interwoven subjectivities and time-spaces. Encountering any one particular trajectory or time-space inevitably causes a cascade into the others allowing an 'Us, Here' to encounter a 'Them, There' in ways far more ethically generous and politically affirming than most contemporary media representations of Arab subjects. In doing so, this act of witnessing refuses these very distinctions (us/them; here/there) and the relations of power that instantiate them. Witnessing, then, is not only a subjective process (what Agamben (1999, 151) describes as being subject to a desubjectification) but also always intersubjective. Just as Soha, in witnessing Khiam, enters into a zone of indistinction with 'others', each time we witness we also get caught up between things. This intersubjective relation occurs not only between 'human' subjects, but also with a whole variety of other 'things': videotapes, detention centres and even events such as an interview in a Paris dorm room.

This brings me to my second point. One issue that has remained implicit in what I have written so far is the importance different media play in enactments of witnessing. *everything and nothing*, and particularly the intimacy as a critical form of engagement within it, must be analyzed in its specificity as a form of audio-visual testimony. As I hope my section on intimacy has demonstrated, different mediations have different affective capabilities, which in turn have important political consequences. It is precisely the affective force of *everything and nothing* - the ways in which it co-constitutes intimacy and what I have described as Soha's 'charisma' - that makes it so compelling to watch. And it is this compulsion that enrolls different audience-constituencies. The fleeting nature of the intimacy, both between Jayce and Soha, and also between the viewer and *everything and nothing*, also hints at a form of generous engagement with others even when such encounters are momentary or very brief. While intimacy is a double-edged sword - such as when it is manifest as intrusion and exploitation - I would argue its

potential as a means for ethically and politically affirming encounters is demonstrated in *everything and nothing*. Furthermore, *everything and nothing* not only witnesses Soha, but does so in a particularly effective way because of the medium through which this process of witnessing is enacted. This is not in any way to privilege videotape as the medium for testimony, but rather to suggest that different mediations will have different affective capabilities which in turn may enfold different political audience constituencies, (Levi's account demonstrates the affective force of written text for example). When politics is viewed as a form of constant experimentation and proliferation, then multiplying the mediations through which acts of witnessing takes place is an important political tactic. It is equally important to pay attention to the specific medium through which these acts take place. As I hope to have shown throughout this paper, it is largely due to the combination of specific geographies and an audio-visual 'style' of witnessing that *everything and nothing* is able to represent Soha Bechara at such a close yet unbreachable distance.

Acknowledgements

The project from which this work is drawn simply would not have been possible without the support, generosity, and gregariousness of Jayce Salloum, for which I am extremely grateful. Different versions of this paper have been (re-)written for many occasions over the past three years, in which time I have received many helpful commentaries. For such assistance, whether extensive or occasional, I would like very sincerely to thank William Bragg, Alice Campbell, Kevin Gould, Derek Gregory, Ben Lampert, Laura Marks, David Nally, Geraldine Pratt, Juanita Sundberg and Joel Wainwright. I would especially like to thank Geraldine Pratt for her rigorous reading and re-reading of this draft. Thanks also to Lawrence Berg and three anonymous referees for their generous commentaries.

I am grateful to Jayce Salloum for permission to use the images and clips from *untitled part 1: everything and nothing*.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Remnants of Auschwitz – The witness and the archive*. New York: Zone Press.
- Bechara, Soha. 2003. *Resistance – My Life for Lebanon*. New York: Soft Skull Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, & Felix Guattari. 1988. *a thousand plateaus*. London: Continuum.
- Gregory, Derek. 2004a. The Angel of Iraq. *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 22, 317-324.

- Gregory, Derek. 2004b. *The Colonial Present*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Levi, Primo. 1989. *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Vintage International.
- Marks, Laura. 2000. *The Skin of the Film – Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mills, Catherine. 2003. An Ethics of Bare Life: Agamben on Witnessing. *borderlands* 2, n.p. (Available at: <http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au>)
- Salloum, Jayce. 2004. Video description. Available from author.
- Salloum, Jayce. Forthcoming. sans titre/untitled: the video installation as an active archive. In Aine O'Brien & Alan Grossman (eds.), *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice*. London: Wallflower Press & New York: Columbia University Press.

Filmography

- Taleen a Junuub (Up From the South)*. Jayce Salloum & Walid Raad, US/Canada, 1993, video.
- untitled part 1: everything and nothing*. Jayce Salloum, France/Canada, 2001, video.
- untitled part 2: beauty and the east*. Jayce Salloum, Multiple locations/Canada, 2003, video.
- untitled part 3a: occupied territories...footnotes to the book of setbacks/ untitled part 3b: as if (beauty never ends...)*. Jayce Salloum, Lebanon/Canada, 2003, video.

All of the above tapes can be obtained from any of the following distributors:

V Tape, 401 Richmond St. W., #452, Toronto, Ont., Canada M5V3A8, ph:(416) 351-1317, distribution@vtape.org, www.vtape.org

Video Out, 1965 Main St., Vancouver, BC, Canada, V5T 3C1 ph:(604)872-8337, videoout@telus.net, www.videoout.ca

Video Data Bank, 112 S. Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL, USA, 60603, (312) 345-3550, fx: (312) 541-8073, info@vdb.org, www.vdb.org

LUX, 3rd Flr, 18 Shacklewell Ln, London E8 2EZ, England, ph: 0207 503 3980, fx:7092 111413, info@lux.org.uk, www.lux.org.uk

Heure Exquise!, B.P. 113-59370 Mons En Baroeul, France ph: 020-04-95-74, exquise@nordnet.fr, www.exquise.org