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Re-Membering Beirut: Performing Memory and Community Across a “Postwar” City

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication

by

Erin Elizabeth Cory

Committee in Charge:

Professor Elana Zilberg, Chair  
Professor Patrick Anderson  
Professor Gary Fields  
Professor Nitin Govil  
Professor Dietrich Jung  
Professor Michael Provence

2015

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

## Dedication

For P.E.K.  
hakawati  
makari  
bearer of light

## Epigraph

“Beirut, suspended, waits for the unknown, and you too are in suspension. ‘Where’s his life story?’ we ask. Where’s his story? It’s a drop in the sea. Beirut has one and a half million souls. Beirut’s a ship, a ship on the sea, and the sea could rise up at any moment. Its location is to blame. We can’t lay the blame within it: it’s not *in* the city, and it’s not in you. The place, rather is to blame. And the time. ... Streets crack open. Cities collapse.” – from *The Mehliis Report*, Rabee Jaber

## Memories.

They age faster than us,  
die sooner,  
disappear silently like hair,  
without a passing date, a suicide note, a last vowel. And what are we then? What are we then?

Surely a memory, the memory of a memory could be remembered again.

Surely the shadow of a memory,  
the memory of a shadow...

- from “A Few Love Lines to Beirut,” Zeina Hashem Beck

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for all you are, and joy in pursuit of your passions. In short, I wish for you what the last eight years have given me. Thank you for choosing me to be your mother.

Portions of Chapter 2, “Badna Na’ref (We Want to Know): Unearthing the Public Secret of Lebanon’s Missing and Disappeared” will appear in the volume *Communicating Memory and History* (2016), edited by David Park and Nicole Maurantonio.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Re-membering Beirut: Performing Memory and Community Across a “Postwar” City

by

Erin Elizabeth Cory

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Elana Zilberg, Chair

More than 20 years after the end of Lebanon’s civil war (1975-1990), reconciliation remains elusive. A number of factors contribute to this stasis. No agreed-upon historical narrative exists by which Lebanon’s 18 ethnoreligious groups can make sense of the war, and the state has interests – both economic and political – for burying common memories and erasing common spaces. In light of these erasures, the capital Beirut, like much of the country, remains divided along spatial, ideological, and mnemonic lines.

The extant literature has generally considered the perils of what Samir Khalaf (2006) calls Beirut’s “geography of fear.” By contrast, this dissertation considers the city a realm of possibility. “Re-membering Beirut: Performing Memory and Community



Across a ‘Postwar’ City,” fuses ethnographic research, analysis, and performative writing to introduce the idea of “re-membering,” a term I use to describe how people engage the residual material of the city-at-war – its textures, tempos, routes, and representations – to render legible the shared pasts and current political claims of historically divided communities. Through case studies including a walking tour, a protest, and street art, I argue for considering the city’s in-between spaces as loci for emergent cross-communal politics, and for movement as both object of analysis and method. The sometimes ephemeral publics that take shape around these performances and practices reconfigure how Beirutis understand themselves in relation to their city and each other, while simultaneously revealing the city’s persistent ideological and spatial terrain.

The project contributes to a fuller picture of how people across the Middle East and North Africa (the MENA region) are using urban space and cultural production – in the wake of the Arab revolutions and most urgently in the midst of the ongoing Syrian crisis – to communicate shared pain and dissent, and to mobilize in the face of failing or oppressive political systems. As the region once again divides itself along both old and new fault lines, the study explores the perils of occluding violent histories, as well as the critical role of culture in inter-communal postwar healing.

## **Introduction**

On a late night in September 2009, I landed in Beirut for the first time. Waiting for me at the airport were two distant cousins, Ralph and Carl, and their mother Lamyā. Once we had loaded my luggage into their car, we began the trip back to their home in Bikfayā, a mainly Maronite Christian village outside Beirut. Though Lamyā had lived in Beirut for several years and still regularly drove down from the mountain to the city for shopping and entertainment, on this night she had difficulty finding her way back to the highway near the airport. She was visibly nervous as we drove through darkened streets, and seemed to take care deciding whom to ask for directions. I did not know it then, but she had unwittingly driven into Dāḥiyya, an area commonly described as Hizballah’s local stronghold. As we neared Beirut’s shimmering downtown, she breathed a sigh of relief. “Promise me, ya Erin,” she said, “that you will never go to Dāḥiyya.” As this was my first visit to Lebanon, indeed to the region, I readily agreed, happy to take advice from the only local community I had.

Nearly four years later, on a day in early summer 2013, I took a cab to meet Jazzar, a Palestinian graffiti artist and member of hip hop group Katibe 5, at the group’s recording studio in the center of Dāḥiyya. A week later, we walked through Beirut together, crossing from Hamra in the west and moving down to Beirut’s waterfront, the Corniche. We had walked comfortably together, stopping here and there to smoke and chat, Jazzar at his ease as he leaned back against the metal railings stretched between city and sea.

The afternoon was waning as we wandered in the general direction of Gemmayzeh, the neighborhood where I lived in east Beirut. As we neared the Beirut

Central District (BCD) in the capital's downtown, known for being the glitzy epicenter of reconstruction after Lebanon's long civil war (1975-1990), Jazzar fell quiet. I asked him if he came to this area much. "No," he said. "This is not for us. They know we don't belong here." "Mīn?" I asked. *Who?* "Kil l 'alam," he said. *Everyone.* He explained that people could read him by his clothes and his accent, which, he said, he inherited from his Palestine-born father. Carrying this heritage on his back and tongue, Jazzar felt he was marked as other, as not belonging to the space. I could not help but think that this man, with whom I had walked so companionably for much of the day, had in this space suddenly been transformed into a subject who would likely be surveilled on camera and by the many security guards posted outside the posh boutiques dotting the BCD's well-kept streets.

Lamya and Jazzar are from markedly different backgrounds characterized by their respective ethnoreligious identity, class, gender, generation, and the places they call home.<sup>1</sup> And yet both of them experience Lebanon's capital, Beirut, in a similar way: as a patchwork landscape made up of spaces of inclusion and exclusion, of anxiety and familiarity. Such dynamics are common in a city cut through with pronounced spatial and ideological boundary lines. The proliferation and maintenance of these boundary lines remain a real problem in Lebanon, and in the literature written about it.

Many scholars call this aspect of the city Beirut's "geography of fear" (Khalaf 2006), referring not only to Lebanon's long civil war (1975-1990) but also to the capital's

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<sup>1</sup> I use "ethnoreligious" following Lucia Volk 's (2010) preference for the term, which she argues reveals the complexities of Lebanese communal identities as being more than just "religious" or "sectarian." The term "ethnoreligious" is a better descriptor, which connotes that "it is not primarily tenets of faith that separate the Lebanese but a mix of religious belief *and* cultural practices" (Volk 2010, 7). These same identities play a major role in politics as well, ordering the "confessional" quota system, as well as the clientelism pervasive in Lebanese society.

reconstruction in the “postwar” era.<sup>2</sup> At the center of much of this work is an explicit critique of the reconstruction projects carried out by corporate giant Solidère since the end of the war. The built environment constructed since the early 1990s has buried common heritage and collective memory through the elimination of shared public space. Critics note the ways in which Solidère has quite literally made concrete the sectarian and ideological separations that have long characterized Lebanese society, and which in many ways fueled the war (e.g., Makdisi 1997, 2006; Ghandour and Fawaz 2009; Khalaf 2002, 2006). Their work argues that, under the guise of neoliberal reconstruction and an institutionally-sanctioned “amnesiac” imperative, meant to move the country forward, Beirut has undergone a dangerous fracturing that has real consequences as old conflicts play out over and over again. I am interested in how groups are trying to fight against this new order of things.

To be sure, Lebanon is still in many ways divided along religious and spatial lines (Hanf 2003, Khalaf 2006, Larkin 2010, Nasr 2003), a fact which merits the close attention that the extant scholarship has paid to particular communities, spaces, and texts in the “postwar” moment.<sup>3</sup> While such sustained engagement offers rich insight into the spheres these communities inhabit, there is a way in which it also discursively reproduces

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term “postwar” with a great deal of caution at the exhortation of several interlocutors in Beirut. As artist Walid Sadek explained to me during an interview, Lebanon’s perpetual cycles of violence challenge the very definition of the term, and to employ it too freely would be to discursively absolve Lebanese society of its continued participation in intercommunal and regional violence.

<sup>3</sup> Numerous monographs and articles have explored the lacuna of civil war memory in Lebanon, and especially in Beirut. These include (but this is hardly a comprehensive list) the memorial practices of elites (Volk 2010), wartime and postwar texts (Haugbølle 2010), and how the social milieux of particular areas deal with the legacy of the war and the encroachment of reconstruction efforts (Sawalha 2010, Deeb and Harb 2013).

the myriad divisions that persist in Lebanon. Indeed, in much of the work, Beirut's urban imaginary itself seems to end at the boundaries of the Solidère project. Scholars have mourned the loss of shared spaces where Lebanese once mingled freely, sharing ideas and participating in the political and social life of the capital (e.g., Makdisi 2006, Khalaf 2006, Sawalha 2010). However, as Craig Larkin notes, Lebanon's most pressing need at present "perhaps is less to do with the construction of cosmopolitan 'shared spaces' than with the creation of diverse publics that allow for the formation of cross-communal ties (sectarian/political/class) and associations" (Larkin 2010, 434).

This dissertation considers how the space of the city – though certainly cut through with painful memories and separations – might also serve as the stage on which such publics are formed. The dissertation proposes a more holistic reading of the city as a critical text to ask a series of questions: How are people using Beirut itself to communicate emergent politics and publics, or to illustrate ongoing and dangerous faultlines? How are they productively engaging Beirut's "geography of fear" to illuminate their hopes, desires, and needs?

Through intensive ethnographic research and analysis of cultural artifacts and media texts, this dissertation investigates recent practices and performances in public space – including a protest, public art, and a walking tour of the city – through which subjugated knowledges are made legible. Such legibility, I argue, "re-members" the city, a term I use to describe how people use the residual material of the city-at-war – its textures, tempos, routes, and representations – to highlight the commonalities between otherwise divided (spatially, culturally, and politically) populations. Efforts to "re-member" Beirut attempt to build bridges between different communities. These

emergent, sometimes ephemeral, publics are shifting the way Beirutis understand themselves in relation to their city and to each other. As such, the dissertation renders visible interactions between communities that often go unnoticed, or undocumented, by placing them into conversation with each other.

### **Some Brief Remarks on the “Public Sphere”**

Any work on public space and political engagement will need in some way to account for its relationship to Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. In this study, the concept has particular resonance, particularly for the ways it does and does not map onto the Lebanese context.

Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, has received no shortage of attention, and it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to conduct yet another protracted analysis. In short, however, Habermas’s concept emerged from an examination of 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment bourgeois society, wherein he observed the emergence of a realm of ideas situated, and mediating between, the state and civil society. Public spaces such as *salons* and coffee houses played a significant role in the formation of the public sphere, acting as hotbeds for the critical-rational thought that would be deployed in public political debate (Habermas, 1989: Section IV).

Numerous critiques and reformulations of the “public sphere” have been published since the translation of Habermas’s seminal text, some of which argue that the original concept is far too Euro-centric to be applied elsewhere (e.g., Gilroy 1993,

Kapoor 2008). It seems, however, that Habermas acknowledged the specificity of his rendering of the public sphere, as he wrote,

[the public sphere is] a category that is typical of an epoch. It cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that ‘civil society’ originating in the European High Middle Ages; nor can it be transferred, ideal typically generalized, to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations” (Habermas, p. xvii).

This is not to say that we cannot speak of a public sphere beyond the post-Enlightenment “West.” Indeed, as Michael D. Dawahare notes, the idea of the public sphere has been taken up and transformed in debates throughout the “Global South,” from the Middle East to Latin America (Dawahare 2000, 50).<sup>4</sup> Still, the Lebanese context presents special problems beyond the geo-historical context of Habermas’s original formulation.

Following critiques of the Habermasian public sphere as too unified to account for the heterogeneity of any one society (e.g., Felski 1989 and Fraser 1990), Dawahare argues not only that multiple publics may exist in a state or nation, but also that there may be various sources of these publics, such as fidelity to a clan or tribe.<sup>5</sup> In Lebanon, the presence of confessional groups necessitates the need for a more locally-specific rendering of the public sphere(s).

### ***Asabiya and the Lebanese Public Sphere(s)***

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<sup>4</sup> Dawahare cites work by al-Sayid, 1995; Mahon, 1996; Mowlana, 1993; and Norton, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> In his work on “cassette-sermons” in Egypt, Hirschkind (2001) has also noted the role of virtue, and specifically Islamic virtues, in cultivating a reinvigorated Islamic community via a particular kind of deliberation and argumentation based on ethical speech. Haugbølle (2010) has also pointed out that the greater Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region is in many ways defined by the propensity for “subnational identity” that overrides the significance of a national family (6). Suad Joseph (2005, 2011) offers the most pointed local examination of this dynamic, which she calls “political familism,” in the Lebanese context.

The history of Lebanon revolves around many identities and factions vying for material, geographical, and ideological dominance. These different groups have hailed from both inside (what was to become) Lebanon as well as outside it, and their respective influences have shaped understandings of Lebanon's past and present. It is not within the scope of this dissertation to detail the earliest examples of these competitions.<sup>6</sup> However, the inception of modern Lebanon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century bears some exploration as it illuminates ongoing debates over history, shared memory, and identity.<sup>7</sup>

Before the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the close of World War I, Britain and France secretly outlined the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), preemptively establishing their ideal spheres of influence in the region in the event of the Empire's partitioning. The basic terms of the agreement were formally institutionalized by the League of Nations mandates (1922), under which the French mandate was established over Lebanon and Syria.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of Lebanon's history, see Fawwaz Tarābulṣī's *A History of Modern Lebanon* and Kamal Salibi's *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. Tarābulṣī's account of early Lebanon, from its beginnings as an Emirate within the Ottoman Empire, is especially useful. His descriptions of 19<sup>th</sup> century battles for dominance, as he himself notes, still ring true in "postwar" Lebanon (Tarābulṣī 2007, 38-40). Both his detailing of the "events of 1860," including fighting between native Druze and Christian communities on Mount Lebanon, and the role of foreign nations (Britain and France) in these conflicts speak to some of the beginnings of dynamics (sectarian strife, civil war, colonial interests) that have shaped the course of Lebanese history, and the many narratives about it.

<sup>7</sup> This dissertation does not pretend to make grand claims over the definitions of "history" and "memory." Indeed, as many scholars have shown, these terms are slippery indeed, often sliding into one another (e.g., Huyssen 2003, Olick and Robbins 1998, Ricouer 2004). Rather, this dissertation is interested in the *practices and performances* that communicate the past, not with the aim of (re)assembling an overarching historical narrative, but rather with the goal in mind of communicating common experiences in the past that now inform shared claims in the present – in other words, the interventions that make different communities visible to each other.

<sup>8</sup> As Tarābulṣī (2007) notes, the language of official justification obscured the true colonial aims of the mandates, such that France justified its claim to greater Syria by announcing the necessary protection of minority groups (Christian, Druze, 'Alawi, and Shi'i) and Britain claimed Palestine as a homeland for the Jews (75-6).



Salibi (1988) notes that, to be successful as a state, Lebanon needed political agreement and even social development amongst the myriad groups that now comprised its population. However, Lebanon's success proved difficult in light of two factors. First, in order to maintain control over its "Lebanese project," France relied on the support of the Maronite Church.<sup>9</sup> Maronites subsequently fought to retain control of the nascent Lebanese state, refusing to share power with Muslims, as they claimed that Muslims would likely be swayed by the opinions of their coreligionists outside the country, putting Lebanon's national security at risk. Secondly, Arab nationalist thought was staunchly against Lebanon's succeeding politically. For the other four countries carved out of Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire (Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, and Iraq), Lebanon presented a special problem. Maronites and their Christian supporters readily accepted not only their new country, but also a nationality and identity *quite apart* from their Arab neighbors and the groups who were forced to become their countrymen. As such, the Maronites had "broken the Arab consensus" by actively supporting foreign involvement in the region (Salibi 1988, 31-37).<sup>10</sup> Thus at the outset of modern Lebanon, we see the beginnings of a conflict between two social forces, Lebanism and Arabism. These two perspectives were hard-pressed to come to consensus on any major issue, to the detriment of the Lebanese state's development.

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<sup>9</sup> The Maronites are a Christian community long allied with the Roman Catholic Church. The relationship between the Maronites and France dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is narrated in great detail by Kamal Salibi (1988).

<sup>10</sup> For more on the relationship between France and the Maronites, see Salibi 1988. The text narrates various communal understandings of Lebanese history, and is especially thorough in its narration of this relationship and the ways it countered Arab nationalist sentiments, a factor that played into many of Lebanon's earliest (and protracted) national conflicts. Such communal mythologies are also addressed in Dawahare (2000).

To be sure, various state attempts have been made throughout Lebanon's history to achieve parity for the country's different groups. *Al Mithaq al Watani*, also called the National Pact of 1943, was essentially meant, at the outset of Lebanon's independence, as a compromise between communities.<sup>11</sup> Its tacit stipulation was that, despite their long affiliation with France, the Christians would not split from the Arab world in favor of the West, while Muslims likewise might turn from the rising tide of Pan-Arabism (Tarābulṣī 2007, 110).<sup>12</sup> It also reaffirmed the 6/5 power-sharing ratio enshrined in Article 95 of the Constitution of 1926 (Kassir 2010, 444), and accounted for the distribution of the main offices of government amongst the three main ethnoreligious identities: a Maronite Christian President, a Sunni Muslim Prime Minister, and a Shia Speaker of the House.

Kassir (2010) notes that this “political confessionalism” – the rule of communal proportion to elect leaders at all levels of society – existed in the Lebanese state's prehistory. The system has been legally reaffirmed, with certain changes, by both the Ta'if Accords signaling the “official” end of the civil war (1989) and more recently by the Doha Agreement (2008).

On paper, this proportional representation might seem the surest path towards (an at least tenuous) peace between identities and affiliations. However, neither the pact nor the constitution could galvanize various identities in an overarching Lebanese

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<sup>11</sup> Tarābulṣī (2007) notes that Lebanon's independence (1943) is founded on two documents, a formal constitution and the “National Pact,” the informal *verbal* understanding between Bishara al-Khuri and Riad al-Sulh. Only a fragment of the latter can be found in al-Sulh's ministerial declaration from October 7, 1943 (109).

<sup>12</sup> Importantly, however, Tarābulṣī notes that the National Pact was tantamount to political *guarantees* for Christians, and political and socio-cultural *promises* for Muslims. These principles were never codified in the revised constitution, likely so as not to sign them into law, in order to maintain Christian hegemony (Tarābulṣī 2007, 111)

nationalism.<sup>13</sup> By 1958, Lebanese had taken arms against each other in the young nation's first civil war. Yet even the violence of this event failed to produce changes to the political system. As William Harris argues:

Lebanon's political system...has integrated Western representative concepts and local social tradition in a very distinctive way. Within a framework of transplanted parliamentarianism, genuine electoral contests, and extensive public freedoms, political behavior has been determined not by Western-style ideological and party allegiances, but primarily by old feudal, family, and sectarian loyalties. Despite demands for changes in representative balances, strong popular adherence to this hybrid political model was not broken by its inability to maintain peace and consensus after 1975 [the beginning of the civil war]. (Harris 2006, 61)

It is these loyalties to which Dawahare (2010) refers when laying out his explanation of multiple Lebanese public spheres, or *asabiyat*.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on work by Latif Abul-Husn (1998) and Ibn Khaldoun, as well as thinkers such as Geertz (1974) and Sennett (1980), Dawahare notes that *asabiya* (singular of *asabiyat*) is a pre-Islamic concept indigenous to the region, and has long informed sectarian interaction and identity in the Levant (Dawahare 2010, 15).<sup>15</sup> A combination of both emotion and reason,

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<sup>13</sup> As Samir Khalaf notes, the pact had an implicitly spatial dimension: that of marrying the traditional mountains and hinterlands to the cosmopolitan city (Khalaf 2006, 25).

<sup>14</sup> The term "asabiya" has myriad definitions, among them "zealous partisanship," "bigotry," "esprit de corps" and "tribal solidarity." For a more comprehensive list, see Hans Wehr's *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic*. While the term may seem outdated, especially owing to its beginnings in pre-Islamic discourse, the variety of texts I have found that employ the term suggests that it might yet be relevant in describing lingering commitments and affiliations in Lebanon. Eveline van der Steen, for example, is especially conscientious of the potential connections of "asabiya" with notions of race/bigotry. She notes that for Ibn Khaldoun, kinship went *beyond* blood ties, and could be *created*. She quotes him as follows:

The affection somebody has for his clients and allies results from the feeling of shame that comes to a person when one of his neighbours, relatives, or a blood relation in any degree is humiliated. The reason for it is that a client/master relationship leads to close contact exactly, or approximately in the same way, as does common descent. (Ibn Khaldoun 1967: 98, 100; qtd. in van der Steen 2014)

See also Kapitan (2015), Ruthven (1984) and Sayeed (1995)

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Khaldoun was an Arab Muslim historian whose major work the *Muqaddimah* (or, the Introduction) is considered influential to early sociology and historiography. Dawahare cites

*asabiya* loosely means “solidarity,” and is characterized by a thin mode of common sense, a structure of feeling based on local knowledge. Its constitution – how effectively it governs and who wields power within its structure – stems from four main factors: lineage affiliation, group social and political affiliation, family position, and the possibility of forming religious or confessional groups (Ibid., 79).

Loyalty, then, goes far deeper than larger notions of Lebanism or Arabism. Within the framework of *asabiya*, group solidarity is enforced by power and authority, which are highly visible and coercive, as well as by *group mythos and narrative* (Ibid.). Identity origin myths circulate and reinforce the closeness of a given *asabiya*. Further, members’ fidelity to these narratives as well as to the group itself are controlled by established leaders, who in turn promote favored kin, alliances, and clients to positions of power (Ibid., 82).

The discourses of a society’s various *asabiyat* and the socio-political goals of their respective leaders are often at odds, and act as the foundation for the emergence of unique public spheres, all vying for hegemony (Ibid., 82-3). Rarely do these spheres enter into tolerant dialogue with each other, though Dawahare notes the importance of such encounters in the formation of a national public sphere (Ibid., 57). Indeed, *interaction* between confessional groups and an *acknowledgment* of multiple origin myths and sociopolitical realities, he argues, would be absolutely critical to the foundation of a strong civil society that might disrupt the patterns of competition and

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Abul-Husn (1998) extensively, as the latter expounded upon the idea of Ibn Khaldoun’s *asabiya* specifically in relation to the Lebanese civil war.

conflict which have characterized Lebanon's history, and have continued to plague its social and political processes (Ibid., 132).

As Kamal Salibi wrote in the middle of the civil war,

If the various factions are to lay down their arms and live in peace and full co-operation as citizens of one country, the Lebanese will first have to reach a consensus on what makes of them a nation or political community and this can only be achieved if they manage to agree on a common vision of their past. (Salibi 1988, 17-18)

Nearly 30 years later, this vision remains difficult to grasp.

### **Topographies of Forgetting: Memory in Public Spaces**

Samir Khalaf echoes Dawahare and Salibi when calling for increased connection and dialogue between communities, or public spheres. Significantly, however, he ties such connections to *public spaces*, which may serve a “healing and mediating” function (Khalaf 2006, 245). That is, for Khalaf, public space becomes the *literal common ground* on which Lebanon's myriad identities may find validation and closeness to others. Before we can think about how such closeness might actually come about, we need to account for how it was *lost* – not only during the war, but also in the “postwar” era. For indeed, as much as people make spaces, as the literature on space and place (following Lefebvre 1991) has long told us, so too are people made by the spaces they inhabit.

For Khalaf, Lebanon's public space *par excellence* was the Bourj, also called the Beirut Central District (BCD), the once-beating “heart of Beirut.” This space adjacent to Beirut's downtown was, until the destruction of the civil war and subsequent reconstruction efforts, characterized by both “resonant pluralism and [an] assimilating character” (Khalaf 2006, 169). Its pluralism, receptivity to change, and tolerance to

others fashioned it into a physical manifestation of a national public sphere, akin to Habermas's *salons* and coffee houses (Ibid.). While at certain points in its history (particularly the Ottoman period and the French Mandate era), the BCD mainly hosted the upper echelons of Lebanese society, it also frequently served as a venue in which a spectrum of identities and backgrounds mingled. These groups came together to socialize, to buy and sell goods at market and, often, to voice collective dissent, resulting in a place-making that, according to Khalaf, marked the Bourj for all time (Ibid., 195).

If Beirut's prewar life centered in the BCD, life and death converged in its space during the civil war, as much of the fighting took place there. By the end of the war, the BCD was a smoking, hollow husk, in shambles and nearly uninhabitable. With the passing of the Ta'if Accord in 1989, and the "end of fighting" in the next two years, difficult questions arose about reconstruction – how would it be carried out, by whom, with what funds?<sup>16</sup> Law 117 passed in December 1991, authorizing the establishment of a private real estate company by the Beirut municipality, to be funded by public moneys. Rafiq al-Hariri took office as Prime Minister in 1992, and founded the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of the Beirut Central District (Solidère) in 1994. Solidère pitched its reconstruction efforts as a salve on Lebanon's war wounds: during Solidère's early days, several architects involved with the project claimed that Solidère's "massive reconstruction of downtown Beirut was...a must-do action to announce the end of the war and the beginning of the return to normality"

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<sup>16</sup> The Ta'if Accord was meant to put an end to the fighting in Lebanon. Signed in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, it also asserted Lebanese sovereignty over Israeli-occupied south Lebanon, and acknowledged a Muslim majority in country.

(Kabbani 1998, 8; qtd.in Sawalha 2010, 28). Ostensibly meant to heal the wounds of the conflict, Solidère's reconstruction efforts hardly returned Beirut to its prewar state.

What manifested instead in the material space of the city center was a rather sanitized, closely-surveilled, and extremely expensive downtown, in which a storybook version of a Mediterranean city met a globalized festival marketplace. The BCD's reconstruction might well be considered its "*creative destruction*" (Connerton 2009, 119).<sup>17</sup> Connerton notes that both cultural memory and amnesia are closely linked to the "life history of the material objects with which people are constantly surrounded" (Ibid., 122). Creative destruction operates under the auspices of development to carefully select and destroy the material objects to which a society's *memoire collective* and amnesia are inextricably linked. Such destruction quite easily transforms urban landscapes into "*topographies of forgetting*," evacuated of the shared memory that had previously characterized them and made them significant to a community.<sup>18</sup> People's relationships to the urban landscape, and to each other, are thus radically changed.

Solidère's vision included scrubbing away the traces or markers of the very violences that precipitated downtown's reconstruction, which are themselves a commonality important to Lebanon's shared memory. Though it was the center of much of the fighting during the civil war, the downtown bears no monument to those who fought and died in it, no *lieux de memoire* around which the Lebanese might remember

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<sup>17</sup> Connerton follows Harvey (2001), who appropriated this term from Marxist theory to theorize how heritage commodification involves both the accumulation of profit and a social need to accumulate nostalgia. I will consider how heritage is sold in downtown Beirut in Chapter 4.

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 22 for an explanation of the term *memoire collective* in relation to memory studies as a field.

and share in the common experience of the war.<sup>19</sup> The BCD's rather empty memoryscape thus perfectly spatially embodies the Lebanese state's postwar amnesiac paradigm, of which more will be said in Chapter 2.

The dynamics of the creative destruction wrought by Solidère in Beirut's center also had effects that continue to tentacle far beyond the BCD, and far beyond the specific time and space of the civil war. As Lefebvre (1991) notes, the fate of a city's center is of paramount importance to outlying areas:

The concentration of 'everything' that exists in space subordinates all spatial elements and moments to the power that controls the center. Compactness and density are a 'property' of centers; radiating out from the centers, each space, each spatial interval, is a vector of constraints and a bearer of norms and 'values.' (Lefebvre 1991, 356)

The anomie nurtured by the center's evacuation became the rule throughout Beirut.

Thus, the war and the subsequent reconstruction it precipitated not only destroyed public spaces in downtown Beirut, but also "encouraged the formation of separate exclusive, and self-sufficient spaces" (Khalaf 2002, 247), the spatial enunciations of the various *asabiyat* mentioned in the previous section.

Within these spatial enclaves, encoded with the symbolism and narrative that allow for control by dominant parties, the spatiotemporality of Solidère's "postwar" downtown persist. Not only were these enclaves quite literally concretized as a result of Solidère's reconfiguration of Beirut's consummate public space, but they have also subsequently adopted the logic of the company's reconstruction tactics. As urban

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Nora (1989) argues that in an increasingly "deritualized" society - where the new is favored over the old, the future over the past, and innovation over tradition - *milieux de memoire* (real environments of memory) have disappeared. To compensate in some way for the disappearance of these *milieux*, people have created *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory), which are "fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it" (12).



planners and theorists Mona Fawaz and Marwan Ghandour point out, reconstruction after other conflicts, especially Hizballah-backed Wa'd's projects in Haret Hreik after the 2006 Lebanon War with Israel, produce exactly the same effects as the Solidère project:

[Based on the Solidère and Wa'd projects] it is possible to argue that the reconstruction consolidates the geography of war and accepts its new timeline as fact...anything prior to demolition is reduced to a reservoir of moments, selectively invoked to serve the interests of the new project, stripped of social and/or political significance. Economic entitlements are also dis-embedded of their social milieu and abstracted into shares and/or forms. It is an erasure that operates on the social, political, economic, legislative, and environmental dimensions of space...Far from a process of healing the scars of war, this radical change in the characteristic of the "reconstructed" neighborhoods positions reconstruction projects as a continuation and even a consolidation of the war-induced processes of change. (Fawaz and Ghandour 2009, 6)

These processes have meant a constant partitioning, indeed concretizing, of terrain along ethnoreligious lines. Daily life is affected by the stratified nature of the "body politic" of the city, which "forecloses the opportunities for public debate and for dwellers to intervene as partners in their making of their living environment" (Fawaz 2007, 23). Instead, elites in every sector maintain control over the symbolic and material space of their neighborhoods, weaving tightknit communities based on circulating narratives that often invoke an "us vs. them" ethos.

People both *make space*, and *are made* – physically and ideologically – by the spaces they inhabit, implicated in the painful lacuna of forgetting and fracturing. This "polynucleated" shape (Connerton 2009, 107) is not a problem as such; certainly place-based communities are important bedrocks of identity and safety. However, in light of Lebanon's always-tenuous peace, such continued separation has real implications. When even the center of the city fails to be a real public space in the sense that the public has a

hand in its “making,” its everyday life, the anomie is only amplified. In the face of this separation – physical and ideological – Solidère’s attempt at a “nationalist unifying project” (Sawalha 2010, 28) rings hollow.

Perhaps Beirut in the contemporary moment might be understood as a dismembered body politic, a term that gets at the violence of spatial separation. As Lieven de Caeter points out, this dismembered body politic is so cut through with real and imaginary demarcation lines that actual bodies, belonging to Beirutis, are affected in tangible ways:

The dismemberment of the city as body politic has repercussions on the physical bodies of the inhabitants. In the absence of society, state and legality, a lawlessness, a generalized anomie, prevails; everyone is exposed in their corporeality in a literal sense... One might further wonder whether the Civil War perhaps created phantom citizens. When citizenship becomes something ghostly, it is quite possible for people themselves to become phantoms. They are inverse phantoms: just as real phantoms have only their appearances and no matter, false phantoms have only their body... because they have lost their citizenship, their belonging, their civic human appurtenance. (de Caeter 2011, 428)

The spatial dismemberment of the body politic of Beirut is “a quasi-physical experience, graven into the bodies and mentalities of the citizens” (Ibid., 429). For de Caeter, as for many others who work on Beirut’s built environment and issues of space, memory, and politics, these divisions are so entrenched that they can seldom be challenged, much less changed in any sustainable way. It would seem that the spatial erasure of a more encompassing public space, and with it the memory of shared everyday life, has also erased the possibility of a larger Lebanese public; opportunities for political participation, solidarity, and challenging the status quo have been systematically

foreclosed as communities continue to be spatially and ideologically sequestered from one another.<sup>20</sup>

The fracturing of the body politic has thus benefited those in power – even as they form coalitions with other parties, they play on and enjoy the loyalties of their constituents – while leaving people across the city bereft of an expansive urban imaginary that would join these publics towards some common understanding and community, one that would perhaps interrupt the cycles of violence that seem to happen with haunting regularity (Chrabieh 2007).

### **Re-membering Beirut?: Performing Memory and the City**

But what if we began by reading the dismembered body politic of Beirut as a site of possibility? As much as I observed Beirut's many separations, which will be described in more detail in the case studies, I would also like to argue that while the "scars of war" (e.g., Khalaf 2006, Fawaz and Ghandour 2009) represent Beirut's painful, repetitive history of intercommunal violence, these same scars may also be productive sites of healing. What is a scar, after all, if not both a site of rupture, and also a site of stitching and rejoining, the seam or edge of healing?

I am interested not only in the emotional and mental scars left by violence, but also the spaces in the city where this violence is made *legible*. Though scars are thought

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<sup>20</sup> Saree Makdisi (2006) notes that the "historical confusion" that confronts Lebanese people at every turn compounds this isolation. This historical confusion, he writes, centers on the civil war, and becomes apparent in various institutions and cultural forms, or as a result of their absence. Lebanese school textbooks, for example do not narrate history beyond 1946, three years after Lebanon gained independence from the French. Although several attempts have been made to author a narrative acceptable to all communities, they have each failed in turn. Even published histories, he notes, face nearly insurmountable challenges in presenting a comprehensive, and consistent, narrative (Makdisi 2006, 207).

ugly, the site of violence done to the body politic, the marks of wounds that sometimes still get rubbed the wrong way and have yet to fully heal, perhaps the wounds can be reopened, and stitched together anew. These scars in Beirut bear out the city's special spatiotemporality: Rooted in space, they trace the boundaries across which people are loath to pass. And yet they also constitute the rough terrain that articulates the memory of common experience.

Here Vyjayanthi Rao's (2008, 2009) theory of the "*city-as-archive*" is helpful. Archives and cities (in map form) have often traditionally been the sites by which the memories and demographics that characterize societies have been understood and studied. Archives have been reified as the conglomerate of information that is important to a society's memory, while maps have accounted for densities of people. Rao argues that these conceptions are too static to account for the ways in which both archives and cities change over time. Archives are often being added to and tinkered with, and are perpetually shifting. Similarly, when people are displaced, she writes, and move to different areas, they carry their memories and stories with them. Neither the archive nor the city is static, but both are instead always *in process*. She argues for considering the *city as an archive in process*: "because the city draws together disparate groups of people it is also necessary to consider that the city – as multiple forms of media – might serve as an archive *actively producing connections* amongst its residents rather than merely reflecting them" (Rao 2008, 179; my emphasis). The ways in which these stories and experiences change the fabric of the city is something for which urban research must account.

In Beirut, the city has been treated like an archive in the traditional sense, where

the major debates have been about Solidère's failure to preserve not only landmarks, but also a way of life. These concerns are valid, especially in light of the relative scarcity of traditional archives accessible to the public and the persistent lack of narrative around some of Lebanon's most troubling history. It is understandable that a sense of nostalgia for a "golden age" would persist, as well as a desire to resurrect or preserve spaces as they once were. And in this light, as previously mentioned, it is natural that the Solidère project would draw criticism. However, it is this dissertation's argument that these debates, heavily bent on issues of heritage and preservation, only go so far; in fact, the city is always *being made*. The engagements and practices through which people *make and re-make* their city in critical ways are sometimes less easily observed than those that form the city's spatially-situated communities.

The difficulty in observing them has perhaps much to do with the fact that they often happen in the *spaces*, rather than *places* of the city. By this I mean that they occur in the in-between areas that are often ignored in Beirut by dint of its spatial fracturing and car culture, the stasis and motion that at once corrals community-specific memory and ignores the common threads that tentacle *between* neighborhoods. The ephemerality often characteristic of these practices, in fact, can make them difficult to trace. This should not mean that they are not taken seriously, however; indeed, looking at these practices tells us much not only about the divisions that still mark the city's landscape/memoryscape, but also about emergent publics. As Low and Smith argue,

...[The] respatialization of our sense of the public brings the opportunity of a more complete repoliticization of the public than would otherwise be available. Investigating the means of making and remaking public space provides a unique window on the politics of the public sphere, suggesting

an even more powerful imperative to the focus on public space. (Low and Smith 2006, 7)

The question, per Rao, is how to account for such practices; indeed, *how to find them*.

### **Detour: Locating Process, Finding Connection**

Allow me a brief detour, a small alleyway in this dissertation's narrative to tell the story of how I came to focus on the practices that constitute its case studies. This project began as an exploration of what I called the "civil war generation" in Beirut. I understood this group to be composed of people who had grown up during the war but who did not actively participate in its fighting or other forms of violence. Though they had been children during wartime, they were still marked by their experiences of the conflict. Studies showed that the vast majority of children in this generation had experienced several traumatic events.<sup>21</sup> Because there had been focus on both those who experienced the war as adults - as both fighters and non-combatants - and on those growing up after the war (what Larkin (2010), following Hirsch, calls Lebanon's "postmemory generation"), it seemed there was a compelling case to be made for studying those who were somehow in between.

My entry point into this generation was a sound piece by trumpeter and visual artist Mazen Kerbaj. In "Starry Night," Kerbaj plays his dismantled trumpet in an eerie duet with the bombs falling on the Beirut during the 2006 Lebanon war with Israel.

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<sup>21</sup> Several studies conducted during the 1980s and 1990s support this claim. Among the findings were the fact that Lebanese children 3-9 years old who had witnessed traumatic events – including death, forced displacement, and/or destruction of a home – were nearly twice as likely to exhibit nervous, regressive, aggressive, and depressive behavior reactions to subsequent war situations (Chimienti 1989). The likelihood of trauma in this age group was high: young people between 3 and 16 who grew up during the civil war experienced six different types of traumatic events on average, sometimes repeatedly (Macksoud 1992). Chronic exposure to war made some children in Lebanon more likely to develop "continuous PTSD" (Macksoud 1996).

Kerbaj belongs to the civil war generation, and I set out to find other artists who might be doing similar work. As it turned out, there were many - a whole scene made up of this generation, many of whom collaborated, and whose work dealt either explicitly or implicitly with the civil war.

I began contacting artists in Kerbaj's cohort in 2010, connecting via email and Facebook, and attending Irtijal – an experimental music festival at which many of them performed. In spring 2012, I started interviewing them in earnest. It became increasingly apparent that the art scene was extremely limited in its membership, to the point of exclusivity. Many of the artists came from backgrounds that allowed them to live full time as artists, a mark of privilege that is especially notable in Lebanon, where unemployment is around 13%.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, as I spent more time in Beirut, I was also making other contacts and friends. As I will detail in the case studies that comprise this dissertation, casual acquaintances often turned into important contacts and companions, who introduced me to other people in areas of the city I would likely never have ventured to go at the outset of my research. Over time, it became apparent to me through these informants and companions that there was far more to explore in Beirut than the much-vaunted art scene.

The historical moment demands explanation as well, for the political situation in Lebanon was also changing in relation to Syria's civil war. Upon re-entry to Lebanon in

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<sup>22</sup> According to the World Bank's *MENA Quarterly Economic Brief* from January 2014, while overall unemployment in Lebanon is between 12-13%, that number is nearly doubled for young people under age 25 and the highly educated. Please see <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/QEBissue2January2014FINAL.pdf> for more information. Importantly, these numbers do not account for the numerous (over a million) Syrian refugees who have been displaced to Lebanon as a result of Syria's ongoing civil war.

spring 2012, then, I found a *city in process*. That is, there was a feeling in Beirut that things were shifting rapidly, a nervousness precipitated by omens – the increased movement of Syrian refugees across the border, the fighting playing out along spatial/identity lines in Tripoli by those loyal to Assad and those who opposed him – that the violence next door was drawing every closer. As it did, old tensions cropped up along communal lines, ghosts that suggested the consequences of burying the past.

While walking the city, out with friends at cafes, and clicking around Facebook, I became aware of events around Beirut that had to do with the city and memory. Almost all of these were open to the public, and so I began attending, with the goal of getting a larger sense of some of the issues the civil war generation artists might be dealing with. The groups I observed at these events – or, if I did not attend, observed interacting online – were compelling for a number of reasons, but especially for the ways they traversed times, communities and spaces. First, some of these groups were grassroots organizations and were relatively new, which meant that they had their finger on the pulse of current debates about heritage and urban life, debates that have long plagued Lebanese urban scholars and reconstruction initiatives alike. Secondly, these groups appeared to bridge several communities and identities, including ethnoreligious background, class, gender and generation. I was intrigued by these connections, as much of what I had read on Beirut, and experienced through my family in Lebanon, seemed to suggest that communities were isolated from one another with little hope, or desire, for reconciliation. Finally, some of these groups were associated with other local, regional, and international organizations. By attending these events, I came to know a network of local and foreign cultural producers, organizers, and institutions whose motivations were



often simultaneously aligned and at odds with one another. In examining these connections and quarrels, I gained a sense of the power dynamics –built on personal or political connections (what in Lebanon is called *wāsṣa*), capital, and the production of knowledge – that color even activist-based work in Lebanon.

After some time in the field, it became clear that the case studies I had identified – a walking tour, a protest, and public art throughout the city – shared not only a conceptual locus centered on memory and the city, but also were examples of new *communities in process*. Often these communities were only temporary, by which I mean that their co-presence in real space was observable only briefly. The communities came together only to dissolve, after the walk, the protest, the art event, ended. And yet these *practices* – of moving through the city, marking it both literally and figuratively – seemed worth noting. That these cross-sections of people should be visible *together* in a city where such co-presence is a rare occurrence, seemed a radical thing indeed. For all their ephemerality, these moments were nonetheless deliberate and demanded attention.

Certainly each group described in this dissertation had its own concerns. The immediate motivations of street writers are not the same as women waiting for news of their loved ones who disappeared during the civil war, and their concerns in turn are quite different than those of a walking tour guide attempting to narrate the oft-observed history of Beirut. I would argue, however, that holding these groups together is a desire to lay claim to the past, and that the way they all do that is through their *critical physical engagements* with the city. The city represents the critical text in which they act, through which they both mine and inscribe their memories.

## Theoretical Nexus: Memory, Space/Place, and Performance

Phenomenological work done at the crossroads of both memory studies and the field of cultural/humanistic geography helps us understand how people's practices both make sense of, and *make* the city.<sup>2324</sup> This work places the body at the center of place- and memory-making. Indeed, the body bridges the realms of memory and space/place.

For Edward Casey for example, place constitutes “a container of experiences that contributes...to its [own] intrinsic memorability” (Casey 1987, 186). *Place memory*,

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<sup>23</sup> Though it has roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century sociological thought of Durkheim and his contemporaries, memory studies has experienced renewed academic cache in the years since the “memory boom” of the 1980s. Halbwachs' (1925) idea of *memoire collective* is at the center of this field. Halbwachs argued for the importance of shared memory in constituting group identities, and further suggested that such identities required activation in rituals of solidarity. For Halbwachs, memory was about minds working together in the social world, and the way that society structures mental processes: “[I]t is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (*On Collective Memory* 38). An individual's social frameworks are responsible for how, and what, the individual remembers, and it is essentially impossible to remember outside these frameworks. “Collective memory” has been subject to critique because of its relatively vague conceptual boundaries. As Olick et al (2011) suggest, Halbwachs' idea of “collective memory” drew criticism almost from its inception, mostly because it seemed to conveniently oscillate between socially-framed individual memory and strictly group-centered common memory (40-1). However, the concept continues to generate intellectual work and debate in the form of ever-emergent subfields taking shape in tandem with and against each other, under the larger memory studies discipline. Among these subfields are cultural memory studies and social memory studies. Both are relatively new discursive formations, the former based mainly in European thought and the work of Jan Assmann, the latter only recently articulated in *The Collective Memory Reader* (2011). The differences between these two realms remain largely unclear, and seem to be a simple matter of editors' selections. Indeed, both are concerned with memory as a dynamic, social, and generative process

<sup>24</sup> Similar to memory studies, studies of cultural and humanistic geography have argued for geography's significance as both material and ideological staging/battleground for the formation of identity (Jackson 1989, 1991; Keith and Pile 1993, 1997; Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996). Geographies, including built environments, are sites where identity is formed through the enactment of community and politics, as well as the transgression of physical and cultural boundaries. Foundational humanistic geography texts challenged space's privileging in 1970s-era human geography by refocusing on *place* through the lenses of phenomenology and existentialism. They framed place as a universal part of the human condition, not necessarily in terms of particular places, but rather as a way of being-in-the-world. Topophilia” refers to “the affective bond between people and place” (Tuan 1974, 4); as people live in and perceive their everyday places, they come to a greater understanding of the world. In contrast to space, which is predicated on action and movement, place suggests resting, involvement, and attachment.

then, centers on the phenomenological experiences – visual, auditory, and kinesthetic – that a person has in the place. The body itself plays an integral role in this remembering, acting as the nexus where the intimate relationship between memory and place is realized:

As psycho-physical in status, the lived body puts us in touch with the psychical aspects of remembering and the physical features of place. As itself movable and moving, it can relate at once to the movable bodies that are the primary occupants of place and to the self-moving soul that recollects itself in place. (Ibid., 189)

David Seamon (1980) emphasizes the significance of *movement* to understanding place. People *perform* places through their “place-ballets,” the daily movements through which they come to know a place, understand themselves as part of it and, indeed, *make* it.<sup>25</sup>

While much of this work focuses on the formation of *place*, I would argue that the emphasis on movement lends well to the consideration of *space*. Timothy Cresswell offers a solid working comparison of the two terms. *Place* is “not just a thing in the world but a way of...seeing, knowing and understanding the world...a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment” (Cresswell 2004, 11). In contrast, *space* is a more abstract concept, predicated on movement rather than stability, mobility rather than attachment. Central to the argument of this dissertation, however, is that such movements can and *do* lead people into attachments not only to their immediate environments, but also to each other. In this sense, space serves as the realm, or perhaps

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<sup>25</sup> A wealth of work on the relationship between people, their movements, and the places in which they form their identities, has been done in the related fields of cultural and humanistic geography. A comprehensive list of such work is beyond the scope of a footnote, but my work is largely inspired by the following, among others: Thrift (1983), Merleau-Ponty (2008), Tuan (1974, 1977), Relph (1976), Jackson (1989), Keith and Pile (1993, 1997), Sibley (1995) and Cresswell (1996).

the network, by which attachments *between* places – and all the histories, memories, and identities they carry – might start to take shape. In their movements, people create not only their primary places of attachment (neighborhoods, quarters, etc.), but also create their city through the routes they take, the boundaries they cross. When they do this together, with intention, perhaps they begin to quite literally stitch the city – its places, its memories, its stories – together.

This critical work might be cast as what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2003) calls *the repertoire*. That is, as opposed to the archive, the repertoire contains the verbal performances, prayers, songs, and nonverbal practices that might push back against the incomplete ways of knowing represented by the archive, the physical and discursive site that consummately represents Western disciplinary formations reifying literary and historical documents to the exclusion of other forms of knowledge, memory, and identity. If in this instance we are taking the city, Beirut, as an archive that, as Rao suggests, can be changed in fundamental ways, perhaps the daily performances that constitute the repertoire are precisely the practices she longs to find and document. These performances de-privilege hallowed spaces like museums and texts in favor of everyday space as a site for the dialogic communication that transmits memory and culture (Roach 1996, Taylor 2003) – in other words, for the *street as stage* (Schechner 1993). In Beirut, such work has real implications, not only as a way to join communities, to interpolate audiences into its critical work (States 1985), but also as a way to fill the discursive absences that persist in the narration of Lebanon's history.

The ephemerality of these performances does not make them any less worthy of documentation and analysis. In fact, as Jill Dolan notes, performances generate

“moments of *communitas*” into with performers and audiences are affectively hailed. This brief but powerful togetherness - what Dolan calls the “utopian performative” – ideally opens the possibility of transformation and social change by allowing participants to imagine new forms of social relationships. Importantly, though utopian performatives glean their power by attaching to particulars (a moment, a place, etc.), they remain transcendent in “past-present-future ‘now’” time, the “local products of a here and now that passes into a there and then” (Dolan 2005, 168-9)

Indeed, the sense of movement between time and space make performance a particularly useful framework. In light of this project’s interest in shifting understandings of the built environment, identity, and memory, Dwight Conquergood’s definition of performance resonates with particular relevance:

Performance privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures, such as shamans, tricksters and jokers, who value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental. (Conquergood 1995, 138)

Perhaps it is the invocation of such performers for which Khalaf (2006) calls in the conclusion to his book, *Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Burj*. In the final chapter, “Future Prospects,” Khalaf implores the Lebanese people to revive an archetypal character, the *makari* (itinerant merchant). This traveler, Khalaf argues, crosses not only spatial, but also ideological terrain. Traversing different worlds, he performs the role of a cultural broker who links together their multiple “rhythms and rituals” (Khalaf 2006, 246).

The focus here on movement is a much a part of the theoretical framework for this dissertation as it is central to its methods. In the following section, I discuss the

sometimes-unconventional methods I used in trying to understand how both memory and the city are being made, as de Certeau writes, “with footsteps.”

### **Methods: On Movement, Complicity, and Conjecture**

Owing to the variety of practices, communities, discourses, and histories underpinning its material, this dissertation takes a multi-method approach. By that I mean that I do not locate the methodological trajectory of the dissertation within one framework, but rather make use of both traditional ethnographic methods (e.g., participant observation, semi-structured interviews) and newer practices (e.g., walking as method and conjectural historiography) to explore seemingly disparate critical memory practices in Beirut.

As noted earlier in this introduction, one critical aspect of the project involves how it puts pressure on past work on Lebanon that situates individuals and communities in conceptual “prisons” (Appadurai 1991), among them particular places and identities, often based on ethnoreligious background, generation, and class. By contrast, this dissertation looks instead at the *practices* that take place and move through a range of sites (spaces and places) in Beirut. To make a case for considering different, often disparate, sites in a larger research field, I turn to George Marcus’s idea of multi-sited imaginary/ethnography.

Responding to the impasse faced by anthropology in the 1980s and early 1990s created by the conflict between a disciplinary commitment to holism and a new understanding of cultures as ever-circulating, Marcus argued for the idea of a multi-sited imaginary as a “challenge to the orientations that underlie [ethnography]” (Marcus 1998,

3). A multi-sited imaginary employed in a multi-locale ethnography works toward a postmodern cultural deconstruction of the macro, not only by contextualizing cultural activity and identity through reference to a totality (as ethnographic realism did previously), but rather by addressing the *circulation of meaning, objects, and identities between multiple locations* (Ibid., 72-79). Their dynamic interplay reveals the system that binds them together (Ibid., 5).

The recent sub-methodology of urban ethnography has likewise addressed the importance of location to ethnographic research. A systematic approach to studying social environments, including physical sites, it emphasizes cultural production in particular spaces (e.g., Duneier and Carter 1999, Bourgois 1995) to understand how institutional and social relationships manifest physically. Through their intimate contact with their interlocutors and their engagement with everyday urban spaces, urban ethnographers have the opportunity to record multiple stories, voices, and experiences from a range of communities (Venegas and Huerta 2010).

However, as Ingold and Vergunst argue, attending to the sites themselves, and to the practices situated within them, misses the significant work that happens in the *in-between*, “as though life were lived at a scatter of fixed locales rather than along the highways and byways upon which they lie” (Ingold 2011, 3). Indeed, as I followed people through the city, I felt as though the “field” into which I had entered had ruptured. Accounting for these practices, it seemed, would require a shift in my own urban imaginary – from Beirut as something more than a polynucleated city, and from the idea of “field-as-location” to “field-as-network” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). That is, instead of the field being simply a location as such, it also came into focus as a shifting web of

political relations. In Beirut, that web had both spatial and ideological dimensions. The question became, how might I approach the “field” when it seemed to be a (quite literally) moving target? And how might I responsibly account for these transitory practices of moving through and marking the city?

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed phenomenological approaches to memory and geography, and suggested their importance to this study. As I observed the groups that make up this dissertation in their movements around the city, theory and ethnographic practice became inextricably linked. Indeed, my own movements through the city formed the basis both for my understanding of its networks, as well as for the practicalities of research.

Firstly, the locations where I lived informed my work. I began my engagements in Lebanon staying with extended family in Bikfayā, a small, mainly Maronite Christian village outside Beirut. My family’s knowledge of Lebanon made my initial foray comfortable and educational, especially in hindsight. My family’s well-meaning advice about which Beirut neighborhoods I could visit, and which I should avoid at all costs, I later discovered, was much informed by their experiences of Lebanese Christians, and the histories and political affiliations tied to that identity. As it turned out, as illustrated by this dissertation’s opening anecdote, few of them knew Beirut very well, though several had lived in the city for extended periods of time, or attended university there.

This dynamic repeated itself on subsequent trips to Lebanon. In autumn 2012, I moved into a small studio flat with a friend in west Beirut. The neighborhood in which we lived was just adjacent to one of Beirut’s most vibrant districts, Hamra. A quick walk downhill delivered us onto the noise of its main street, dotted with shops, cafes, and bars.



Nevertheless, our neighbors, who had lived in the city much longer than either one of us, could rarely give directions to some of the district's most visible landmarks, a fact explained away by a friend who told me, shrugging, "We all drive here or take *servees* (a shared taxi cab), so we never really get a good look."

The drivers of said *servees* were likewise flummoxed when we attempted to cross the city. Taxi drivers from the city's different neighborhoods were frequently loathe to cross into areas with which they were not familiar, and when they did consent to drive into them, their discomfort was sometimes obvious as we drew closer to our destination.<sup>26</sup>

Eventually, I moved to Gemmayzeh, a neighborhood in east Beirut, where I lived in a large flat with five other people: an American NGO worker, a Canadian journalist of Egyptian and Greek descent, a Lebanese-American aid worker from a Greek Orthodox family, an Alawite Muslim from Tripoli in northern Lebanon, and the Shia son of a Member of Parliament from Saida in Lebanon's south. This was a bit of an unorthodox household, but a rich one. On weekday evenings, we gathered in the enormous living room to talk, or sat on one of the flat's terraces during routine power outages, drinking beer and listening to the sounds of the city below. Through my roommates, I learned about the increasingly desperate Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, the inner workings of Lebanese politics, and sometimes heard about important new stories before they broke. I was frequently treated to dramatic renderings of family conversations they had had

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<sup>26</sup> For more on Beirut's car culture and the politics of traffic, see Kristin Monroe's forthcoming project, *The Insecure City: Space, Power, and Mobility in Beirut* (Rutgers University Press).

during trips home, which gave me a sense of how current events were being interpreted in different communities.

The neighborhood, too, helped keep me abreast of current events in Beirut. Conversations in local shops, the flow of traffic, and, especially, the walls of Gemmayzeh's one main street, Rue Gouraud, clued me into goings-on in the city. Posters covered, it seemed, nearly ever available, reachable stretch of wall. New clubs, department store sales, special concerts, art exhibitions – the walls mapped out in miniature the mainstream cultural life of Beirut. Though the workers who put up the posters sometimes took the time to scrape away older advertisements, just as often they simply plastered them on top of layers of “old news,” so that the walls took on a bumpy texture, made soft when the winter rains drenched the streets. Had I scraped at them, I might have found a small urban archive of events going back for some time. As it was, many of the posters hanging in my neighborhood led me to events that ended up being significant to my research, even if they do not appear in this dissertation.

In considering the material I was continuously compiling for the project, it seemed that some of the most exciting work was being conducted out in the city itself, where often unlikely groups were moving, interacting, or doing things together, and thus were publicly assembling new sorts of communities, or publics, around common interests, losses, and routes. I began wondering what this might do to the social and political fabric of Beirut, and quickly much of my participant observation (or perhaps observant participation) moved to the streets of Beirut, where I could observe these makeshift communities, sometimes participating in their performances and practices. If this “data” was grounded in the street, so too was my own methodology.

I took to walking the city, reading the walls as I went, which was often much faster than taking a *servees* or a bus, especially during rush hour. Though walking in Beirut, as I will describe in the case studies, is a somewhat perilous mode of getting around, it helped me literally ground myself in the city, getting to know many neighborhoods, as well as the tempos and sounds that make up everyday life – to, in other words, “think in movement” (Ingold and Vergunst 2011, 3). As Ingold and Vergunst, clearly inspired by de Certeau, note of walking,

Not only...do we walk because we are social beings, we are also social beings because we walk...[The] rooting of the social [is] in the actual ground of lived experience, where the earth we tread interfaces with the air we breathe. It is along this ground, and not in some ethereal realm of discursively constructed significance, over and above the material world, that lives are paced out in their multi relations. (Ibid., 2)<sup>27</sup>

The primacy of my own movements through Beirut as a means of understanding the city, of course, presents certain problems. To be sure, as an embodied way of knowing, walking-as-method offers researchers opportunities to locate and theorize history “from below” (e.g., de Certeau 1984; Pink, O’Neill, and Radley 2010; Edensor 2005). Yet as Aoki and Yoshimizu (2015) point out, this sort of embodied practice – especially when carried out alongside interlocutors, as happens in each of this dissertation’s case studies – implicates the ethnographer in place-making as well (Aoki and Yoshimizu 2015, 276). While the ethnographer’s relationship to place represents one of the most intimate engagements in the field, the researcher/walker must also reckon with how she embodies “social, institutional, and experiential knowledge and practices

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<sup>27</sup> Here I would like to acknowledge the very ableist perspective of Ingold and Vergunst’s work. I am more interested in *movement*, rather than walking, as a broader category of engagement. Still, it is important to note that Beirut’s cityscape generally does not accommodate disability.

that mediate emplaced interactions and ethnographic explorations” (Ibid.). This is especially crucial for research that purports to privilege practices and communities that challenge dominant narratives, for indeed, as a researcher, and especially an American researcher working in and on the Middle East, I carry with me the trappings of technologies and histories of power.

My movements, from walking Beirut to traveling internationally, were unfettered relative to those of many of my interlocutors. As an outsider, I was often read as a tourist, and so could comfortably traverse boundary lines that many locals could not, or simply did not desire to cross. As a researcher, I frequently found myself given access to spaces – alternative archives, for example, or the homes of interlocutors I had just met – that might otherwise have been closed to me. Similarly, as tensions in Lebanon waxed and waned, I was afforded a certain amount of security, living with the knowledge that should the situation truly deteriorate, I would likely have the option to leave, a choice most of my friends and interlocutors did not have.

Other things also circumscribed my movements, or shaped the way I participated in the activities described in the case studies. As a researcher, for example, I had to conform to certain rules and regulations pertaining to my work in the field. This manifested in the IRB forms I was required to provide at each interview, which sometimes made other sorts of movement – the flow of conversation, most obviously – rather difficult by interrupting connection and dialogue. My documentation of the city and the practices reshaping it, too, had consequences: my own experience of the city was mediated through research technologies (notebook, voice recorder, camera), and the

people I documented, aware of what I was doing, perhaps staged their own movements in the face of these technologies.

Further, my movements and those of my interlocutors, of course, were not merely physical and spatial, but spanned the distances between communities and ideologies as well. Certainly this movement presented certain complications, as I was reliant on the grace of my interlocutors not only to engage with me, but also to send me on to others who would speak with me. Because I was not rooted in any one group, this sometimes posed a challenge.

On my first longer stay in Beirut (May-August 2012), I resided at Saifi Urban Gardens, a hostel run by the Dirani family. Several family members were employed in the café, hostel, Arabic language school, and rooftop bar. The café presented a particularly rich site for making new contacts, as many of the Diranis' friends and family regularly came by for lunch and to enjoy the Friday evening parties, at which people managed to dance between the closely-packed tables and the smoking narghileh pipes to lively music played by a traditional band. At the same time, I was beginning to experience my subjectivity as a researcher walking the line between insider and outsider. I often experienced my personal connection to Lebanon as an advantage: people were genuinely interested to know why exactly I had decided to travel to, and take up residence in, the country. When they found out I had family in Lebanon, most were generally excited by the idea that I was there to learn more about my roots. Then again my last name, Cory (Arabic, *Khoury*, meaning "priest") is a traditionally Christian name, and many of my relatives in Lebanon belong to the Maronite Christian community, inarguably the most privileged ethnoreligious identity in Lebanon. Several of them

fought in the civil war on the side of the Katā'ib Party, the Lebanese Phalangists, to which they still belong. This group committed some of the war's most heinous, large-scale atrocities, including (with the help of Israel) the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila. Though I had expected, because of larger geopolitical forces and histories, that my American citizenship would be a considerable liability in my work in Lebanon, at times it seemed to mitigate some of the problems a more closely-tied Christian identity might have presented.

That said, while the nascent publics I examine in this dissertation were sometimes pluralistic enough that my participation presented no cause for concern, in other instances, especially in the context of home visits to interlocutors and friends, I was questioned closely as to my politics and affiliations, or whom else I had interviewed.<sup>28</sup> I drew on Marcus's idea of complicity in ethnography – that is, dismantling power differentials by imagining ethnographer and interlocutor as mutually decentered actors in relation to a “third” (Marcus 1998, 122). The trouble, of course, was that sometimes these individuals and communities were *each other's* “third”; that is, they saw themselves as directly opposed to some of the other individuals and communities with whom I associated, even if only tangentially. Thus my own movement between communities carried some risk. It also begged the question, how could I summarily account for a multiplicity of spatial, ideological, and historical experience?

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<sup>28</sup> As Spivak (1988) reminds us, research and representation are inextricably linked to politics and power. Researchers who claim that they can “give voice” to those about whom they are writing, come dangerously close to reproducing colonial power relationships. Thus it is important to be self-reflexive and keep such analysis visible in written research. In the case of this dissertation, I was sometimes charged by my interlocutors with representing them not only to academics, but also to the world, a heavy charge indeed, and one that I try to honor here. In the interest of this self-reflexivity, I appear throughout this dissertation, documenting not only my observations, but also my subjectivity in relation to the people I met and the spaces through which I moved.

Again I turn to Marcus, whose idea of the “messy text” might be read as another sort of productive rupture and movement away from a holism that forsakes the disorder and multiplicity of everyday life. The “messy text” challenges functionalist ethnography that would stuff cultural objects and their producers into neat categories (Ibid., 186-88). Instead, it opens a space in which objects of study can *exceed* set classifications. These objects of study (people, cultures, practices) can be re-theorized such that their interconnectedness with other mobile and multiply-situated objects of study is exposed (Ibid., 197). Not only is the messy text as configured by Marcus a sort of anti-container for objects of study which inevitably violate the borders of their own categorization; it is also a text that defies its *own* curtailing. Though systematic in its execution, it makes no claims to objectivity, but rather embraces the partial, situated knowledges comprising its core. Its writer must appreciate its open-endedness as directly reflective of the unbounded nature of both culture and cultural subjects. To answer the question above, then, I must sit with the discomfort of not being able to fully account for every perspective, history, experience, etc. Instead, I look at their *junctions*, the moments in which they come together. Indeed, I have had to become comfortable with the inevitable failure of this project.

And yet such failure can be productive. Kamala Visweswaran (1994) advocates for a “conjectural historiography,” which calls into question the relationship between memory experience, historical record and written testimony. If voicing memory is what ties one to history, she asks, and being part of a history is what gives one agency, is the silent subject then bereft of agency? While Visweswaran poses these questions in relation to “refusing subjects,” who *decline* to speak, such questions are also helpful in

relation to my work in Beirut. In some ways, Lebanese history itself is the *refusing subject* of this dissertation, its loud silence largely obscuring the chance for community across spatial, ideological, and memory lines. In this sense, my interlocutors and I are engaged in the production of a conjectural historiography, recording and making up bits of narrative and memory to piece together a picture of Beirut, and Lebanon, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Practicalities of Data Collection**

To account for this dissertation's data sources, I must speak in somewhat general terms. Focusing on practices rather than discrete groups or communities means that, to some extent, each case study required its own methodological and theoretical approach.

Fieldwork for this study was carried out during a period of five years between 2009 and 2014. I spent substantial amounts of this time on the ground in Beirut, but my research was frequently interrupted. Though I applied for numerous grants, and came close to being awarded research funding, I ended up having to fund my own research. I was thus compelled to return to San Diego to make money in between research trips. While I did not have the benefit of sustained financial support, I did receive a scholarship to attend the University of California Humanities Research Institute's Seminar in Experimental and Critical Theory (SECT) at the American University of Beirut in August 2012. This seminar put me in touch with local and international scholars whose work is fundamental to this dissertation.

The breaks between research trips had the additional benefit of requiring me to take a step back from the field to reflect upon my observations. Following both my



interlocutors and current events in Lebanon at a distance gave me the opportunity to write, to try out new frameworks, to read, and to enter the field anew. I, too, dwelt in the in-between, a strangely productive space to inhabit while I waited to return to Beirut.

As noted above, much of my initial data came from simply happening upon posters or Facebook posts listing local public events in Beirut. These included protests, art exhibitions, forums, etc. After many of these events, I contacted organizers and participants to sit down for semi-structured interviews, which often led to subsequent outings and interviews, or to introductions to other people helpful to the project. Over the course of fieldwork, I took hundreds of photographs and recorded video, as the security situation permitted. I curated a collection of newspaper articles, flyers passed out at events, official publications and reports, and posters culled from city walls. I also recorded over 30 hours of interviews. Much of the most pertinent, interesting information, however, I gleaned from casual conversations with friends and acquaintances around the city – in living rooms, bars, cafés, and while traveling via taxi, bus, or on foot. The number of hours I spent cultivating relationships, many of which have continued as rich friendships despite improbable distances of time and space, cannot be quantified.

I maintained contact with my interlocutors after my departure from Beirut, via Facebook, email, and Skype, and returned in February 2014 to conduct follow-up research. On this trip, I found the city much changed. The effects of the Syrian civil war, which had previously rippled into the country, had become a tidal wave of refugees, security outposts, and general anxiety. These changes had exacted severe, in some cases deadly, effects on the people I knew and cared for in Beirut. Many people had left the

city; still more hand curtailed their routes through it, especially at night. The movements I had previously observed had slowed. Communities had contracted once again.

This atmosphere obviously affected my access to the spaces and people I had known. Due to increasing spates of violence in Beirut and Tripoli, for example, I could not return to northern Lebanon to re-interview a contact who would have been central to this project. Nor could I follow up with one of the main personages of the dissertation, central to Chapter 1, who left the country and cut ties with his community in early January 2014.

The fraying of these ties was yet another lesson in the fragility of community and solidarity in the face of real violence. Even this very important cultural work sometimes takes a backseat when people's safety, and indeed their lives, are at stake. This text, like the communities it documents, possesses a certain ephemerality – it goes only so far, it speculates, it is haunted by its own absences and loose ends. Perhaps it is best to think of it as a chronotope, lending a view into Beirut at a particular moment in time.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

This study explores protest, tourism, and public art (what I call “street writing”) as critical sites of spatial production and the recovery of shared memory. The case studies reveal the movement through which cultural actors are coming to know their city, and thus to understand its varied memories, narratives, and its lingering boundaries. This movement is an act of re-remembering – a way to rejoin various spaces, as well as people to their city, and people to their history – through spatial encounters with buried, or

otherwise hidden, memory. In its focus on movement and everyday life, this dissertation hits on some of the current trends in research on Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>

In the first case study, I consider the critical importance of tourism in Beirut through the lens of Ronnie Chatah's *WalkBeirut*. The Lebanese tourism sector has long been trying to get back on its feet in spite of regular cycles of violence, never quite recovering. Further, the tourist area of downtown Beirut – once a pluralist space wherein groups from across Lebanese society interacted – has been creatively destroyed by reconstruction efforts carried out by Solidère. The tourist site that remains offers no context for its own existence, thus spatially erasing both the plurality of an earlier era and the hard fact of intercommunal violence that necessitated its rehabilitation. Critics read this space as vacuous, built only for tourists - foreigners, and the elite who can afford what is on offer – rather than Lebanese. By contrast, I see tourism as a potentially critical enterprise whereby native Lebanese can be re-introduced to the fraught space of the so-called “heart of Beirut.” Walking is a special sort of critical practice in Beirut, where hardly anyone walks. Ronnie's project not only teaches participants, many of whom are Lebanese, to develop the critical reading skills of Benjamin's physiognomist, but also to begin to *write the space* (following de Certeau). Bringing their own memories and narratives to downtown, sharing them with each other and with Ronnie, the enterprise of producing the space through walking becomes intensively intersubjective. It also reveals the intertextuality of the city itself. Ronnie and his walkers weave their memories and

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<sup>29</sup> Kristin Monroe's book *The Insecure City: Space, Power, and Mobility in Beirut*, which examines traffic and issues of access and power in Beirut, is forthcoming from Rutgers University Press. Michael Gasper's project on everyday life during the Lebanese civil war, aptly titled *Everyday Life During the Lebanese Civil War 1975-1990*, is also forthcoming.

narratives through the city, *socially producing it*, and laying claim to it in ways many think impossible. My account of the walk, too, is yet another layer to the story, offering the reader a composite walk through downtown.

In the second case study, I examine the problem of the missing and disappeared in Lebanon. Since the end of the civil war (1990), more than 17,000 individuals remain missing. I detail the numerous ways the state has continued to bury evidence – through legislation, cultural amnesia, and the actual burying of bodies. I suggest that the burial of evidence, apart from being a gross violation of international human rights law, also constitutes a “public secret” (Taussig 1999), which, if left to fester, continues to separate groups within the larger Lebanese community. This is, of course, to the benefit of government officials, many of whom would be prosecuted should the truth come to light. Without access to one another’s narratives and the common understanding this brings, many Lebanese ethnoreligious identities stay in their mnemonic communities. I consider NGO Act for the Disappeared’s “Enough Waiting” campaign, arguing that their many engagements with the question of the missing and disappeared offered opportunity for the exchange of narratives and common experience, fostering a dialogue and recognition of shared memory amongst divergent groups. I follow the group’s protest through the city in November 2012, during which they visited the sites of supposed mass graves. I argue that this protest is a performance (Taylor 2003) that pushes against the burial of history simply by dint of how members of different communities stood together. In the absence of the bodies of their loved ones, the protesters’ own bodies represent a co-presence as an act of remembrance and solidarity against the opportunistic amnesia of the state. Against the ephemerality of performance, as well, the work of the NGO and its participants

expands once more across time and space to other sites of performance, including a protest camp.

In the final case study, I think about the role of street art in challenging and delineating the geographies of war. In this chapter, I examine work by different “street writers” in Beirut, whose work writes the literal and metaphorical (public) street into being. This work can tell us about the privileges and lingering limitations of *different publics*, which are often in conversation with each other and with larger institutions, including the state. Asking questions about this sort of urban intervention – where is it found, and where not; what can be written, and what is taboo; etc. – shows us how artists are both challenging boundaries, and are still limited by them. I first consider the young street writers of Beirut, who first found their footing through experiencing the 2006 Lebanon War. While they express deep affection for Beirut, and a desire to mark it all as their home, thus transgressing boundaries, their movements through the city and the shift in their work in the last few years reveals both certain territorial limitations as well as a heavy disillusionment with their country. Other factors circumscribe artists’ engagement with the city too, as in the case of Semaan Khawam, who was arrested for touching on the sensitive subject of the civil war, a fact that reveals that some memory lines are difficult, even perilous, to cross, indeed.

### **A Note on Writing**

The case studies documented in this project illuminate some of the absences central to Lebanese political and cultural life. While this work done by individuals and communities highlights the obscured histories, missing people, and urban isolation that

contribute to Lebanon's cycles of violence, it also suggests deeply shared desires for and literal movements towards institutional transparency, community building, and historical justice.

The dissertation itself employs a logic that mirrors the movements of the groups it documents, in an attempt to suggest the spatial dynamics of some of Beirut's diverse, but nevertheless linked urban imaginaries. It too tells a story, beating out a particular path through the city.

It begins at the "center" of things, Solidère's downtown, as a prelude to the critical work described in the subsequent chapters. Just as the practices that comprise the case studies try to do, the dissertation *writes against* this space not only as a critique about its transformation from central public space to corporatized marketplace, but also in terms of its centrality to the literature on contemporary Lebanon. For while the Beirut Central District may be a starting point for understanding the state of memory and space in Beirut, there are other stories to be told.

From the BCD, the writing spirals outwards into myriad movements, accounting for the rhythms and refrains filling the space of the city. We first walk from one side of the city to the other, cutting straight through the heart of Beirut, listening to a storyteller try to make sense of his own city. Next, we go further afield, circling the city, marking out its absences in the form of alleged mass graves where family members stand in solidarity against the amnesia imposed by the state. From there, we move through Beirut's highways and byways. Feeling the pavement under our feet, we go looking for the writing on the walls, the script that connects the whole city.

Finally, in the dissertation's postlude, we enter another imaginary entirely, drifting between spaces of exile and home, or at least a dream of what home might be.

In its narrative logic, the dissertation offers not only a critical reading, but also a critical writing. It thus puts pressure on how Beirut has been discursively produced as a divided city, as a geography of fear. It suggests, instead, the potential of the practices described – which fill the space with their stories, tying it together – to transform Beirut into a landscape of connection and, indeed, hope

***Prelude. The “Ancient City of the Future”: Burying Stories and Selling Heritage in Downtown Beirut***

Before discussing downtown Beirut’s much-maligned “postwar” reconstruction, it is first important to understand that unfettered development, often to the detriment of historical structures, is not unique to the “postwar” period in Lebanon. As Samir Kassir points out, long before the civil war decimated much of Beirut’s city center, building over older structures and layers of the city’s history had been an integral part of downtown’s development. Urban construction started accelerating at an alarming rate shortly after Lebanon’s independence in 1943, when private companies were tasked with attempting to merge all of Beirut’s architectural languages (Kassir 2010, 415). In efforts to augment Beirut’s commercial and tourist appeal in the post-independence era, the state focused on paving direct routes to downtown, leveling many buildings standing in the way of the city’s new grid. The central government, represented by the *muḥāfiẓ* (prefect), rather than the Beirut municipality itself, possessed singular control over the city’s development. The government, however, lacked the funds to support development initiatives. Without a plan, unbridled building by private entities proceeded without regulation. The mushrooming development of the city center extended further along the coastline, pushing out those who could no longer afford to live there to more and more impoverished areas, thus altering the social life of the downtown area (Ibid., 412-417).

As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the Lebanese government tasked the company Solidère with the majority of downtown Beirut’s reconstruction after the civil war. The casualties of reconstruction, as in the post-independence era, included



several buildings and sites that were central to the life of the city, most notably the souqs, a network of shops and stands where local vendors and, later, international companies sold their wares. The souqs were more than just a space for trade, however. They served as a *social space*, to which people would come from outlying areas to walk their capital city, socialize with friends, and hear the latest news.

Solidère maintained the necessity of its reconstruction efforts in helping to rehabilitate Beirut. A quarter of a century later, the company's annual reports still teem with stories of Beirut's status as a tourist destination, a haven for locals, and a "beacon of hope and progress" (Solidère Annual Report 2010). The narrative casts the company as the savior not only of the city, but also of the nation.

For example, Italian photographer Gabriel Basilico's photo essay in Solidère's 2010 Annual Report includes images from Basilico's first trip to Beirut in 1991, at the end of the war, which are coupled with triumphant imagery from a rebuilt downtown. Ayman Traoui's 2002 coffee table book, *Beirut's Memory*, presents a series of the same sorts of photographs, and features a glitzy holographic cover that one can turn to and fro, between past and present, to see the change in Beirut's cityscape. The narrative, written by Traoui himself, calls Hariri the caretaker whose most important goal was to reunify Lebanese society after a war that threatened to destroy its peaceful plurality. Critics of Hariri's plan are painted as unpatriotic, and the greatness of his plan is placed on a continuum of other questionable but ultimately successful urban planning schemes, especially Haussman's 19<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction of Paris. In its emphasis on the coexistence of all Lebanese, Traoui claims, Hariri's downtown is "the most tangible translation and physical expression" of the New National Pact (the Lebanese

Constitution). Downtown's "vibrant central district [is] busy with its banking, commercial, and touristic activities" – young people stroll and window shop, old people reminisce (Traoui 2002, 7).<sup>30</sup>

Bosnian photographer Ziyah Gafic likewise produced a photo essay documenting people in downtown Beirut for Solidère's 2011 Annual Report. This collection shows people making use of the space, everything cast in a particularly flattering light; all seem to participate equally; even service workers – kitchen staff, security guards – have a place in Solidère's downtown. In all these collections, the focus on the visual and on the rhetoric of recovery betrays an emptiness. There is no room for debate here, no discussion of the arguments against the project from locals (there is rather only a consummate dismissal of their concerns), and no engagement of the real impact the project had on people's lives.

In truth, Solidère's "tabula rasa" approach to its postwar projects involved as much erasure as rehabilitation. The way the company went about reconstruction drew ire from Lebanese intellectuals, as well as cultural and heritage organizations. Indeed, Aseel Sawalha (2010) notes that contrary to residents' wishes or the admonishments of countless historians, architects, urban planners, and sociologists, Solidère tore down buildings and neighborhood landmarks, only preserving those that served its "master plan's" vision of an idyllic city space. This inherently neoliberal vision was built to appeal to foreign investors and tourists, whose continued support would contribute to Lebanon's recovery while simultaneously making good on returns for these investors and fostering the tourist-friendly idea of Beirut's resurrection as the Paris of the Middle East.

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<sup>30</sup> Incidentally, Banque de la Mediterranee, owned by Hariri, partly sponsored the book.

These publications manipulate spatial narrative to the exclusion of the experiences and stories of others, namely the Lebanese who were forced from their homes in downtown Beirut, as well as those who have personal memories of the space. Though Lebanese may be pictured in these essays, as consumers and as workers, family and friends often articulated the myriad ways in which they felt excluded from downtown.

One afternoon early in my fieldwork, I took a drive through downtown with my cousin and aunt. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" my aunt said. I had to agree. It was beautiful, an apparently seamless hybrid of Middle Eastern and European architectural tropes. Still heavily reliant on my family to make sense of the city, I asked them about it. "There are a lot of shops," my cousin said. "Really nice shops. Chanel, Gucci, you name it!" My aunt was quiet. "Do you come here often?" I asked her. "No, I don't really know the area anymore. But they've done a good job with it." Lamyia had lived in Beirut when she was younger, before the civil war broke out, and had fond memories of visiting downtown with her sisters and their friends. Now, she said, everything is so expensive.

Not long after that first drive through the BCD with my family, I walked through it alone. Though lovely, it was almost too charming. The buildings' yellow sandstone glowed in the afternoon sun. Posh cafés boasted small tables and comfortable chairs, around which dashing young waiters moved, flashing beautiful smiles and warm greetings - "Ahlan wa sahlán!" *Welcome* - to entice passersby to sit down and enjoy an afternoon of pleasant reverie away from the teeming city. Everything was meant to invite comfort, to welcome the pedestrian into the heart of the capital.

And yet something felt off. The shutters above the cafés were shut tight, revealing no movement, no life. There may have been people behind them, whole

families eating together and talking. Or they could just as easily have hidden barren rooms, containing only one or two forgotten cardboard boxes of old memories and photographs, or outdated menus and placards, the detritus of the past collecting dust as life continued in the streets below. It felt, quite honestly, much like walking through one of Disneyland's many "quarters," a sentiment I often heard repeated by local friends.<sup>31</sup>

Across the street from the café district, high-end global boutiques occupy the lower levels of buildings built to echo the architectural language of Beirut's prewar heyday. Where the souqs once stood, a public space of exchange and communitas, the "Beirut Souqs" now spread out. A pastiche of the traditional and the globalized modern, the Beirut Souqs complex is a large-scale mall offering designer goods and gourmet food by international brands under the rehabilitated arcades running up and down the alleys where the original marketplace once stood.

Although public squares – those spaces Khalaf (2006) mourns – exist, both their use and meaning are heavily inscribed by security concerns and Solidère's narrative. National Unity Square is exemplary in this regard. Located on the southern slope of Serail Hill, adjacent to the government palace, the Grand Serail, the park boasts lush jacaranda trees, manicured lawns, and cascading fountains, at the top of which stands a larger-than-life statue of Solidère's founder, late Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. One can hardly take advantage of the views on offer, for army guards manning booths at either end of the hill prohibit loitering. Though the square is picturesque, technologies of surveillance and security – guards, guns, cameras, barbed wire, barricades - prevent

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<sup>31</sup> Baudrillard (1983) notes the replacement of public space with Disney-like "simulations" that blur the line between real and fake to such a degree that the violence and exploitation upon which this version of the "everyday" are built, are carefully obscured.

entrance onto the grounds; even photography is strictly forbidden. Hariri's likeness, in fact, stands near the borders of the BCD on all sides, the guardian who in life and death represents the promise and failure of a unified Lebanon: the Rafiq al-Hariri Memorial Garden sits to the south, just near the blast site where he was killed; and Hariri is interred with members of his motorcade in a tent adjacent to the al-Amin mosque, which Hariri commissioned in 2002.

Far from the pluralist city that haunts Lebanese memory, Beirut – and especially the BCD feels much like a *tourist* city, which prioritizes the desires of people who come from elsewhere rather than the needs of its own residents (Judd and Fainstein 1999). Tourist cities' publicity campaigns highlight their "heritage, vitality, and unique attractions," while at the same time setting up an infrastructure that caters to visitors rather than to locals (Frug and Barron 2008, 165). To be sure, the Lebanese economy is mainly service-oriented, and has long hinged upon the banking and tourism industries. The civil war severely damaged the economy as investment in the country slowed, and tourism all but ceased, bringing Beirut's so-called "golden age" to a halt. In the years since civil war-related fighting ended, this pattern has continued on a compressed timescale: the tourist economy has by turns recovered and slowed over and again in concert with Lebanon's cycles of violence, including the 2006 Lebanon War and the recent spillover violence from the Syrian civil war.<sup>32</sup> Under these conditions, the

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<sup>32</sup> The numbers recorded by the Ministry of Tourism speak to a struggling but still impressive tourism industry. In 2012, nearly 1.4 million foreign visitors, mostly Europeans, were registered upon their entry into Lebanon. In 2013, that number dropped by nearly 7% to around 1.3 million. See <http://www.mot.gov.lb/Publications/Statistics> for annual statistic reports from the Ministry of Tourism, going back to 2007. Not all of these reports are uniform (in other words, they do not all account for the same thing; some look at hotel occupancy, others look at arrivals, etc.), and reports for the year 2010 are missing entirely

Lebanese tourism industry has needed to carefully consider Lebanon's place image to maintain international interest in the country and its industries, which it has done by marketing Lebanon (and especially Beirut) in particular ways.<sup>33</sup>

Solidère has tried to capitalize on Beirut's architectural heritage while simultaneously evacuating the city center of the *intangible* heritage – the social milieux and practices – through which inhabitants *made* their city.<sup>34</sup> To be plain, downtown Beirut has been carefully crafted to play upon the *feeling* of heritage, and yet this place marketing has all but eradicated the actual *practices, memories, and stories* that comprise this heritage.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, the BCD operates on the logics of the marketplace writ large, a city selling a *sense* of place and history to the consumer or investor. In its current iteration, Beirut's downtown can be *sold* as a symbol of both Beirut's glorious past and its rehabilitation in the “postwar” period. Those who cannot afford what is on offer, and

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<sup>33</sup> Hazbun (2008) recounts how Lebanon's outbreaks of violence have affected its finance and tourism industries. The decline in tourism was especially marked after the civil war. Hazbun notes that whereas before, Beirut – the Middle East's “playground” - had attracted both Arab and Western tourists and investors, the flow of both people and money declined rapidly, which also affected larger circuit tours of the region. (Hazbun 2008, 77 and 214).

<sup>34</sup> As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines it, cultural heritage includes

...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

(Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Article 2.)

<sup>35</sup> Materialist approaches to urban tourism have critiqued the commodification of heritage as a tactic of *place marketing* that literally capitalizes on nostalgia as a way to both increase the flow of money and draw attention away from pressing current issues (Selby 2004, 48-51). Diverse spatial narratives and traditions are boiled down to pithy, charming narratives, or ignored wholesale to appeal to the fantasies of consumers. Culture ceases to be a process, and instead is sold as a product. See Hewison 1987, Richards 1996, and Sorkin 1992.

those who no longer feel comfortable in the space of the city, are thus excluded not only from the space of downtown, but also from the narrative of progress that it sells. As both space and object of consumption, Beirut's hyperreal downtown plays upon fantasy and imagination, decontextualizing history and place. In so doing, the lines between the real and the fake are blurred, and the violence that precipitated and animated Beirut's reconstruction is obscured.

It is important to bear in mind that the *effects* of this blurring and obscuring are real, for representations often act on behalf of power. That is, the discourses of and about a particular space may become naturalized through the processes just described (Foucault 2000 [1967]). In tourist cities, this naturalization stems from the ways in which consumers tailor their actions to what they assume are the 'truths' of the locations they visit (Duncan and Duncan 1988, qtd. in Selby 2004, 94). Tourists often read landscapes inattentively, uncritically interpreting the representations set before them by the tourist industry, and thereby forming a "*textual community*" that essentially reinforces the discourses benefiting that industry.

The same can be said of locals, who have been included or excluded from the tourist city by varying degrees based on their identities and backgrounds (including class, ethnoreligious background, gender, etc.). For locals, the space of the BCD represents a space to which very few of them belong, as well as the material manifestation of the postwar amnesia they are expected to accept. In fact, Solidère's motto for Beirut, the "Ancient City of the Future," is telling for how it gestures to both a nostalgia for the past as well as hope for an improbably peaceful future, all the while leaving no room for current quarrels or alternative readings in and of the *present*.

And yet the civil war does exist in the space of downtown, as do the traces of other violent episodes. One sees these traces in the Kalashnikovs held by men at the entrance to the streets running towards the Place de l'Étoile and the Lebanese Parliament. Sometimes they appear in concrete but un-narrated artifacts that speak the legacy of the civil war's violence – the silver footprints that walk down Jacques Chirac Street, marking out Hariri's last walk through the BCD before his assassination; the small square at the edge of downtown where a larger than life statue of Samir Kassir, a journalist who was killed for voicing opposition to the violence permeating Lebanon, sits at the edge of a reflecting pool. They reside in the windows of the luxury condominiums that for so long have remained empty and unlit, their prohibitive rent another blockade to rehabilitating the social life of the city.

### **A Caveat: The Heritage Trail**

Then again, in some ways the space is also made by the articulation of long-held quarrels over that history and heritage, an overabundance of narratives laying claim to the downtown area. The reconstruction efforts uncovered several major archaeological finds long buried within the city's many layers. While it is not clear how many of these Solidère has preserved, the company has been working on a Heritage Trail for nearly 15 years.<sup>36</sup> The Trail is a 2.5 km circuit through the city center, and will eventually use reproductions of maps, drawings, and photos to tell visitors the story of the BCD.

Although the trail does not deal specifically with the contested memory of the war,

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<sup>36</sup> On a private tour of the forthcoming Heritage Trail, Amira Solh told me about, for example, the Roman columns falling into stately disrepair near the Garden of Forgiveness (Hadiqat as-Samah). These were not the actual columns, she said, but rather replicas placed in their stead. The others remain in storage.



focusing instead on ancient artifacts and archaeological sites, its progress has been halted at seemingly every turn due to conflicting claims on these sites.

Amira Solh, the senior urban planner in charge of the Heritage Trail, recounted some of these conflicting claims. Despite the fact that the texts used on the trail – which will eventually be turned into 50 wall panels in Arabic, English, and French – have been reduced to what Amira calls the “lowest common denominator,” or the least contentious but still historically accurate narratives, there have still been objections to historical facts that make certain communities uncomfortable.<sup>37</sup> For example, the head of Islamic religious studies in Beirut objected to the proposed panel for the al-Omari mosque. The panel states that this mosque originated as the church of St. John the Baptist. The head of Islamic religious studies insisted that, if the panel were to include this information, it should also mention that before it was a church, the building served as a house of pagan worship. (Amira noted that this was likely a move to please the community rather than a demonstration of contempt for Christianity; origin stories are indeed powerful.) When told that there was no evidence for this latter use of the site, he consummately refused to agree to allow the prepared panel outside the mosque, though the panel was finished and the poles that would support it had already been placed.

Though Solidère has long been disparaged for its approach to reconstruction, the Heritage Trail, specifically its delay, demonstrates that other social and political forces also work to stymie Beirut’s recovery and reconnection. The downtown remains a rather

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<sup>37</sup> Eventually, Solidère hopes to include an audio tour of the Heritage Trail, which users will be able to download onto their mobile phones. The Trail will also have its own website. However, neither of these supplemental texts has been realized; nor has the HT had its official opening, though Solh has been trying to plan one for years. She cites the recurring bouts of violence, and various assassinations, as well as the conflict in Syria, as roadblocks to what she hopes will be a festive occasion.

decontextualized space where floating signifiers – of the past, prosperity, the nation – offer no historical or spatial orientation. This is not to say that a space like the BCD must be overly contextualized or that an overarching national narrative must be the rule. As Taylor (2003) and others have pointed out, we must always question who gets to write the narrative that comes to be taken as historical fact. As I argued in this dissertation's introduction, the in-between is often a fruitful space for connection, challenge, and re-writing. This same idea applies to stories, which, if left open-ended, are often the openings into which people may step to reflect, and to bring their own readings and experiences. Under these circumstances, the practices that follow take on special import, as the performances of storytelling help to (re)orient people to Beirut, and to recontextualize the space of the city, while also teaching participants new ways to read it and, indeed, to write it.

## Chapter 1. Writing Beirut: Walking and/as Storytelling in the “Postwar” City

*[The] story begins on ground level, with footsteps. – de Certeau 1988, 97*

On a cool February night, I stood on a rooftop terrace in Monot, a once-chic part of Beirut. I had just been introduced to a young architect and musician named Rani. Rani had lived in Beirut his whole life, and admitted that it often felt “like a village”; people running in the same circles knew each other and each other’s business, so that it sometimes felt impossible to have any privacy, he said. He asked about my work, and when I told him about my interest in memory and the city, and how movement links them, he told me a story. As an architect, he said, he is always thinking about space and how people use it. Then one day, his car broke down, and while he was able to take a *servees* to work, on returning home, he decided to walk the four or five blocks to his local gym. It seemed a banal enough experience: he walked through the neighborhood in which he had lived for years. But suddenly, the space became rather extraordinary. Rani recounted experiencing sights and sounds he had never noticed in his neighborhood before. He got a good look at the street’s *dakaneh*, a family-run shop ubiquitous to Beirut’s streets. He noticed trees and buildings along the way that he had never thought to really look at before. The neighborhood felt somehow new to him. “If this is how I felt about my own neighborhood, where I lived for a really long time,” he said, “just imagine what I don’t know about the rest of the city. But I never, ever walk.”

Walking in Beirut is indeed a novel activity. As noted in the introduction, primary modes of transport include private cars, scooters, public buses, and *servees* taxis. The traffic, as my cousin Ralph often reminded me, is the most dangerous part about Beirut,

and Lebanon in general. Traffic laws and signage are more suggestions than the rule, roads are often bad and, because of regular electricity cuts, unlit. There are sharp turns, an endless parade of construction zones, and no real speed limits. The city during rush hour, which seems to be in full swing at almost all hours of the day, is a symphony of car horns, trumpeting at various pitches on highways and surface streets alike. Routes change with current events – military processions, political entourages in big black cars, lines of tanks making their way to new posts or training grounds, neighborhood fighting, car bombs. Life is complicated for a pedestrian in Beirut.

Ronnie Chatah knows this better than anyone. Started as a final project for his Masters degree at the American University of Beirut, his *WalkBeirut* tour was a fixture in the city between 2008 and 2013. The only long-running walking tour of Lebanon’s capital, the tour was crafted to introduce people to the city. It stretched from the Hamra area in West Beirut, through the much-contested Beirut Central District (BCD), and finally to the edges of Beirut’s infamous Green Line, the boundary that divided the city during Lebanon’s civil war. The tour linked the city through storytelling. For foreign tourists, *WalkBeirut* presented a novel way of seeing the city through the familiar global tourist practice of a walking tour; for locals, it served as a means of discovery and epistemological entry into their capital and its fraught past. In some ways, too, it was an act of subversion; through walking on foot *between* places, it pushed against Beirut’s car culture and the divisive geography of the city.

In this chapter, I engage literature on urban tourism and walking as a lens through which to understand the critical importance of a practice like *WalkBeirut*. In the *Prelude*, I described “postwar” downtown Beirut as an exemplary “tourist city,” reconstructed for

the pleasure and fantasies of visitors, rather than the needs or memories of locals.

Operating on the logics of capital – which includes the selling of heritage – the BCD excludes from its narrative space not only Lebanese, but also a transparent account of the conditions that precipitated its (re)production.

Tourism, however, may actually constitute a critical tool in reintroducing people to the histories and memories of the city that have been lost to both time and space. Through movement and storytelling, a walk like Ronnie's cultivates ways of looking, being, and seeing to access a city that in many ways has disappeared. Not only do participants engage in a looking-back, they also learn to read the city for its narratives, while introducing their own experiences as a way of *writing* it. Walking reveals the city's intertextuality and creates it at the same time. *WalkBeirut* offers an epistemological entry into the multilayered the story of the city, wherein walkers come to know their city, and participate in its making.

### **Walking and/as Touring the City**

What is it to walk in a city? Scholarly work on walking has long argued for its significance as a primary embodied practice through which people come to understand – indeed to *read* – urban space. Walking brings the practitioner into intimate contact with the materiality of the city (Amato 2004, Lefebvre 1996), the city's immediacy compelling the walker to pay attention to things that had previously gone unnoticed and unappreciated. Physically and mentally engaged with the city's sensorium, the walker takes in sensations often missed while utilizing other modes of transport. The walker moves through her city's viscera, feeling the texture of pavements and asphalt,

encountering aromas sweet and acrid, shuffling her feet along to the cacophony of horns and car engines, or stepping quickly out of oncoming traffic.

Walkers may also experience the city as Benjamin's "memory theater," the archive of cultural memory. Approaching the city as a "physiognomist" (Benjamin *Arcades*: 207, H2 7), the walker eschews the spectacle of the modern city by "[becoming] a productive reader of this space, perceiving the city as a map of historical configurations" (van den Berg 2011, 228). As such, walking draws attention to the historical processes that have shaped the city and had real effects on the communities that share its space.

Importantly, then, walking has *political* as well as poetic functions. De Certeau (1984) writes of the "long poem of walking," in which walking is an *enunciative* act, the turns (*tours*) one takes akin to "turns of phrase" (97-101). Apart from the maps and printed guides that might chart one's course through urban space, the walker's memories, experiences, and secondhand stories also color her routes through and interactions with the city. Sometimes these everyday routes become tactics which "weave places together" (de Certeau 1984, 97), and challenge the strategic production of space by those in power. The long poem of walking can be cast, perhaps, as a counternarrative, a critical writing of the city against the spatial discourses that produce and reinforce a city's many boundaries.

Humanistic approaches to urban tourism address how visitors come to use their own knowledge, emotions, and memories to understand urban spaces, often in concert

with fellow tourists, and/or mediated by a guide.<sup>38</sup> These studies place tourist *experience* at the heart of their analyses, a fact that marks them as distinct from traditional tourism studies, which emphasize place marketing and tourism management. Frequently inspired by the literature on walking, humanistic studies of urban tourism take bodily presence and *performance* seriously, recognizing the dynamism of tourists as social actors who both embody and interpret experience, and who also *create meaning* through their actions. Here tourism becomes an active process, and the tourist an “agent of seeing, being, experience, cultural invention, and knowing” who negotiates and constructs the reality of the tourist destination (Selby 2004, 127).

The work of interpretation and creation unfolds in myriad ways. If tourists are unfamiliar with a city, or if the city presents a dangerous landscape which they are wary of approaching, perhaps they make use of a *tour* of the city, led by a guide, which offers a sense of place by joining together the disparate stories of a city’s sites in a coherent narrative (Rojek 1997, 52). One learns to read the city, to become a modern-day Benjaminian “physiognomist,” by following the guide’s lead. Told where to sit, when to move, how to look and act, one can become adept at plotting a course through the city’s veins and arteries, negotiating its joints and pulses, becoming intimately familiar with its inner workings to both navigate to a destination and avoid peril along the way.

As tourists move around the city, they come to understand it both through their multi-sensual engagements and the personal memories they carry into the space. In

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<sup>38</sup> Such approaches to tourism, and specifically urban tourism, are relatively new. As a field, tourism studies has long been tied to economic concerns (e.g., management and marketing). More recent work accounts for concerns pertaining to the social sciences, and especially cultural studies. This work imagines tourism as central to social life – the place of dreams, myth, encounters, and the social and cultural processes that make such things legible (Selby 2004, 1-4).

studies of two sites in England, for example, Bagnall (1998, 2003) has shown the importance of memory and emotion to urban tourist experience, especially as related to consuming heritage. Individuals' memories trump national historical narratives in constructing "landscapes of memory." As such, personal background determines how an individual will experience a site, accounting for markedly different tourist engagements with the same place.

However, the fact that we often experience tourist sites *socially* bears just as much weight as individual experience. Not only do we carry memories from our past, but we also *encounter those of others* in a tourist group, as well as those of locals and guides. Thus, as Selby (2004) points out, tourism is highly *intersubjective*, the past and present experiences of others impacting how we learn about and make sense of the spaces we travel through (154). To be sure these narratives, especially those performed by guides, who have cause to cast in flattering lights the urban spaces in which they work, may reproduce dominant narratives. And yet, as we will see in the case of *WalkBeirut*, guides may also walk the line between tactics and strategies (de Certeau 1984), employing the material of structured space as the stage through which they critically, carefully move (Lugones 2003, ctd. in Aoki and Yoshimizu 2015). These routes, narratives, memories, and social experiences thus offer challenges to the ways that power has operated in and on space. That is, they may represent antidotes or alternatives to the hegemonic narratives those in power have written into space, and work to uncover stories that have been erased.

Indeed, "tourism's" etymology suggests discovery, or perhaps *recovery*. The word "tour" has many meanings, including "a traveling around...[a] journey," "a brief trip



through a place, as a building or a site, in order to view or inspect it,” and “to guide (someone) on a tour.”<sup>3940</sup> Implicit in each of these meanings is the promise of *return*. One tours, or takes part in a tour, and eventually returns to the starting point – either of the tour, or of a longer journey (e.g., returning home). During the tour, however, participants transform– they gain knowledge, see new places, hear new stories. Such transformation in the return is especially poignant in the case of locals who tour their own cities or countries. For these native tourists, “return” perhaps takes on a different meaning – it is not only a spatial return one makes, but also perhaps a return to one’s heritage, one’s history.

### **Writing *WalkBeirut***

I took the *WalkBeirut* tour five times over the course of several months, beginning in November 2012, which amounted to more than 20 hours of walking with Ronnie and tour participants. The walk followed the same route each time, and Ronnie performed from a memorized script along the way, telling the same stories and offering the same directions, which will be elaborated below. Though script and route were constants, the city has its own logics and rhythms, its own textures to negotiate. Things sometimes happened along the way that disrupted the script and the course of the walk. These moments, too, added another layer to the story of the walk, and of the city.

What follows is a description and analysis of Walk Beirut, focused on its methods of both reading and writing the city. I have selected representative, illuminating

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<sup>39</sup> McCabe (2009) takes a practical approach to defining tourists, tour, and tourism, mining the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *American Heritage Dictionary* to show the roots of the words and how their meanings have changed over time (29-32).

<sup>40</sup> From the *American Heritage Dictionary*, cited in McCabe 2009, 31.

moments from the time I spent on the tour, which form a composite walk. I also interlace fragments from an interview with Ronnie, to provide context and background for some of the choices he made in his route and the role he performs on the walk, as well as the personal stories that animate his endeavor.

The route I present does not include every stop on the tour, but does follow its itinerary in terms of its spatial trajectory. Threading through the “stops” of this composite tour are moments in the “in-between,” those moments during which we were in transit from one site to another along the seams of the city. These stretches of walking offered opportunity for conversation, questions, and sensory experience, different epistemological lines through which walkers engaged with the city, learning to both read it and write themselves into it.

In the narrative, I document conversations I had with Lebanese people while on the tour. These conversations were admittedly few and far between. I had consulted with Ronnie about the possibility of asking walkers for their contact information to schedule future interviews. He politely but pointedly declined my request. While not preferable, then, my own sensory experiences in the city are foundational to how I represent it, a methodological quandary with which I grappled in this dissertation’s introduction. These I have tried to merge with observations from friends and family, both local and foreign, who also took the walk.

Ronnie tells the story of the city in a way that opens it up for critique and critical inquiry, but never does he interrupt the story to add his own opinions. His keeping the story as neutral as possible is part of the politics and poetics of the walk. In light of this, while writing I felt a resistance to inserting analysis and theory within the narrative

stream. Might theory be another way of interrupting the story? Might it serve as yet another discursive blockade to the stories that pulse under the city but are rarely told? In an effort to honor Ronnie's public mode of engaging his city, I have left the majority of theorizing and analysis to footnotes.

### **Finding (Walk) Beirut**

In early December 2012, I take my first walk with Ronnie. Running late, as usual, I hop in a cab with two Dutch friends, Saskia and Niels, and ask the driver to take us as quickly as possible across the city to Hamra. He asks us where we were going, exactly. Saskia gives him the name of a plaza, Gefinor Center Plaza, near the American University. "Mā ba 'refo," he replies. *I don't know it.* Saskia protests, ensuring him it is a very big plaza, very centrally located. "Which street?" he asks. Saskia tells him. "Okay, I know that street," he says. "But that plaza? I'm not sure."

We pass through downtown Beirut, the waning autumn afternoon sun casting a soft glow on the BCD's buildings as it moves toward the Mediterranean. Things are quiet downtown. "Not much traffic, Al-ḥamdu lillāh," the driver says into the mirror, and his eyes creased into upside-down smiles. "Al-ḥamdu lillāh," we reply. Sundays are slower, at least, in the city.

Once we gain the far side of downtown and enter the area around Hamra, the stillness is broken by a growing argument between Saskia and the driver. He knows the street, he tells us again, but the plaza with the uncertain location has become a figment of Saskia's imagination. "There is no such plaza!" he tells her. "I don't know what you are talking about!" She repeats the address, lists some landmarks she vaguely remembers

from her first tour two years previously, and finally literally throws up her hands, turns to me and Niels, and says, "Incredible! He doesn't even know his own city! How does he make a living?"

Clearly frustrated, the driver weaves in and out of streets, stopping what few locals are about on a Sunday afternoon to ask them about the location of the plaza. A couple people give directions that turn out to be educated guesses; others think for a moment and then shrug. The driver is determined, however, to deliver us to our destination, and insists on continuing to drive, even when we suggest it might be easier for us to walk. Finally, partially by chance and partially by process of elimination, as we have covered most of the small streets connecting the avenues around where the plaza is supposed to be, we see a crowd of what look to be foreigners convened in an open concrete courtyard by a bank. "Hon!" Saskia says. *Here!* And the driver, visibly relieved, wishes us well, takes the money we hand him, and speeds off in the direction we had come.

We join the circle of walkers standing in small groups in the plaza. Having never seen Ronnie before, I do not know for whom I should be looking to redeem my online ticket. I am surprised, somehow, to discover that the fair-skinned man with the thick waves of red hair and trim goatee, milling about with a list of names and a bag of maps, greeting strangers as though they were old friends, is in fact Ronnie. This is not the first time I have experienced this sense of misrecognition, and it is far from the last. He, on the other hand, has no such problems. Approaching our trio, he spots Saskia and calls, "I remember you!" They banter a bit, Ronnie chiding her for not living up to Northern European punctuality. Once he has checked our names, he calls the circle to come closer

to him, and welcomes us to the walk.

Pivoting in place, he assesses the audience gathered around him. Once he has made sure we are all there for the *WalkBeirut* tour, and have paid our fee, he begins to weave his story.

Introducing himself to the group, he quips, "Now you may not believe this, but I am probably the most Lebanese person here." The crowd, mostly fair-haired Europeans, chuckle under their breath, unsure whether to really laugh. "No really," he says. He recounts the story of his mother's attending the tour, and her embarrassing claim that she had no idea why he ended up as a fair redhead.<sup>41</sup>

He pauses for a moment, eyeing those assembled. "Are there any Lebanese in the crowd today?" Two or three people slowly raise their hands. He smiles and nods, offering no comment on their presence other than the briefest acknowledgment.

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In a warmly lit bar in Gemmayzeh, in Beirut's East, Ronnie sits in a high booth at the window, his back to the street. He has agreed to meet me here to talk about the origins of *WalkBeirut*, which I have taken several times by this point. It is early spring 2013, and the pavements outside are still wet with afternoon rain. He has ordered some

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<sup>41</sup> Edensor (2001) and Crang (1997) have noted the importance of tourist workers to the performance of tourism. "Directors and stage-managers" are among the most important of these workers, in that they carefully choreograph itineraries through tourist space, demonstrating appropriate behavior and cultural expectations in a given context. Ronnie is not only a director, but also a cultural intermediary (Edensor 2001), a fact that allows him to perform well his role as a guide through Beirut. That is, he is both local and "global": his appearance – jeans and sandals, long reddish hair – and fluent English also situate him comfortably as not-only local, but also as a recognizable figure in a global tourist industry that works to represent the local while catering to tourist expectations. Though Ronnie grew up in Beirut, he spent significant time in the U.S. and Europe, as will become apparent.

*mezze* – savory appetizers in small bowls – for us to share, and we order two beers while we chat about people we know, including a close friend and flatmate of mine.

Eventually the conversation turns to the object of our meeting, and I pull out a small recorder, placing it on the table between us. Ronnie laughs. “No, Erin, no recording.”

I try to convince him that being able to speak freely without the burden of writing will allow us to have a more honest conversation, which will also be recorded more accurately. Still, he refuses. I relent, but ask him to go slow so that I can write down every bit of what he says. He agrees to this, and so the story begins.

On 14 February 2005, several tons of explosives decimated former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri’s motorcade as it made its way down the coast, past the iconic St. Georges Hotel. Hariri and 22 others were killed.<sup>42</sup> At the time, speculation about Syrian involvement led to a mass uprising that ultimately resulted in Syria’s ouster from Lebanon.

Ronnie recalls the heady mix of bitterness and euphoria that followed. A family friend died from wounds sustained in the blast, and yet, “It was the first time I could remember,” he says, “that there was a real sense of nationalism, that so many Lebanese were on the same page. It seemed like all the traditional structures were collapsing.”

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<sup>42</sup> The UN-appointed Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) was set up as an international criminal tribunal meant to assess the evidence of the assassination and determine responsibility. The STL indicted and issued arrest warrants for four individuals associated with Hizballah. Hassan Nasrallah condemned the indictments and warrants, and declared the STL to be an international plot against his party, while blaming Israel for the assassination. Since the beginning of the STL trial on 16 January 2014, 40 witnesses have appeared, and 484 pieces of evidence have been submitted. For more information, visit <http://www.stl-tsl.org>.

However, after the end of Syria's occupation in April 2005, the euphoria of the previous spring was, in Ronnie's words, "quickly decimated." A series of assassinations, rising mistrust between political factions and their constituents in the capital and throughout the country, and the reorganization of political alliances signaled that old patterns of violence were reemerging.<sup>43</sup>

Ronnie's close friend, Samir Kassir, fell victim to this violence. A renowned journalist and author, and sometime faculty member at the American University of Beirut, Kassir had long criticized Syria's presence in Lebanon. The party to which he belonged, the Democratic Left, had actively fanned the flames of 2005's Independence Intifada after Hariri's assassination. During this period, Kassir encouraged Beirutis to take back their city and their country from the Syrian occupation.

On 2 June 2005, Kassir was killed in those streets by a car bomb. For Ronnie, it was like watching with his own eyes while things fell apart.

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Ronnie directs us to look over the maps he had handed out as the group gathered.<sup>44</sup> The route, he says, is not comprehensive, but will still take us four hours to

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<sup>43</sup> After Hariri's assassination, new political alliances quickly began to take shape. The March 14 Alliance, named after the beginning of the "Cedar Revolution," was composed of anti-Syrian entities, and is led by Hariri's son, Saad, and other leaders like the Katā'ib Party's Amin Gemayel. The March 8 Alliance is composed of pro-Syrian parties such as the SSNP, Hizballah, and Amal. Since Hariri's death and the emergence of new political fault lines, several assassinations and attempts have been made, especially on politicians and journalists with anti-Syrian politics.

<sup>44</sup> If guides like Ronnie are performers, so are the participants who take their tours. As tourist-performers, they have likely learned certain tourist-specific behaviors, "pre-existing discursive, practical, embodied norms which help to guide [them]" (Edensor 2001, 71). Such norms include the use of guidebooks and maps (Adler 1989), which are both stock tourist technologies that help them also straddle the culture of tourism and local culture, imparting area-specific knowledge as legible text. In Beirut, mapping a route like *WalkBeirut's* is profoundly political, connecting the

complete. And it will not be without its perils. Traffic might be an issue, he warns, though no one should worry, as he is exceptionally good at stopping traffic for his tours. He had, after all, successfully stopped Ban Ki Moon's cavalcade as it coursed through the city not too long ago. He hadn't had such luck with the Pope's entourage, however.

And protests are an altogether different matter. About six weeks earlier, a car bomb killed a communications minister and several bystanders across the city in Sassine Square. Since then, intermittent protests have stymied the already halting flow of traffic through the city. When and where they might occur is often unpredictable but will most likely change the course of the last part of the tour. If that happens, he says, we will simply finish up the tour in one of the earlier meeting spots. Thus armed with unusually clear maps of major landmarks and Ronnie's assurance that we will in fact be able to safely traverse Beirut on foot, we set out on our course.

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city in one long, more or less continuous (narrative) line from west to (the edge of) east Beirut, and cutting directly into the space of Solidère's rebuilt downtown. If maps are technologies used to guide us, Ronnie's storytelling is itself a spatial practice: his stories "traverse and organize places...select and link them together [to] make sentences and itineraries out of them" (de Certeau 1988, 115). A visual representation of these stories, the map also marks the beginning of the spatial script Ronnie wants us to follow, a script that is essential in Beirut, as many of the spaces into which we will venture require specific cultural knowledge and/or behaviors. The maps also help develop our Beirut-specific "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990), through pointing out select landmarks. The tourist gaze is constructed through signs and "directed to features of landscape and townscape that separate them off from everyday experience" (Urry 1990, 3). Though I cannot speak for everyone on the tours, I felt myself much better acquainted with Beirut – its rhythms, openings, and closings – in the months after *WalkBeirut*. Referring back to this map oriented me to spaces that might be more sensitive than others, and I was able to recall the repertoire of practices through which Ronnie guided us on the tour.



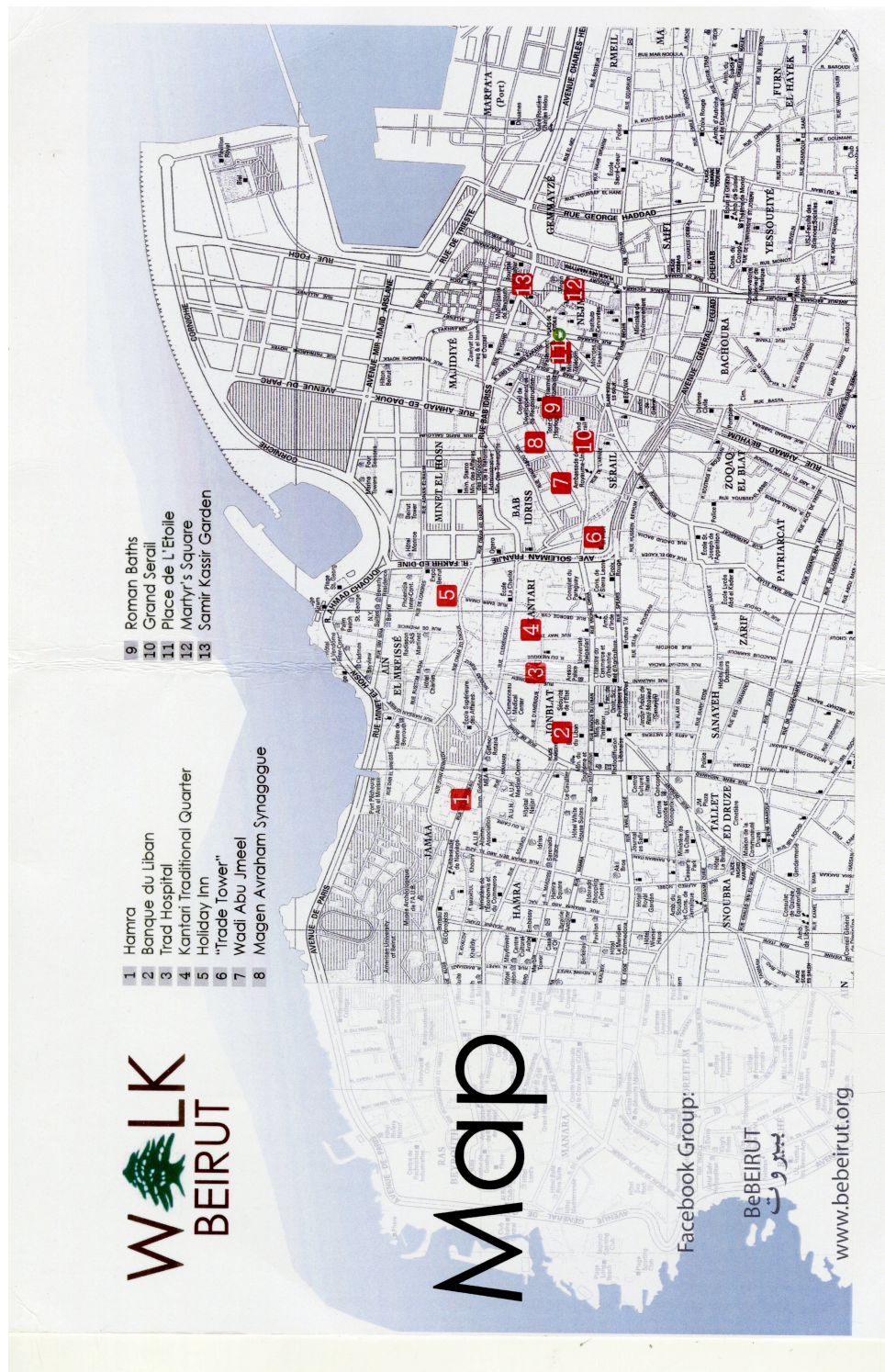


Figure 1 Map of WalkBeirut, 2013

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The first stop of the tour is the Banque du Liban. Ronnie stands on the pavement, allowing participants to file past him and fill the steps he faces.<sup>45</sup> Though the area is relatively quiet, as it is a Sunday, two young men walk the sidewalk just across the street and pause as we seat ourselves. They are laughing, obviously taking photos of us on their cell phones. Ronnie glances over his shoulder at them, waiting for them to leave before continuing the tour. When they persist, his photographer crosses the street and, in words we cannot hear, insists that they keep moving. They do, eventually, but not without turning once more to capture a few more images.

Once the street is quiet, Ronnie begins to recount in earnest the country's complicated history by narrating the tragedy of the Lebanese lira, which has suffered from a fixed exchange rate that has not changed in 20 years. From there he moves into a discussion of the war by tying Lebanese currency to important dates, specifically 1975, when the war began. At that time, Lebanese stopped using Lebanese currency and instead toyed with other monetary forms, including the deutschemark. He manages to

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<sup>45</sup> Though tours may be scripted, they are not performed in isolation. The city is a stage comprised of its own itineraries, choreographies, and confrontations. Edensor (2001) notes that locals often become part of the performance, sometimes contesting the meaning of the performance by shining a different light on it. Although most of the *WalkBeirut* participants were accustomed to the practice of moving in large groups as part of a tour, such a practice is extremely rare in Beirut, both in terms of the number of people gathered in public space (the exception being protests and events like the annual *Fete de la musique*, which takes place in the BCD) and the fact that we were traversing the city on foot. While the young men laughed and recorded this odd constellation of people, many of the tourists shifted uncomfortably, their hands at their sides or in their laps instead of on their cameras, feeling keenly the strangeness of our presence, something that, in the reassuring presence of Ronnie and other tourists, we had perhaps momentarily taken for granted. The tourist gaze, often problematized as a surveillance practice that intrudes into local lives (Urry 1992), might also be challenged. This episode illustrates how the script may be flipped, the tourists feeling themselves on display, and simultaneously learning something about the cultural norms in the city they are touring. This dynamic, as we will see, repeated itself throughout the tour.

narrate the power struggles between sects by focusing on the institutional set up of the bank itself. Like almost every part of Lebanese life, he says, the bank deals with and in religion. If you want to work for the bank or the government, you fall into a quota system organized by religion and then by sect. Over a series of questions, Ronnie asks the audience to pull from their knowledge of Lebanon to help him tell the story of the country. Correct answers receive a prize, in the form of a plastic slap bracelet. Emblazoned with the red and white stripes and cedar tree of the Lebanese flag, it reads "I Love Lebanon" – the ultimate in tourist kitsch. Ronnie makes a huge spectacle out of bestowing these small treasures on tourists.

"Question: What kind of Christian is the President of Lebanon?"

A participant raises her hand. "Maronite!"

"That's right! Come here, this is for you." With one hand, he holds her arm steady, and with the other he gives her wrist a solid slap with the bracelet

"Question: There are two main sects of Muslims in Beirut. One of these sects has the Prime Minister spot in Parliament. Which is it?" Someone yells out "Sunni," the right answer. "You're right. Come on up." This slap sounds a bit harder. "It hurts more for Sunnis," he says, to a round of laughter from the crowd.

"Question: Which Muslim sect always has the position of Speaker of the House?"

"Shia!"

"Correct! Come here and collect your prize!" Ronnie makes a special display of this one, giving the taut bracelet a couple of "practice" waves through the air before finally landing it in one smooth, sharp snap on the winner's wrist. He grins. "Sorry about that. But it *really* hurts for Shia."

Ronnie talks about the industry around money: its counterfeits during the civil war, how some forms of money are now collectibles, never found in circulation anymore, and it begins to become apparent, through this one institution and its main cultural artifact, how slippery power, and claims to it, have been historically in Lebanon and how consequential to one's power – both institutionally and culturally – is the accident of one's ethnoreligious identity.<sup>46</sup>

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When Ronnie received his acceptance letter to the MA program in International Relations at George Washington University, he packed his bags and left. “I thought, ‘Fuck this country,’” he says. “I told myself, ‘You don’t know when this sort of opportunity will come again.’”

Ronnie’s joint American and Lebanese citizenship allowed him to easily exit the country. He was born in the United States while his father, Mohamad Chatah, held the post of Lebanese Ambassador. Ronnie had spent enough time in the U.S. to feel comfortable once he landed and settled into work and school. The reprieve was short-

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<sup>46</sup> Without going into the details of Lebanon's fractured past, or the inequalities faced by very specific segments of its religiously diverse population, Ronnie has sketched the basic contours of power and relational politics in Lebanon. In a way the bank may seem the most unlikely place to start, and yet it is for all intents and purposes ideal. Most tourists are at least cursorily acquainted with the concept of sectarian divisions, and vaguely know about Sunni/Shia divisions, even if they do not know the particular historical details and current iterations of these divisions. However, they are unaware of the ways in which these cut across myriad social as well as political lines. The bank is also a solid place to start because it deals with literal currency, an item the participants are bringing to Lebanon, and an artifact so pedestrian that one would hardly consider it contentious. Except, in this case, it explains so much. Here *WalkBeirut* also begins, like any good tour, to interpolate its audience/participants into the story of the tour by allowing them to respond to questions and by rewarding correct answers. Participants can touch pieces of Lebanese history, sit in front of a proxy of one of its main power institutions (the heavily-surveilled Parliament being well out of reach for a tour like Ronnie's), and participate in the storytelling, receiving small gifts for performing the role of tourist.

lived, however. Uprooted and far from home, Ronnie found himself disillusioned once more, longing for home. He decided it best to return to Lebanon to figure out his next move. His questions about his own life in some ways mirrored those he had about Lebanon, questions his father was also working through in his job as senior advisor to Hariri's replacement Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora. How could different experiences and desires be reconciled? What sort of path would lead out of confusion?

“Cities far more diverse than Beirut come together during tragedy,” he notes. Somehow, however, Beirut seemed caught by a stultifying torpor, incapable of uniting, much less moving forward. Moreover, “...the problem is that Lebanon as a whole frequently imitates the movements – be they political or cultural - of its capital city.”

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The group collectively heaves itself up from the warm bank steps, and follows Ronnie down the street. I fall into step with his photographer, a young woman who has very comfortably been wielding a large, state-of-the-art camera. I ask her about the young men who heckled the group; they had quieted down after she spoke to them. It doesn't happen that often, she says, but people are not used to seeing a group of this size walking through Beirut.

We chat as we go, minding the uneven streets, enjoying the shadow-sun-shadow rhythm of walking on the streetside of old courtyards, from which the blood-pink of fully blooming bougainvillea spills over the tops of wrought-iron gates, forming a lush balcony over the sidewalk.

She herself is not from this city, but grew up in Jounieh, a rather affluent coastal town north of Beirut. Her parents moved there during the war, like so many Christians

did, if they had the resources to do so. But despite the conditions of this transition - the wartime resettlement - she never heard about the war itself from her family as it was happening, nor did they divulge details after the fighting stopped. If you didn't grow up in a family that was politically involved, she tells me, you didn't get any history lesson from any perspective.

Her education as a child in Jounieh was French through and through. She and her classmates drew maps of France and learned the details of its geography. They did not, however, receive similar lessons on Lebanon. In high school, students learned the history of the “Arab countries,” and continued their education in French language, history, and literature. But with respect to Lebanon, their education only included the World Wars and Lebanese Independence. It stopped after that.

Even when she began attending university in Beirut, Lebanese history remained a void in her education, a blank spot she could not fill. She realized that students only learned about Lebanese history in college if it mattered to their major. She studied fine arts, mainly focusing on painting and photography. She did not, therefore, learn about modern Lebanese history until long after her formal education had ended.

After university, she settled more permanently in Beirut and began working for Ronnie. Then, and only then - living in Beirut's neighborhoods, listening to Ronnie, walking the city again and again, and recording on her camera the moments that unfolded before her – did her country's layered past start to become legible.

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Two days after his return to Lebanon, jetlagged and re-orienting himself to home, Ronnie looked up modern maps of Beirut online. Intrigued by the cartographic bird's-

eye view, he rounded up an assortment of maps of the city, some dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before Lebanon's establishment as a nation. As he browsed through the images, he noted the changing cityscape and its shifting demographics. These were stories about his city that he had never heard. And indeed, in 2006 Beirut's story was about to take another turn, precipitating new rounds of displacement and urban change.

That summer had promised to bring tourism back to Lebanon. But the onset of fighting between Hizballah and Israel, in the 34 days of fighting known as the 2006 Lebanon War, dashed those hopes, bringing NGO and aid workers instead.

Possessing an American passport, Ronnie had two options - two more, he says, that most Lebanese. He could leave through Syria or take a big American ship to safety. As the violence moved closer, the sound of bombs in Beirut's southern suburbs audible throughout the city, Ronnie found he could not leave. To do so would be to leave behind not only the fighting, but also his family and friends, many who did not have the option of getting out.

Instead, Ronnie chose a third option: he stayed. He sought comfort by reaching out to others who had stayed in the city either for work, or because they had no other choice. He volunteered at local community center and art space Zico House, where he helped distribute medical supplies, water, and food to Beirut's displaced residents. He also took over Lebanese scholar Kamal Salibi's old music school and reopened it as a hostel.<sup>47</sup> At the time, Salibi Center Pension was the only hostel in town, and many aid

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<sup>47</sup> Kamal Salibi (d. 2011), cited at length in this dissertation's introduction, was a Lebanese historian and professor of history at the American University of Beirut. He wrote a number of books, including the influential *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (1988), cited frequently in this dissertation.

workers took up residence under Ronnie's roof. "Back then," he says, "if you were foreign to Beirut, you were here for work, not fun."

Ronnie once again brought out his maps, but this time he had an interested audience. As his tenants tried in vain to figure out the city – routes between neighborhoods, the histories of various quarters, where they could and could not travel – Ronnie attempted to bring it to life for them. Simply pointing at a map, however, was not enough; so he began taking them on walks.

Ronnie walked foreigners through the city countless times, and found the enterprise enjoyable, even when certain parts became inaccessible with the ebb and flow of Lebanon's political situation. He found alternate routes through Beirut, despite shifting power geographies, continuing his informal tours through the city even when, for example, Hizballah occupied downtown after the 2006 war. "I enjoyed being the guru back then," he says.

And yet, despite his best efforts and his deftness at navigating the city's shifting map, he realized Beirut was not making sense to his charges; it was simply too complex.

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As we head east away from Hamra, Ronnie gives us a quick word of warning: we are not to take pictures as we round the nearest corner. We are now in the traditional Clemenceau neighborhood, and an important politician lives here. Even the suspicion of a snapped photograph will elicit inspection by private security guards.

After the initial scramble to cover camera lenses or replace small digital cameras in bags and pockets, we follow Ronnie down the street once again. Walking slower, more aware of being looked at while looking, we confer amongst ourselves: which house



belongs to the politician? Ronnie has not told us. Though here we are limited in terms of what we may record, we are fairly free to look up and around; the sidewalks feel smoother underfoot in this neighborhood, and so we trust our feet to carry us to our next destination.

Soon enough, we are there. As we round a corner to the left, Ronnie stops to tell us that it is now safe to remove our lens caps, to retrieve our cameras and phones from our pockets. It's a welcome invitation, as directly across the street from where we've stopped stands a stunning old yellow building. Ronnie waxes poetic about the building's virtues, how it merges a few of the disparate pieces of Lebanese heritage in one beautiful, and functional, structure. The *harim*, he notes, a small turret lofted high above the street, was inherited from the Ottoman Empire, built only for women so that they could observe the street, but the street could not observe them. The art deco gates take their inspiration from French design around the time of the French mandate. But the three windows over every balcony, he says, are distinctly Lebanese, a shared architectural trope found in traditional homes throughout the country. Each set looks into the house's main social areas, its salons, where families entertain their guests.



Figure 2 Traditional Family Home, Kantari, Beirut

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We leave this house. The city is largely quiet today, and we walk comfortably, the nearby sea inviting a slow pace, expanding daydream-like as we move towards it. The pleasures of walking slowly have momentarily lulled us, perhaps, into a meditation on the space around us, with no care for what is behind or what is ahead. Even the Lebanese in the group walk comfortably up the middle of the road. It is only the photographer's last-minute shout that prevents a collision with the scooter. The young men riding it go careening downhill, no helmets, no jackets, and a bawdy "Ahlan wa sahlán!" yelled into the wind. *Welcome!* They laugh, perhaps as surprised to see us in the middle of the road, as we are to see them.

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Ronnie stops us once more, and this time we find ourselves on a narrow street between a grand old house similar in style to the one we just left, and a walled-off lot behind which can be seen the decrepit remains of what was once someone's home. After making the connection between the two traditional houses, Ronnie calls our attention to this lot. Many older homes were abandoned during the war, he says, when waves of Lebanese left the country's shifting shores for safer ground overseas. Some of these homes, like the one we are now observing, have incongruously beautiful views. The rotting walls of the house cut an earthy brown silhouette against the impeccably blue Mediterranean sky. Half rooms stand naked in the sun, their protective walls cut down. The floors of what were once bedrooms, perhaps, have become balconies with a view to the glittering sea. Seabirds wheel above us. The windows are bereft of their glass, but no matter: the whole house has become a window, an artifact that has borne witness to violence, abandonment, and disrepair. We shift uncomfortably in the face of its bareness, as though we were gazing upon the most intimate emptiness, where the house's fortunate inhabitants once gazed out at their city and the calm motion of the sea.



Figure 3 Abandoned Family Home, Beirut

These views are coveted. Real estate companies, commensurate with the push of postwar development, have been eyeing these abandoned plots for future projects. Simply taking over such lots is not legal, however, and so the companies are now tasked with the unenviable difficulty of searching for Lebanese families in the diaspora and getting them to agree to sell their ancestral land. Many of these Lebanese, separated by the scattered destinations of the diaspora, have fallen out with their family members, notes Ronnie. But, ironically, they somehow seem to find (quite literal) common ground again when they profit from parting with their land, often their last tangible connection to Lebanon.

Before we leave this lot to time and the salty sea air, Ronnie makes an announcement. The next stop, he says, is that building standing over there, just northwest of us. He points, and we are instantly oriented. This is the infamous Holiday Inn. We

are not to take pictures when we come within eyeshot of the front of it. Even mobile phones must be tucked away, Ronnie says, lest the guards on duty think we are secretly capturing its image. We turn our faces to the building, its pockmarked gray like a scar cutting through the clear blue sky. We keep our faces trained on it during most of the walk down to its base, as if beckoned to it, pulled by the mythology surrounding the place. This is the civil war monument par excellence, according to the guidebooks, though that is almost all they say about it. Certainly there is no plaque dedicated to explaining its various uses: the glamor of its ill-fated days as a hotel, its strategic position as a sniper roost during wartime. It stands, a ghostly sentinel, dark eyes peering over the city. If the Lebanese have in some ways come to take for granted Beirut's war-scarred cityscape, the Holiday Inn is too prominent to ignore. It is the city's North Star: a landmark by which people orient themselves to their capital city and, perhaps, to at least part of their history.



Figure 4 Holiday Inn, Beirut

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Motorbikes scoot around cars making their way down the one-way street, nearly clipping one or two in our group. And so we move off the asphalt, slipping and shuffling along the sunbaked sidewalks. They are less even here, less maintained. They have been worn down over time, the grooves shallow between the small squares that make up their pattern. It is difficult to gain traction. Gone is the shade of lush foliage. Across the street in a large apartment building, striped coverings shade rows of small balconies from the light and heat. They flap their faded plasticized cotton in the breeze coming off the sea. The man in front of me – blinded by the sun, or perhaps focused on the large structure looming in the near distance – nearly trips into a deep crevice, perhaps a

manhole on which someone has forgotten to replace the cover.<sup>48</sup>

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As we approach the Holiday Inn, Ronnie and his photographer once again admonish us to put away our communication devices and cameras. Though we are not allowed the tourist luxury of recording our movement through the space, we are ourselves undoubtedly being recorded. No security cameras are immediately apparent, but as we walk down the sidewalk opposite the hotel, the eyes of the on-duty Lebanese army guards seemingly scan our ranks for any outliers, any equipment that would wittingly or not capture the image of the Holiday Inn, creating a record that might compromise security. We become very conscious of our bodies, making absolutely sure we will not slip, lest we call the guards' attention to us.<sup>49</sup>

Eventually Ronnie stops, just opposite the guards' stations, in the tiny space between the bumpers of two cars. We file ourselves into two rows facing the Holiday

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<sup>48</sup> Tourists experience new sites not only through sight, but rather also through a range of multi-sensual encounters (smell, sound, touch, etc.). The significance of embodiment – “a process of experiencing, making sense, knowing through practice as a sensual human subject in the world” (Crouch 2000, 68) – is crucial to how tourists understand the spaces they travel through. Urry (2001) also notes that tourists have a “sixth sense,” kinaesthetics: as they move – navigating new objects, textures, and rhythms – the nature of their understanding changes, accounting for more than what is merely visible.

<sup>49</sup> As MacCannell (2001) points out, though the tourism industry cultivates a tourist gaze through brochures, maps, guidebooks, and tours themselves, the gaze is neither universal nor unidirectional. Instead, locals might trap tourists in a “second gaze,” in which the tourist is scrutinized, manipulated, and surveilled. Indeed, “everything that attracts the [tourist] gaze, *every representation, has its own beyond*” (MacCannell 2001, 31, my italics). If we, as tourists, were taking in the city with all our senses – sight, smell, sound, even our movement – perhaps the city itself was *looking back*, challenging where we could look, and what we might see there; disrupting our leisurely tourist movements, curtailing how and where we could move. Even the sounds of the city demanded our attention. As walkers, the sounds of cars, horns, engines, motorbikes, signaled to us differently, prompted movements we would not normally make were we in a *servees* or other vehicle. The city told us, in no uncertain terms, what is was, what it expected. Out here, as pedestrians, our vulnerability was heightened, but so was our engagement. This conversation with the city demanded our full presence.

Inn, one row standing, one row sitting at their feet or on the curb. Behind us, warm white lights shine in the storefront of a chic establishment selling Lebanese textiles. Its window dressings are beautiful, displaying the bright but rich colors of Lebanese housewares against the whiteness of Scandinavian design. As we organize ourselves, our eyes light upon four-poster beds draped in muslin and silk, handmade soaps, and sparkling glassware, all framed beautifully in the polished windows.<sup>50</sup>

In this moment, the late afternoon sun hitting the black caverns of the Holiday Inn's topmost floors on its descent into the sea, the difference between the two sides of the street is striking. And yet there is also a striking similarity. The goods on offer in the windows are selling the specter of progress to the walkers. "Helū," one of the Lebanese walkers says to her companion. *Lovely*. Here are traditional phrases, materials, and products updated for the stylish 21<sup>st</sup> century connoisseur's home. They are sold at designer prices, playing on the idea of Beirut as a designer city. Beirut is a warm, inviting, and chic home away from home where one can seamlessly experience the best of both "West" and "East." And just a few meters away, reflected in the store's windows, is the looming specter of a war fought ideologically and spatially along such ideas and fault lines. The stubbornly warm lights of the storefront windows seem to fight against its long shadows, its vacant orifices.

We wedge ourselves into the seam between these light and dark spaces, our chatty

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<sup>50</sup> In later months, I would visit this store, and discover the spectrum of wares inside, from handmade greeting cards and baby clothes to large mirrors that looked more like art pieces than functional housewares, shining Arabic calligraphy, wall hangings, and traditional-looking women's dresses. I would also discover that the price tags on most of these goods were well beyond budget, even for some of the wealthier tourists in the city. Downtown's particular political economy seems to tentacle ever outward.



crowd growing quiet, perhaps aware of that we have crossed over into one of the most liminal spaces on this swath of the city between East and West, though not fully knowledgeable about its specifics. Ronnie's smile in front of us offers a welcome focal point, something to distract from the eyes of the soldiers, and the dark eyes of the building behind them, which seem to be reading us, cataloguing our movements, our gazes. In this place, we pause between the marks of an almost-forgotten memory, and in this push and pull between past, present, and perhaps future, Ronnie is our anchor, holding us suspended.

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In the spring of 2008, Hizballah and its ally, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), took control of Hamra, the bustling neighborhood bordering AUB's campus.<sup>51</sup> If Ronnie and other young residents of the area had thought the 2006 war too close for comfort, violence was now at their very doorstep. Ronnie remembers spending two full days hiding under his hostel's grand piano with 12 foreigners. They stayed away from the windows, which soon lay shattered upon the floor, struck through by stray bullets.

In June, exhausted by the constant violence, he left for Berlin, where he spent four

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<sup>51</sup> Between 2006 and 2008, as a response to new alliances formed in the wake of Hariri's assassination, Lebanon witnessed a series of political protests against Fouad Siniora's March 14 government by members of a coalition opposition forces (mainly made up of Hizballah, Amal, and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), as well as smaller factions like the Lebanese Communist Party and the SSNP). In May 2008, as a response to the government's threat to dismantle Hizballah's telecomm network and remove the airport security chief for his alleged ties to the party, Hizballah waged a turf war and seized a series of neighborhoods from government forces. These areas were turned over to the Lebanese army, which sided with the opposition forces by allowing Hizballah to maintain its telecomm operations and reinstating the airport security chief. Eleven people died and 30 were wounded as a result of these clashes. After two weeks, rival Lebanese leaders signed the Doha Agreement in Doha, Qatar, to halt the fighting. Though it was quelled in Beirut, it moved to other areas of the country, including the Bekaa Valley, which borders Syria, and Tripoli in the north.

months. This trip proved both a relief and a revelation. He fell in love with the city. For him, Berlin represented the exemplar of “a divided city that got it right.” How, he wondered, could a divided city look back at its past with the same gaze, and be so tourist-friendly that visitors could navigate its history without a guide? Disconnected physically and intellectually from Beirut, he found he could address some of the same issues faced by his city, without being swallowed by its pain.

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Ronnie begins to speak, pausing only to allow passing cars their moment of noise, easily continuing the narrative thread as the engines die away. He is obligated to do this several times. Cars slow down in the narrow one-way street, eliciting honks from the drivers following behind. Faces peer out the windows, curious. We are an attraction, a site in our own right. Windows are rolled down, "Ahlan wa sahlan bi lubnaaaaaan! Welcome! Welcome to Lebanon!" Some of the walkers half-wave in response; perhaps they are becoming more accustomed to their dual role as spectators/spectacle. Ronnie laughs. He continues to speak in between these small exchanges.

He tells the story of the Holiday Inn in broad strokes. He introduces the character of Yasser Arafat, and asks us if we know who he was. At least a few people can offer satisfactory answers, and Ronnie congratulates us. Not many people, he says, really know about Arafat. One walker once suggested that he was an exchange student at the American University. We laugh, proud of ourselves. Arafat, says Ronnie, brought the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to Beirut. Though he was accepted in the area around the American University of Beirut (AUB), where he would hold court with students who listened eagerly to his ideas, his presence signaled something else entirely

to opponents of the PLO: the neighborhood was changing. The eventual move away from West Beirut of many of these opponents marked one of the major wartime demographic shifts. In fact, the PLO takeover of the Holiday Inn, which had opened only one year before the fighting broke out in Beirut, also constituted another pattern in the wartime cityscape: whoever had control of the Holiday Inn was, for however long they occupied it, "winning."<sup>52</sup>

Once Arafat moved in, according to the story, forces in East Beirut began shelling the building and eventually occupied it. Of course, this occupation did not last forever, and in the push and pull of wartime "victory" and "defeat," the PLO kicked out its opponents in 1982. Eventually, at the "end" of the conflicts, the Syrians moved into Beirut and declared victory for themselves by occupying the hotel. When they were driven from the country in 2005, blamed for Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination, the Lebanese army moved its soldiers in. They remain the hotel's tenants today.<sup>53</sup>

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After considering Beirut in light of Berlin, Ronnie came to a conclusion: the difference was that Berlin had figured out a better way to move on – through unification,

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<sup>52</sup> Today the Holiday Inn is occupied by the Lebanese Armed Forces, an institution both celebrated and chastised for its frequent inefficiency. The LAF is an intersectarian group, which is perhaps fitting given the history of the Holiday Inn. In the years since the end of the civil war, ex-militia leaders, once the snipers in the hotel's windows, have set up strong presences in neighborhoods that "belong" to their sometime sympathizers. For example: Maronite Katā'ib Party (Lebanese Phalanges) has headquarters in several neighborhoods in East Beirut. Hizballah is quartered in the Haret Hreik neighborhood of Dāhiyya (Beirut's southern suburbs). The SSNP (Syrian Socialist National Party) has posts in Hamra.

<sup>53</sup> In this version of the story, whittled down to an easily digestible history, Ronnie is careful not to assign either party or sect to Lebanese fighters. "East Beirut" becomes a stand-in spatial referent for the Lebanese Forces, consisting mainly of coalition right-wing Christian fighters. The PLO, by association then, appears to be situated within West Beirut, which transformed from pluralist to majority Muslim after the Christian flight to East Beirut during the war.

building up mutual understanding of the past, and a staunch commitment to stability. Beirut had had that moment in 1989, just at the end of the civil war, Ronnie says, but missed its opportunity to rebuild while honestly dealing with the causes and legacy of the conflict. Although Lebanon plays up its façade of fun, Ronnie feels that the reality is much different. While not sanctioned as such, for Ronnie and many others, modern Lebanon is a failed state. “It’s been permanent civil war,” says Ronnie, “with more or less violence.” Berlin, on the other hand, though cut through by unspeakable violence, the signs of which are still visible in the city, had managed to not only reckon with its painful and divisive history in a unified way that allowed people to feel that the future held promise; it had also developed a whole tourist economy around narrating shared memory.

Ronnie recalls walking through Berlin and being struck by a passing walking tour group. The group of walkers consisted not only of tourists, but also of Germans who had come to learn about Berlin’s history. On further research, Ronnie found there were hundreds of such tours in Berlin. After a web search, he chose one to join.

Over the course of seven hours, the city unfolded in front of Ronnie. The guide gave his group access to areas they never would have been able to see on their own, and managed to tell the story of Germany’s most sensitive history in a way that both informed and entertained. At the end, Ronnie says, he felt like the master of Berlin.

This was still not the case at home, a difference that struck Ronnie as strange and frustrating. Tides of change and violence were forever uprooting his sense of the city, and how he understood his place in it. How could he manage to get a foothold back in Beirut?

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We walk away from the Holiday Inn, some amongst us pausing before fully abandoning the site, to snap some secret photos. We work our way up a small hill, crossing the street in shifts as the traffic lights and traffic rhythms (which have very little to do with the lights) allow. We find ourselves as a group once more in front of another church, across from yet another abandoned building. This one is taller, slimmer than the Holiday Inn. But it feels somehow darker, more haunted, perhaps only because the area around it is a little quieter, and there are no soldiers in sight. When Ronnie tells us about the building, Murr Tower, its eeriness makes sense: during the civil war, snipers roosted here as well; it was a prime locale from which to exchange fire with militants posted at the Holiday Inn.

Ronnie asks us to come close, to circle round, so we can hear him. We squeeze together, making ourselves as small as possible, elbows touching. He is not speaking very loudly; it takes a bit of shuffling to get close enough to hear him. Throughout the war, he says, there was one, very small community that never left its quarters. This community managed to stay downtown even when the Green Line that cut through the Beirut engulfed the city in violence, destroying homes, businesses, and other buildings in wave after wave of fighting. These determined individuals belonged to Lebanon's Jewish community.

Ronnie asks us, once again, to pack away our cameras, or anything that can take a picture, or possibly be mistaken as a photo-capable device. The area we are entering, he says, is very sensitive. If the guards down there notice anything they might consider

suspicious, they won't just confiscate the device; they may throw us out, and Ronnie's relationship with them will be tarnished, making it more difficult for him to return to the area with future groups.

We do as we're told. We like Ronnie. We are nervous.

And then, just as we are turning together to go down to the valley below us, we are stopped. We peer over each other's heads, looking for a reason, trying to see what is happening. We catch glimpses of Ronnie speaking with a guard. We keep quiet. Ronnie and the guard keep talking. The guard speaks into a walkie-talkie.

Soon we are milling about. The talking continues between Ronnie and this man, and shows no signs of letting up. We confer with each other, speculating about what they are talking about, what could possibly be the problem. We feel sure Ronnie has this under control, and that we will be allowed to continue momentarily.

We believe that, even as the minutes tick by.

Ten minutes.

Twenty minutes.

Thirty.

Ronnie turns his back to us, showing the guard some papers that we cannot see. The guard nods and speaks into his walkie-talkie. I overhear a pair of young Lebanese people, a guy and a girl, whisper about *wāsta*, or connections. Is Ronnie using his? Several people wonder aloud, though in whispers, what could possibly be so secret in that valley just below. His photographer moves through the crowd, gently reprimanding people who have tried to sneak pictures while we wait, or those who have wandered a bit. The group must stay together.

And just as it seems as though we may need to reroute, Ronnie swings his arm at us and says, in a voice meant to be upbeat, "Let's go, guys."

We move downhill.

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In the fall of 2008, tourists were beginning to return to Lebanon. By that time, Ronnie had transferred his graduate school credits to the American University of Beirut, and began once again to consider how best to present Beirut to both foreigners and Lebanese. Time away and his experiences in Berlin had lent Ronnie a more critical eye with which to understand his city. His discontent was no longer stultifying. Rather, it found a conduit in Ronnie's MA project: the first official walking tour of Beirut.

By the spring of 2009, Ronnie was mapping out sample routes. He floated all his ideas by Salibi. Salibi, who knew Kassir well, told Ronnie that this was precisely the sort of tour he would have wanted. However, on his first trial run, which - inspired by the tour he had taken in Berlin - lasted an astonishing seven hours, his trial client told him she hated it; it simply contained too much information. So Ronnie went back to the drawing board and the following week, he took 20 people, included half the information, and the woman who had, at first, hated it, told him that she loved it.

Nevertheless, any itinerary through Beirut was bound to be difficult. There are few parks, and hardly any benches on which to rest. Ronnie found himself having to yell over traffic, and street vendors thought this cavalcade of foreigners a veritable moving marketplace in which to sell their wares. Still, those first 20 people sent emails to newspapers and friends back home. People visiting the city started calling Ronnie. So did newspapers, not least of all the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*.

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As we enter the valley, Wadi Abu Jamil, feeling subdued, it remains unclear why there might be a problem with our presence there. The streets are empty. The buildings are too. They look as though they've been burned out from the inside; they are that hollow. There is no sign of ash or fire, only the strange stillness of a space after catastrophe. Some buildings bear the signs of reconstruction: plastic sheeting shuddering slightly on a breeze we cannot feel moving through empty apartments; new doors and fairly even sidewalks. We walk into the silence of the "neighborhood," where new developments are creeping up to the older, war-weathered buildings. Our only companions are soft-footed cats and guards. This valley seems to be holding its breath. For what?

Army outposts dot the street. Inside their small bunkers, young soldiers hold AK-47s in one hand, and mobile phones in the other. Plain-clothes sentinels follow us on foot, too, speaking quietly to each other, asking Ronnie again what he is doing here, in the valley. He greets them steadily, meeting their eye, offers a brief explanation, and continues to move forward. He calls to the photographer, who brings up the rear of our group, encouraging any stragglers to quicken their pace and keep up with the others. She eyes our bags, our hands, looking for any devices that might set off a reaction amongst the guards.

Eventually, we make it to the front of a building, which is closed off from the street. Like so much of the city, it appears fairly new, under construction. But, also like much of the city, it isn't. It is instead in a liminal state, somewhere between disrepair and reconstruction. This, Ronnie tells us, is one of only 17 Jewish synagogues in Lebanon,



and is the only one being repaired. Religious buildings - churches, mosques, and synagogues - are not technically part of Solidère's purview, though we are obviously in the midst of the company's reconstruction project. Though these religious buildings may find themselves in the path of progress, small cool plots of the past in the midst of fevered expansion, their communities must raise their own funds if they are to be reconstructed or maintained. Lebanon's Jewish population is miniscule to begin with, and must worship clandestinely to avoid certain harassment. Given that there is, generally speaking, no love lost between Lebanese and Jewish Israelis (at least not at present), the task of rebuilding this old synagogue is a daunting one.

Ronnie points to the top of the Grand Serail, the Parliament building, and vaguely gestures to the closed-up private residence of the prime minister's palace, the windows of which are catching the quickly-fading afternoon light. Below, in the shadowy valley, we ought to feel secure, closed off as we are from the sensory assault of traffic and the noise of the rest of the city. But the sense of dis-ease is hard to shake. Some clutch their bags more tightly. All move closer together, as keen to hear Ronnie as to try to forget that the guards are still just behind us, on every side.

Ronnie recounts the story of "Liza the Jew", the "neighborhood's" sole inhabitant for several years before her death in 2009. She had been something of a minor celebrity, crashing Ronnie's tours on a regular basis, enjoying interviews with CNN. She was, or so she said, the only Jew left in Beirut. Ronnie laughs as he recounts how she would insert herself into history, telling his groups how she had kicked Ariel Sharon when he visited Lebanon. The benefit of being the area's only surviving inhabitant, of course, was that there was no one to contradict her, no one to tell the story any other way. Her narrative

has no competition. And so she became the heroine of her own myth. Still, she clearly remembered the neighborhood as it once was, before the war's currents, both spatial and political, changed the demographics of the city and eventually swept all the Jews of Beirut into hiding and with them, any claim they might have to the city.<sup>54</sup>

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We walk quickly away from the valley of shadows, feeling footsteps at our back though the guards have turned from us long ago. We reenter sunlight, movement, noise. We exhale, realizing at last how we had been holding our breath. This area, now, we know: the golden stones, the manicured streets, of Solidère's downtown.

I had never really liked downtown, preferring the coziness of Beirut's neighborhoods to the feeling of emptiness sitting at its center. So I marvel at how relieved I feel to be back in it after our brief trip behind the scenes. What have we just glimpsed at work there, in the background?<sup>55</sup>

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We weave towards the Grand Serail, and sit in a small semicircle of steps adjacent to the Roman Baths. The excavation site is small, clean, and unmarked.

Ronnie tells us about these baths. When they were discovered, their order didn't make sense: Roman ruins at two meters, Byzantine at 10 meters, and then the Phoenician ruins below that.

In 551 AD, an earthquake had so shaken the city that it had entirely flipped the

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<sup>54</sup> Jews do still reside in Beirut, and in the rest of Lebanon, though their numbers have dwindled significantly in the last two decades as animosity has continued to grow between Israel and Lebanon. Those who remain are not open with their faith, and cannot risk practicing it in public. Instead they meet in secret venues to worship together.

<sup>55</sup> During our conversation, Ronnie told me in confidence more about some of Solidère's ongoing projects, mainly located in this area, which clarified some of the uneasiness we felt in this space.

ruins, and thus the archaeological order of history.

The French came and did not dig, and the ruins remained reversed.

Then Beirut “got lucky,” says Ronnie. War came and tore down everything the French built. The city's ancient history was finally uncovered, laid bare by bombs and shells and reconstruction.

By accident, Ronnie says, history was found during rebuilding. “But we chose to rebuild Beirut rather than preserving our history.”



Figure 5 Ronnie Chatah talks about the Roman Baths, Beirut

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We sit on a small slope of stairs, our backs to the Roman ruins and the Grand Serail (*serail*, from the Turkish word for 'palace') behind them.

A group of boys sits behind us, too, lounging on the steeper steps that cut through the ruins to high terraces. They laugh and wave. "You want a tour? Hey lady! You want a tour? Bthkee 'arabī? *Do you speak Arabic?* Come here, best tour in Beirut!"

A security guard huffily walks to the bottom of the steps and tells them to be quiet. No pictures here. Put away your cell phones. They laugh.

We face the Beirut Central District's main plaza, the Place de l'Étoile 's clock tower rising up from warm stones.

Ronnie speaks of the Grand Serail's history. During World War I, he says, Beirutis stormed Ottoman palaces and burned them. The Empire was ending; its structures had to go too. The French, however, thought the Grand Serail so beautiful, that they forbade the Lebanese to touch it.

And so power changed hands and showed its contours by what was burned and what was not.

In the years after Independence, when Lebanon came out from under the French Mandate, the Lebanese recovered the Grand Serail for themselves.

No, really, Ronnie says. They literally re-covered it: they simply put a Lebanese flag on top.

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From the start, *WalkBeirut* had its difficulties. According to Ronnie, Beirut is an open book. Each neighborhood is a chapter and you can read it. But Beirut? This city's book was closed long ago. "Each neighborhood has its own history," says Ronnie, "and just as you think you've pried it open, it snaps shut." These enclaves, while serving as

safe havens for residents of a city prone to intense outbreaks of violence resulting from ideological differences and fraught histories, are physical barriers to what could be a shared memory, a subsequent forward movement.

The problem is, says Ronnie, Lebanese don't know about their past. There is no shared understanding of history; rather, arbitrary dates stand in for Lebanese history's biggest turning points. The idea of a shared past, he says, is a fringe issue because Lebanon has never been stable. There are simply too many ideas of what it means to be Lebanese, and no neutral body to mediate these identities.

To Ronnie, *WalkBeirut* is a step in the right direction, relying as it does on neutral objects to bring the city to life. "I talk about politics without being political," he says. "If you brush over politics with an historic stroke, suddenly you have a basic understanding, and that's a start."

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I catch up to two young people who raised their hands at the beginning of the tour, when Ronnie asked the Lebanese in the crowd to identify themselves. They are workmates at the posh Le Gray hotel, which sits on the edge of the BCD, hovering over the dusty space between West and East Beirut, the place that used to be known as the heart of the city. The hotel has sent them on the walk to learn about Beirut so that they will be able to talk to their customers with more authority.

She is Muslim. He is Christian. They are both 24 and are equally shocked by what, and by how much, they have learned on the walk.

"It's like a history lesson," he says.

You didn't learn this in school?

"No!" she says. "No way. We learned about Ottoman history and French history. That's it. Our families never talked about the civil war. Or they did, but not much. I had no idea that Achrafieh [East Beirut] was fighting Hamra [West Beirut]."

Why didn't they talk about it? Why didn't you learn this in school, do you suppose?

"Maybe because they don't want to repeat, because it's a bad history," he says.

"But we should know about our own history before we learn about others," she counters. "*Wallah*. We really should."<sup>56</sup>

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As we get up to walk towards the center of downtown, Ronnie tells us that Beirut is the only Middle East capital that does not have souqs (traditional markets). The first souqs were located where the Place de l'Étoile, literally the "Place of the Star," is now. Then, he says, the Lebanese tore down the remaining souqs during and after the war. On our way down to the plaza, I overhear someone ask him about Solidère. He answers carefully. Yes, he says, it is true enough that people have a problem with Solidère. Although the downtown area was apparently restored stone by stone, how it is used has dramatically changed. But Solidère is not responsible for downtown's destruction. "The Lebanese did that all by ourselves," he says.

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<sup>56</sup> Drawing on Lefebvre and de Certeau, Gardiner (2000) demonstrates that the everyday is full of "redemptive moments that point towards transfigured and liberated social existence... [possessing] transgressive, sensual and incandescent qualities (Gardiner 2000, 498; qtd. in Edensor 2001, 62). I was struck during this exchange by how both these participants had been so moved by Ronnie's narrative, and their walk through the city. Their surprise, verging on shock, was palpable, legible on their faces as we talked. Something had been broken open as we passed through the city. Perhaps we had not only cut through spatial lines, but transgressed narrative boundaries as well. A practice as (literally) pedestrian as a walk, and listening to Ronnie's stories, brought them into the space of the city in a way that was apparently novel, but yet which allowed them to feel so much a part of it that they spoke of "our city," "our history."



Figure 6 Place de l'Etoile, Beirut

I recall a conversation with a friend regarding the souqs. She recounted to me how her mother, returning to Beirut once the war had ended, encountered the new "Beirut Souqs," the huge shopping mall across from the Place de l'Étoile. She was shocked to see none of the old places still existed. But she was downright heartbroken to note how different the space *felt*. Gone were the old vegetable stands, the small tents where local merchants sold cloth and domestic trinkets. And gone were the places where she would meet friends, where people of all identities would mingle, finding common ground at least in the marketplace and the weekly ritual of walking between the small shops belonging to shopkeepers known and trusted by their families.

Today, policed itineraries take the place of such free and familiar movements, such routine yet intimate moments. Soldiers stand outside their posts by short metal

gates through which one must pass in order to gain entry to this central space. These entryways are the stints that keep traffic moving through the avenues, but only certain types of traffic. The soldiers avail themselves of the right to search your bag at any time. Those who have passed muster at the barricades sip coffee and smoke *narghileh* on small terraces, shaded from the sun by bright umbrellas while their children run through the square, chased after by their nannies.

During the half-hour break at Place de l'Étoile, I sit on a metal pylon and sip a soda bought at a little toyshop tucked around the corner from the St. Georges church.<sup>57</sup> I am down the street from the square's giant Rolex, away from the urban nursery and its noise. Ronnie sees me and comes over to talk, coffee in hand. He asks about my work, I ask him about his. He smiles at me, shakes his head.

You have to stop coming to Beirut, Erin.

Why?

Loving Beirut is like loving your abuser

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We walk into the gloaming nightfall, the lampposts of downtown burning like old

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<sup>57</sup> This break served as a respite from our walking, and also as a chance to experience another facet of the "second gaze." Indeed, as MacCannell (2001) points out, the second gaze can also function as a *process of learning*. Unscripted moments, in which the tourist is confronted with the city's subtleties - for example, here, how soldiers carefully monitor a space where people sit leisurely in cafés and children make playful use of a public square - can be moments of experiential education. In this case, though our break meant going off-script for a bit, Ronnie's selection of this particular area was a wise one. Not only does the space permit picture-taking, so that we were unlikely to offend any cultural norms, but the very touristy characteristics of the space - the overpriced food and drink, the fashionable clientele, the tourist kitsch on offer - stood in stark contrast to how the space was policed. The playful energy of the Place de l'étoile, framed on either side by where we had been and where we were going, felt abstracted somehow from the rest of the city and its stories. The difference was difficult to miss.



gaslights, giving the area an even hazier, more romantic atmosphere.

The city looks beautiful in this light, I think. It's hard not to feel in love.

The photographer has walked ahead to scout out our next two sites. There is a protest happening in Samir Kassir Square, which is meant to be our final destination. People are waving large Syrian flags. A man is trying to sufficiently amplify his voice over the evening traffic through a small bullhorn. Waiters from some of the upscale restaurants and pubs behind the square have come out to watch. Sunday is usually a slow night for them, anyway.

Perhaps the protest will be over by the time we're finished at our second-to-last stop, Ronnie says.

We are headed to Martyrs' Square.

We cross from shiny downtown Beirut to the long rectangle of dirt and parking spaces where the square sits, its infamous statue visible from all the surrounding avenues. The area that surrounds the square - north, south, east, and west - is dusty, a sort of urban desert. It is easy to avoid being in this spot. Hardly anyone walks through it. Ringed by streets, the square hosts an endless procession of *servees*; one can hire a car and drive all the way round it without any problem. As we cross its threshold, we watch out for headlights swinging around its perimeter in the falling night, cars honking at each other. The place is only lit by the permanent glow of the nearby Le Gray hotel, the Virgin Megastore, and the spotlights outside of Hariri's tomb where he lays with the martyrs from his motorcade.

But despite the darkness that falls on it, the square remains a quintessential landmark in Beirut, the most recognizable figure of the Green Line, which once separated

the two halves of the city.

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I find myself walking next to a handsome Lebanese couple, and by way of conversation, as we pick our way through the dark, watching our step for refuse and stones, I ask them about the tour.

They are in their early 50s, and both grew up in Achrafieh, in East Beirut. The neutrality of the tour, the man says, is commendable. His wife asks him in French what we are talking about. He tells her.

Yes, she says, it is commendable. But it seems Ronnie only has spotty knowledge of the actual events. If he is not going to tell the whole story, it might have been better to do something else. It would have been more interesting to tour an old traditional family home in central Beirut, for example.

Were you both living in Beirut through the war? I ask.

Why are you writing about this? the man asks.

I explain I am curious. I have family who lived through it. They don't like to talk about it very much.

He pauses.

Yes, we lived through it. This is nothing new for us. It's not that we *remember* these things. We don't have to. It's something we live with. It never left.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Tourists do not only rely on physical senses (whether visual or otherwise). As Bagnall (2003) shows, tourists *emotionally* experience heritage and urban space. Carrying their life histories with them, they engage their individual and social memories to make sense of the sites and people they encounter. As such, their own emotions and memories add yet another layer to the "landscapes of memory." They are thus both reading and writing the space according to the stories by which they make sense of their own lives. We might imagine that for this couple, who were young people during the war, Ronnie's practiced neutrality might prove frustrating. Though



Figure 7 Martyrs' Square, Beirut

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We have filed into the small square and availed ourselves of the deep concrete benches skirting each white wall. The square feels quiet. Though we are on a median in the midst of Beirut's traffic, the car horns and screeching tires are muffled here. The guard post is empty. Ronnie barely needs to raise his voice to tell the square's story.

When Beirutis demonstrate, says Ronnie, they come to Martyrs' Square and reclaim their history.

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they have grown up and the city has changed, like their lives the city is marked indelibly by the war. It is several cities at once, made up of their everyday routes, and layered with stories they have no doubt heard from family and friends in their community. These stories must shape their reading and writing of it, their longing to hear the echoes of communal lore in an official tourist script, to see familiar structures and places tied to the city's history.

It once housed the gardens of the Petite Serail, but became a site of protest during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. On May 16, 1916, the people called for the Ottomans to free all the prisoners they had taken. The Ottomans agreed, on the condition that they could escort the prisoners from their cells to the city.

Once the prisoners had arrived in the gardens, they were hanged one by one in front of Beirutis, to punish both the prisoners and locals for their role in the uprising. The bodies were left hanging for three days.

Under the French Mandate, which followed World War I, the Lebanese desired only one thing: to call this part of the city Martyrs' Square. The French denied the request, says Ronnie, because they did not want the name to inspire any political demonstrations. Besides denying the Lebanese sovereignty over their city spaces and shared memory, the French also imprisoned those who called for independence, including Riad al-Sulh, a champion of Arab nationalism, and Bishara al-Khuri, who spurned both France and Arab nationalism.

Ronnie spins a neat, if unbelievable story, about al-Sulh and al-Khuri: as punishment for their disobedience, they were not only imprisoned, but imprisoned together in the same cell. They (somewhat miraculously) found common ground in jail, and agreed to many items that would eventually be included in the Lebanese National Pact.<sup>59</sup> After their release, on November 22, 1943, they announced Lebanon's independence from the French, and were greeted by throngs of jubilant Lebanese on their return to Martyrs' Square. This day would become Lebanon's official Independence

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<sup>59</sup> The National Pact was conceived in 1943 at the beginning of Lebanon's independence. Though it was unwritten, never recorded, the tenets of the pact influenced Lebanon in subsequent years. For more, please see this dissertation's introduction.

Day. In Ronnie's story, one of the first things al-Sulh and al-Khuri did was to install its famous statue. Its top two figures – a woman cast in bronze, hoisting high a torch, and a young man wearing a loincloth – represent Liberty and the Nation. Its bottom two figures – young men wounded and struggling to rise from the ground – presumably represented the prisoners hanged by the Ottomans in 1916.<sup>60</sup>

Ronnie points to other markers around the square, detailing their pasts, their seemingly magical transformations from cultural centers to the ruins of war and capitalism. The Virgin Megastore? That was once the opera house, he says. And the egg-shaped shell of a building at the far end, the one that has so obviously been bombed and never rehabilitated? That was the state of the art cinema house that got Beirut into the Guinness Book of World Records in 1970 under the category "Most Movie Seats."

As he speaks, Ronnie walks around with photographs of the people he talks about, and the place itself, illuminating black and white and sepia tones under a tiny flashlight. There are al-Sulh and al-Khuri, jovial, laughing together. And there are the martyrs' bodies hanging, attended by men in dark mustaches and white pantaloons. Here is the square as it once was, before the war: lush palm trees lining its perimeter, shiny cars parked all round it, people strolling in and out of its central gardens.

Ronnie continues: the mosque, of course, with its iconic turquoise dome, was

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<sup>60</sup> In truth, the statue did not appear until several years later. Italian sculptor Marino Mazzacurati was commissioned by the Lebanese government to craft this sculpture out of bronze after the 1958 civil war. It was unveiled in 1960, 17 years after Lebanon's independence. Ronnie's vignette, however, is a charming take on a new nation whose two main leaders (al-Sulh the Prime Minister, and al-Khuri the President) were trying in earnest to forge a new nation despite the communal pull to privilege Arabism or Lebanism, respectively. For more on the history of the square, including its memorial statues, see the chapter "Sculpting Independence: Competing Ceremonies and Mutilated Faces (1915-1957)" in Lucia Volk's *Memorials and Martyrs in Lebanon* (2010).

built by Rafiq al-Hariri, though it was not finished until 2008, three years after his death. Now he rests beside it, next to the other men who lost their lives when he was assassinated on February 14, 2005.

After his death, people gathered at Martyrs Square. It has always, in the history of modern Lebanon, been the site of demonstrations, and the unofficial center of Lebanese politics.

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In the context of the current civil war in Syria, Ronnie notes, things are getting bad once again. Though minorities are what he says "made Lebanon special," now they are causing its collapse as various identities and vulnerable communities are committing themselves to outside causes, or asking for outside support. Such commitments have long fractured the country, the stories it tells about itself, as well as its spaces.

Still, Ronnie is not convinced that the Lebanese should confront the details of their history, per se. "I think if the Lebanese were forced to confront their history, they'd kill each other even more," he says. For Ronnie, the goal for *WalkBeirut* is not to make a value judgment on the past, but rather to make its basics legible in the present. Beirut, he says, is a book that deserves to be read.

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Ronnie stands before a large statue of the late journalist, Samir Kassir. Kassir is posed in a relaxed manner, one foot atop a knee, leaning forwards as though in conversation, on a wall behind a shimmering infinity pool. The trees overhead catch the light from the cafés on the other side of the square. The protesters have moved on. We are here alone, but for the Hawk Security guard, ubiquitous in this part of the city, who

watches us from a few feet away.

We've reached it, Ronnie says. The last stop of our walk.

Kassir was a journalist with *An-Nahr*, he explains, one of Lebanon's major newspapers, the offices of which sit adjacent to this square. He was dismayed by how the Lebanese were destroying their own history in the postwar period. But no one was listening to his newspaper missives, and so he took to the streets with his students, encouraging them to walk Beirut with him. He challenged the Lebanese to stop being so divided between ruin and prosperity. And he exhorted them, after Hariri's assassination, to return to the street in a quote that is now inconspicuously carved into the stone benches along his square.

Ronnie asks for a volunteer to translate this quote from the Arabic, and another from the French. A Lebanese woman raises her hand to translate the Arabic. She stands beside him, and reads. He asks her to read again, as loud as she can: *Return to the streets, comrades, and return to your clarity.*

The night seems to stand still.

Is this not what the walk has done?

Ronnie pauses, and then tells us that he knew Kassir. He was a great teacher and public intellectual, whose focus on history, in many ways, cost him his life. And yet, says Ronnie, "I think we have walked Beirut's streets today the way he would have wanted us to."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> De Certeau notes how the "long poem of walking" manipulates spatial organizations, creating "shadows and ambiguities within them" (de Certeau 1988, 101). Its transgressions and surprises, resulting from the confrontation of the hegemonic with the deeply personal, compose a rhetoric that disrupts the spatial discourses of power (Ibid). In Kassir's injunction, then, clarity is not what one would expect, what de Certeau calls the "usual choice" (Ibid). It is not to simply follow

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Ronnie sits beneath the orange lights of the city center next to his photographer. People are shaking his hand, thanking him, exchanging contact information with him and with each other.

He looks tired

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The week after the walk, I visit the Facebook page Ronnie has set up for the tour, called *BeBeirut*. I request membership to the closed group and, after a day or so, am given permission. There are several photos of the tour, and I locate myself amongst the crowd. But there's more: the page hosts the albums of numerous walks, dating back to October 2011.

Beneath the albums, and the photos themselves, people comment about their specific tour, praising Ronnie for his skill as a guide and recounting how much they learned over the four hours they spent with him. They have small conversations with each other and with Ronnie, who rarely fails to respond to their comments.<sup>62</sup>

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the usual routes, which lead to a void, the city's "nowhen," a spatiotemporality that "reproduces the opacities of history everywhere" (Ibid, 94). It is rather the result of venturing down the road less taken, through the city as through history. It is a call to observe and dissent, to read closely for fault lines, and to walk them, discovering what they hide and what they will most certainly reveal.

<sup>62</sup> How these images are archived is worth describing. In addition to the photos found on the *WalkBeirut* Facebook page, all taken by his photographers, Ronnie set up a hashtag on Instagram so that walkers could easily compile and find photos of the walk, and of Beirut. As Crang (1997) notes, images like these are tourist technologies that not only curate past experience, but also are instrumental to "making worlds," a process that tourists carry on into the future. That is, photographs capture tourists' practice and experience, both archiving what they did and also contributing to a discourse about the places and people they encountered. In this case, perhaps, these photographs serve as part of the foundation for a discourse that disrupts the frequent framing of Beirut and other cities in the MENA region as dangerous and war-torn on the one hand, or a recovering tourist paradise on the other. To be sure, the allure of this dichotomy has



Most of these respondents are Europeans or other foreigners. Many note that they were given access to a slice of the city they never would have known had they not taken the walk. Many cite the difference between news stories and photos of Beirut and what they experienced on the walk. Others, who have moved to Beirut, thank Ronnie for helping their visitors get to know the city in which they live. And there are, of course, comments by locals.

One woman writes: Thx Rony, for giving me this GR88888888888888888888 opportunity to discover my everyday surrounding!

And a young man writes: Thanks Ronnie for the amazing tour. There's a lot I learned about my own country. See you next summer!

Sometimes Ronnie writes status updates to keep people abreast of the mercurial situation in Beirut. In August 2013, as the civil war in Syria began to sweep Lebanon up in its grasp in more and more apparent ways, Ronnie wrote that he was not sure how much longer the tour could continue. He had begun, he wrote, another archive of images from the tour, which would be hosted on Instagram, quite apart from the tour's Facebook group, and these pictures would cover all four and a half years of the tour. Numerous people responded, encouraging Ronnie to "keep walking."

And so he did, until the end of December 2013.

On January 2, 2014, he posted this missive:

*A personal thank you, for everyone who joined and made WalkBeirut possible*

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generated numerous stories about Beirut in global media, but these accounts are rarely nuanced, and instead contribute to a sensationalized image of the city. Though the *WalkBeirut* photographs only show a fraction of Beirut, they at least do not resort to tired discursive clichés about the city, a fact that seems especially important in light of current geopolitical shifts, violences, and suspicions.

*over the past five years. A memory I always cherished from the tour was the day my father, Mohamad Chatah, joined. It was 17 April 2011, and he decided to see what the fuss was about. That evening, he gave me a ring and said he was proud of what he'd accomplished. I laughed and told him the WalkBeirut idea was one of the few ideas I came up with on my own...he corrected me, and said he meant me being his son. He's in the photo below, 3rd from left. The tour is over for now. My father's life was taken last Friday. Like too many Lebanese before him, he was killed for wanting a decent and stable Lebanon, free from the ills that have plagued this country for decades. He is now buried where the photo was taken, in Martyr's Square. In my small and limited capacity, by bringing Beirut's history to life through storytelling, I hope I helped my father contribute to Lebanon's narrative and Beirut's memory. Be it prosperity. Be it tragedy. Ronnie Chatah <sup>63</sup>*

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<sup>63</sup> In many ways, Ronnie himself is the ultimate walker, the *makari* who crosses not only spatial, but also ideological terrain, bridging seemingly incongruous people and spaces (Khalaf). But perhaps the *makari*, the itinerant merchant, does not only work for others, but also for himself, seeking the answers to his questions and trying to make connections. Playing on the attributes of many countries, local sites, practices, and stories, Ronnie did not just walk Beirut, but stitched together an understanding of his city by considering the fault lines running through the fabric of his own life. Perhaps *WalkBeirut* was his way of tying himself and his story to the city he both loved and admitted to hating.

After his father's death, he canceled *WalkBeirut* for the foreseeable future, and cut ties to many of his connections in Beirut and abroad. One of my roommates, a close mutual friend of Ronnie's, has not heard from him in nearly a year and a half, and has no idea where he is. Perhaps the fault line opened up by his father's death was one chasm that was too deep to cross.

However, in recent months, the *WalkBeirut* site has shown some signs of life: small updates here and there may be evidence that Ronnie may yet return to his country and his city.

## **Chapter 2. Badna Na'ref (We Want to Know): Unearthing the Public Secret of Lebanon's Missing and Disappeared**

On August 30, 2014, the International Day for the Disappeared, Lebanese NGO ACT for the Disappeared released a documentary called *Neither Dead, nor Alive* (La 'aishīn wa la miyyitīn) on both YouTube and their Facebook page. The result of an oral history project conducted in cooperation with five universities in or around Beirut, the film recounts the story of the Lebanese civil war's 17,000 missing and disappeared. These people, the film tells us, came from every community. Though some have returned home, or their remains been recovered, the fate of the remainder is still, as one section of the film is entitled, "*a public secret*" (sarra 'alniyye).

In this section on the public secret, the narrator suggests that although the tragedy of the missing and disappeared is a national tragedy, in everyday life, it is as though they never existed at all, as though nothing happened to them. A series of brief interviews between the project's student participants and their schoolmates confirms this: each time one of these young people is asked if they know about the 17,000 people who disappeared during the war, they answer with a firm "La" (*no*). No one ever told them the story of Lebanon's missing. They did not learn about it in school, nor from their families. One participant, who also speaks on camera as an interviewee, recalls how she never knew that one of her uncles had been disappeared during the war. After beginning work on the project, she broached the subject with her mother, who instructed her to stop asking questions about the kidnapping. Bringing up the past, her mother said, would only bring more grief to the family, and trying to fight against the silence would be futile. It

was simply not her problem to solve.

The film also points a finger at the Lebanese state, which, it claims, has consummately refused to come clean on the issue of the missing and disappeared. Although the state ostensibly possesses pertinent records, its occasional reports repeat the same basic information as they have done since the end of the war, leaving the public without any clear sense of what happened to the disappeared, or why the state refuses to release the information. This withholding also takes real shape in the space of the city. Wadad Halwani, who in 1982 formed the Committee of Families of Persons Missing or Disappeared, appears in the film, and describes the experience of going about everyday life while knowing the remains of perhaps thousands of people lay under your feet:

Can you imagine that wherever we walk around [we are] stepping on graves and bones? People we know, relatives we loved? We park cars on them! We make buildings on them! We go to university, to school, to work!

The film suggests that the issue of Lebanon's missing and disappeared extends into legal, spatial and corporeal dimensions, as the state buries the past both discursively and physically, within the space of the city. In this chapter, I suggest that challenging these sorts of disappearances requires specific kinds of political tactics, which include looking for support beyond the legal apparatus of the state, and moving through the city as a way of making visible what has been lost.

### **Between Reparations and Refusals: Lebanon in Context and Comparison**

The Lebanese civil war, which lasted from 1975-1990, was actually a series of wars that took place throughout the country, but were largely situated in Beirut. In addition to its estimated 120,000 fatalities, this decade and a half precipitated the

movement of people: over a million migrated; 76,000 remain displaced; and at least 17,000 disappeared. The circumstances around this last number have proved especially vexing. In 1992, based on sworn testimony by families, the Lebanese government declared that 17,415 people went missing during the war. However, in the more than 20 years that have passed since the “end” of the war, very little has surfaced about the fate of the “17,000 missing.”

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, a missing person is a person whose whereabouts are unknown to his/her relatives and/or who, on the basis of reliable information, has been reported missing in accordance with the national legislation in connection with an international or non-international armed conflict, a situation of internal violence or disturbances, natural catastrophes or any other situation that may require the intervention of a competent State authority.<sup>64</sup>

This broad definition includes victims of mass killings and abductions, people kidnapped during conflict, fighters missing in action, and individuals whose bodies were never identified or were buried before they could be. It also includes victims of “enforced or involuntary disappearance,” which was defined by the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance as

The arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support, or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, “Guiding Principles/Model Law on the Missing: Principles for Legislating the Situation of Persons Missing as a Result of Armed Conflict or Internal Violence: measures to prevent persons from going missing and to protect the rights and interests of the missing and their families,” Art. 2(a).

<sup>65</sup> International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2006, Art. 2.

<sup>66</sup> In most similar contexts, enforced disappearance constitutes a tactic used by the state and associated bodies as a method to subdue the public and destroy political opposition or

Certainly the use of enforced disappearance as a terror tactic during wartime is not unique to Lebanon. Frequently cited examples include, among others, Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Nepal, and Peru. In their respective post-conflict or post-authoritarian moments, many of these countries worked to both account for the lives lost as a result of enforced disappearance, and/or to provide support for surviving family members.

Much of this support comes in the form of granting surviving family members access to certain services. Family members of the disappeared in many Latin American countries, for example, qualify to receive educational and housing benefits, medical and psychological support, and exemption from military service (Dewhirst and Kapur, 2015). In other cases, relatives received reparations in the form of payments or pensions. Surviving relatives in places like Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were also frequently granted access to the disappeared individual's bank accounts and other property, as an offshoot of the state's conferring special legal status to the disappeared person. Even if the individual is eventually declared dead, this status continues, as do its benefits for survivors. These benefits are especially important when the disappeared person, as is often the case, was a family's primary breadwinner.

Survivors in Lebanon are privy to no such support. The state, as we shall see, does not recognize the missing as having any actionable legal status (they are instead

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competition. In Lebanon, however, all parties involved in the civil war committed kidnappings. Because there is no way to know how many of these missing people were forcibly disappeared, this chapter uses the terms "missing" and "disappeared" interchangeably to describe those who went missing during the war because they were kidnapped, or whose bodies were not recovered after a massacre.

considered “absentee” individuals). Further, the confessional system through which people access their rights, is highly patriarchal. As a result, although survivors may receive some help from their ethnoreligious communities, more often than not, they encounter myriad difficulties in the aftermath of a disappearance. These include questions of property, such as accessing bank accounts and transferring property. Other difficulties include far more sensitive issues, like questions of custody rights and obtaining legal and identity documents for children.<sup>67</sup> Survivors are also vulnerable to predatory intermediaries, who since the civil war have preyed upon desperate family members, demanding heavy fees for conducting searches that rarely produced missing relatives.

The recognition that survivors in Lebanon desire resonates at a far more basic level, as well. In other countries with a legacy of enforced disappearance, post-conflict legislation has recognized family members of the disappeared not only as heirs or beneficiaries, but also *as victims*.<sup>68</sup> The public acknowledgment of pain and loss, so crucial to healing and survivors’ dignity, was never allowed to the families of Lebanon’s disappeared. They live instead in what many of my interlocutors called a “culture of impunity,” a culture of institutionalized silence, wherein to speak of the war, to make

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<sup>67</sup> Because of the patriarchal nature of Lebanese governance, women are often not considered primary legal guardians of their children, leaving custody questions to the father’s family in cases of disappearance or death. This problem doubles for Lebanese women who married non-Lebanese men, as in Lebanon, citizenship is passed down through the father. To acquire official documents pertaining to their children’s identities (passports, for example) these mothers must often negotiate multiple levels of bureaucracy in both Lebanon and the regional offices (embassies, consulates) of their husbands’ countries.

<sup>68</sup> This is true of Peru, Guatemala, and South Africa. Unfortunately, in South Africa’s subsequent reparations legislation, relatives were relegated to “secondary” status, and only granted benefits if the disappeared person had died. (Goldblatt 2007, 62-63)

visible the invisible legacy of the disappeared, is to rattle the gates of the highest echelons of power.

**(Dis)Appearances: Logics of the Public Secret in Beirut**

“Public secret,” the term used by ACT for the *Disappeared* in its film, seems a fitting term to describe issue of Lebanon’s missing. Michael Taussig (1999) defines the public secret as “that which is generally known but cannot generally be articulated” (Taussig 1999, 5). Shrouded in official silence, what Taussig calls an “epistemic murk,” the public secret’s magnificent deceit involves employing an “active not-knowing” or “knowing what not to know” (Ibid 6).

Public secrecy around the issue of the missing and disappeared has real repercussions in Lebanon, producing a web of silence that impacts both family (as indicated by the experience of the film participant in this chapter’s introduction) and intercommunal communication. Families whose loved ones remain missing are often reticent about the issue, unwilling to discuss it with their younger family members. The public secret of the missing and disappeared also offers a critical nexus through which to explore how amnesiac institutional processes foreclose the civil war’s larger common trauma and shared memory. Boundaries have been drawn around what can and cannot be said and shared by the state, between generations, and between communities. The examples from the film show that the public secret is not just discursive but also, because the remains of the missing ostensibly exist in public space, it is spatial. More than that, with the burial of bodies, it is corporeal, as the missing lay buried under the surface of the city, the knowledge of their fate buried with them.



What sorts of political practices might address this tripartite burial? What sort of political action does a multiply-obscured disappearance necessitate? How can the public address the public secret when it has been so carefully shrouded?

Perhaps the first question might be, how does this public secret get operationalized in the first place? In other words, how does one *come to know what not to know*?

In her discussion of the optics of suspicion and witnessing in Argentina's Dirty War, Diana Taylor (1997) considers how people are trained to overlook violence during wartime, a communal self-blinding she calls "percepticide." People learn to look away rather than witness the violence in front of them, cultivating a blindness that protects them from being categorized as dissenters, but which also isolates them from others who have shared similar trauma. Certainly the case of Argentina during the Dirty War differs considerably from the Lebanese context. However, in both examples people have been compelled to look away. In Argentina, people had to watch constantly where they looked to avoid being accused of anti-military sentiments. In Lebanon the state demanded, *ex post facto*, that the Lebanese simply *stop looking* - for people, for answers, for justice - through a series of amnesty laws and largely ineffective commissions devoted to the issue of the missing and disappeared.

Shortly after the civil war's end, the Lebanese government discursively codified the "postwar" imperative of "No Victor, No Vanquished" (*la ghalib la maghlub*) in a

series of amnesty laws.<sup>69</sup> Amnesty laws are, of course, intended as a means to forward movement, especially in the “postwar” context. By wiping the slate clean, such laws ostensibly offer the opportunity to “forgive and forget,” both to violators and the society to which they belong. The word “amnesty,” after all, shares its etymological roots with “amnesia.” And yet, this “way forward” was not experienced equally by all Lebanese. The implications of postwar legislation absolved certain people of their crimes, while leaving others to deal with the emotional and cultural fallout from that absolution.

Lebanon’s Amnesty Law 84/91, issued on August 26, 1991, declared general amnesty for all political crimes committed during the civil war. Some wartime offenses remained punishable; however, none of these included crimes against ordinary citizens. Instead, the list of punishable crimes appears limited to transgressions against what amount to abstractions and figureheads: the state security apparatus, religious leaders, and relics.<sup>70</sup> The crimes exonerated under this brief but far-reaching law, include violence against individuals, such as murder (as long as politically and not personally motivated), as well as other violations necessary to the completion of, or which resulted from, such crimes. Presumably these secondary violations would include forcefully disappearing people as a prelude to their murders.

In 2000, a full 10 years after the war’s end, the Official Commission of Investigation into the Fate of the Abducted and Disappeared Persons formed to begin inquiries into the cases of Lebanon’s missing and disappeared. Consisting entirely of

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<sup>69</sup> Lebanon has a history of such laws dating back to the years before the civil war. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the government signed several minor provisions into law to exonerate individuals from a range of offenses, including slander in the press and traffic violations.

<sup>70</sup> A special thank you to Ibrahim Saleh, who helped to translate the Arabic text of this law, and whose genuine surprise at its contents added fuel to the fire of this chapter.

members of Lebanese security forces, the Commission asked families to submit information at their nearest police stations. Precisely *how* the Commission carried out its work was never revealed to the public, and though it released a report at the end of its tenure, this two-page document did not include any information about perpetrators or details about the disappearances. It simply acknowledged 2,046 “missing” cases, and claimed that the individuals named therein had all died. It advised families, moreover, to officially declare their missing relatives deceased. The commission stated that were families to choose this option, which had been included in an earlier law (Law 434 of May 1995), they could expect legal help to deal with their reports, which would eventually lead to the closure of their cases.<sup>71</sup> However, the state provided no evidence to the families that their “missing” relatives were in fact dead. Closure, then, would have been strictly legal, rather than personal.<sup>7273</sup>

The 2000 Commission’s report also included information about three supposed

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<sup>71</sup> Law 434/95 was passed in 1995. Its objectives included reducing the time between a disappearance and a court-approved declaration of death. Speeding up this process, of course, is in the state’s interest, as it means closing cases, and shutting down families’ inquiries into the fate of their relatives.

<sup>72</sup> Other, similar investigations followed. In 2001, a seemingly more autonomous commission formed. It delimited its goal, however, to investigating cases in which the individuals reported might still be alive, a status presumably assigned by the commission itself. Though its caseload numbered around 900 and it worked for the better part of two years, it never produced a report. In 2005, an official joint Lebanese-Syrian committee took up the cases of Lebanese people reported to be missing in Syria. It held numerous meetings (over 30 took place between 2005 and 2011), but whatever information it has uncovered remains within a closed circuit, unavailable to the public.

<sup>73</sup> Other parties involved in the civil war, including the Israeli state and Syria, continue to obscure information that might be useful to families of the missing and disappeared, especially in relation to abductions and murders committed by their own forces. The international community also bears responsibility for the delay of justice. For though it has continued to investigate the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who was killed in February 2005 - even setting up the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which continues its work inside and outside the country, it has not offered its support to the families who continue to languish in the terrible purgatory of not knowing.

mass gravesites in Beirut where bodies were dumped during the war. The report disclosed no more, however, than the graves' locations, in a park (Horsh Beirut) and two graveyards (the Beirut War Cemetery and Mar Mitr Cemetery) in very different areas of the city. It did not promise to exhume the remains. It made no statement about officially marking or maintaining the gravesites, nor about memorializing those who lay within them. Other mass graves have been excavated, of course, and the remains of the deceased returned to their families for proper burial. One major find, near the Ministry of Defence in Yarze, just southeast of Beirut, yielded several bodies of Lebanese soldiers, and a few civilians. DNA testing confirmed their identities. Another grave revealed the bodies of a French researcher and a British journalist/activist. Pressure from their respective governments led to the exhumation and the consequent return of their remains. And yet, what may be the largest graves of all – those located right in the country's beating heart – continue to secret away evidence of what may be thousands of bodies. The injunction to not look, then, bore a real spatial dimension. Rather than operating at the level of abstraction, admonishing the Lebanese to deny knowledge and their right to it, the Lebanese state made it very clear that though evidence of the missing people's demise existed out in the world, the Lebanese would never be allowed access to that knowledge, inscribed on the bodies of their loved ones, and buried in the space of the city. Thus the state perpetuated a triple foreclosure constituted not only in discourse and space, but also corporeally, reproducing its animating logics of amnesia and silence on the bodies of the dead.

Interestingly, the state's denials bear out its operational logics in another way. The state has long claimed that its decision to leave the dead buried in their graves was

for the benefit and protection of the Lebanese public. Given Lebanon's long history of intercommunal strife, the possibility loomed that, should the uncovered remains be unequal in any way – more Muslim remains than Christian, or vice versa – violence might break out once again. Of course, many members of the Lebanese government came to power precisely during the country's most divisive conflict, making names for themselves as militia leaders.<sup>74</sup> In the “postwar” era they have thrived, maintaining their positions of power, through the continued division of the Lebanese public along communal lines. It is also in their interest to obscure the evidence inscribed on the bodies of the missing: many of these people were likely abducted and later killed under their authority. Any systematic investigation of the missing and disappeared would likely bring them or their family members to justice.

Indeed, the Lebanese state's refusal to disclose information about the missing and disappeared stands in clear violation of international human rights codes. Article 24 of the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance sets forth family members' *right to know* the fate of their disappeared relatives. Moreover, in the absence of the ultimate victims of wartime violence – the missing and disappeared, the Convention establishes surviving family members as *victims in their own right* by emphasizing “the right of any victim to know the truth about the circumstances of an enforced disappearance and the fate of the disappeared person,

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<sup>74</sup> Examples include, among others, Elie Hobeika (Lebanese Phalangist and Lebanese Forces commander during the civil war; played a major role in the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre; Waad Party); Nabih Berri (head of the Shia Amal movement); and Walid Jumblatt (Progressive Socialist Party).

and the right to freedom to seek, receive and impart information to this end.”<sup>75</sup> Taking the place of their disappeared family members, who have been denied justice and indeed life, survivors retain the right not only to truth and justice, but also to remedy, including, in part, reparation, which “covers material and moral damages and, where appropriate, other forms of reparation such as: (a) restitution; (b) rehabilitation; (c) satisfaction, including restoration of dignity and reputation; (d) guarantees of non-repetition.”<sup>76</sup> As of summer 2015, Lebanon had signed the 2006 convention, but has not ratified it.

While combatants and militia leaders were institutionally, legally forgiven for their roles in a host of war crimes, allowed to move forward with their lives, the same set of laws and the subsequent ineffective commissions relinquished Lebanese who survived the war to an in-between state, *a stasis*, in which they were simultaneously denied transparency about these crimes and expected to enact forgiveness at its fullest, which is to say they were expected to simply forget that which they could not fully know. These laws and reports effectively asked Lebanese people not only to disavow their knowledge about what had, or might have, happened, but also to *not go looking* for their loved ones, to simply accept life as it is, even when, for many families, life seems to have stopped the day their brother, father, sister, mother disappeared.

### **Looking Outward: NGO Work in Lebanon**

In the years following the civil war, as previously mentioned in this dissertation’s introduction, people have grappled with the memory of the conflict and its competing

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<sup>75</sup> International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2006, Article 24.

<sup>76</sup> International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2006, Article 24 (4-5), ctd. in Yakinthou 2015, 4.

narratives. These efforts have ranged from cultural artifacts and performances – plays, films, photography – that address individual and shared memories of the war, often as a way to raise awareness about how the conflict persists in contemporary Lebanon; to more formal organizations that deal with particular aspects of the conflicts, and their legacies. Many of these organizations focus specifically on the loss of loved ones, especially as regards the withholding of information by the Lebanese state and foreign entities. Some were founded and took shape during or just after the war, as is the case with the Committee for the Families of the Missing and Kidnapped in Lebanon (1982) and SOLIDE (Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile, 1990). More recent organizations include ACT for the Disappeared (2010) and, to a certain extent, UMAM (2005).<sup>77</sup>

While it is not within the scope of this chapter to explore the operational intricacies of each of these organizations, it is worth noting that while the earlier efforts are in the main funded by Lebanese organizations and civil society clubs, the groups founded later, after the era of Syrian occupation, are often more visibly active, and enjoy financial support from international organizations and foreign governments.<sup>78</sup> ACT, for

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<sup>77</sup> SOLIDE has largely focused on Lebanese detained in Syria. Visit [solidelb.org](http://solidelb.org) for more information. UMAM Documentation and Research focuses on archiving Lebanon's past, including literature and artifacts related to the civil war. These items include newspapers, photographs, fighters' accounts, and militia propaganda. This is a work in progress, as several staff members told me during my visits to UMAM's headquarters. For now, part of the staff is at work cataloguing and organizing the materials. Many of these materials are available for perusal, if one can only make it to UMAM's headquarters in Haret Hreik, a neighborhood in Beirut's southern suburbs, and gain permission to view the materials. Visit [umam-dr.org](http://umam-dr.org) for more information.

<sup>78</sup> The Syrian occupation of Lebanon lasted from 1976-2005. Syria was heavily involved in the Lebanese Civil War, and in 1991 the two countries signed a treaty of "Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination," which effectively legitimized Syria's presence in the country. Syria was suspected of involvement in former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination in 2005, and the consequent wave of protest eventually resulted in Syria's ouster from Lebanon, under UN Resolution 1559.

example, lists the embassies of Norway and the Netherlands as donors on their website, along with regional donors like Foundation for the Future, and foreign organizations such as Washington, DC-based National Endowment for Democracy. UMAM's donors include the Canadian International Development Agency, the Embassy of the Netherlands, and the Germany-based Goethe-Institut and Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Asef Bayat (2002) locates the beginnings of this trend across the Middle East in the 1980s and 1990s, when the concurrent emergence of particular political-economic developments (mainly free market economies and lackluster government oversight of social issues) and the globalization of human rights discourses (Bayat 2002). Although the NGO boom in the MENA region has had varied results, in the cases of countries like Lebanon and Palestine, he notes, where a state was absent, defunct, or in protracted crisis, NGOs have provided relief and done important work in social development, where social development includes not only the fulfillment of basic needs, but also a focus on social and economic rights (Bayat 2002, 17).

With regard to the issue of the missing and disappeared in Lebanon, several of the NGOs work together to pursue justice for the families of the missing. However, their approaches sometimes vary. Some continue to advocate for punitive justice. Ghazi Aad, founder of SOLIDE, claims that groups working on the issue of the missing and disappeared ought to seek punitive justice for crimes rendered against victims. Such punitive justice, he says, is a real possibility. During an interview, he explained to me that the 1991 amnesty law appears to have a loophole: while the law provides protection from prosecution for a variety of crimes, the one thing that works against criminals who forcibly disappeared people is time. Article G of Law 84/91 states this quite clearly:



The crimes that have been committed to complete other crimes mentioned in this article, or to achieve their goals, or accompanied by, or resulted from.

The granting of amnesty is not given to perpetrators of the crimes mentioned in this article if the type of their crimes is a persistent or recurrent one, and the perpetrators continued to commit them, or committing them has been resumed after the date of this law, and the prosecution will then resume from the point at which it stopped by the amnesty law.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, offenders whose crimes extended beyond the official temporal boundaries of the war are not eligible for protection. However, this reading of the law requires an acknowledgment by Lebanon of the boundaries of international human rights laws, especially those tenets related specifically to the families of the missing and disappeared.

However, people are also weary from the repeated failure of the country's myriad commissions, a feeling shared by other NGOs dedicated to the issue of the missing and disappeared. Responding in part to the persistent reticence of the Lebanese state in relation to the issue, some groups have ceased seeking punitive justice for perpetrators. As ACT for the Disappeared's director Justine di Mayo told me, such groups have realized that pushing for accountability will not get them very far with those in power. Instead, the focus turns to the victims - both those who were disappeared and the families who still wait for them. For example, inspired by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), ACT has made it its mission to seek out a middle ground wherein those with knowledge can come forward without fear of retribution, the logic being one of transitional, rather than punitive, justice. Such efforts provide a measure of comfort

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<sup>79</sup> Partial text of Lebanon's Amnesty Law 84/91, issued on August 26, 1991. Thanks once more to Ibrahim Saleh for help with the translation.

and safety for families who may not feel comfortable accusing powerful individuals of crimes against their relatives. They thus cultivate an environment in which more people might be willing to participate. The challenge, in di Mayo's estimation as in Aad's, is that people simply do not know about the issue, or about the way the state has stymied efforts to resolve it.

The movement evoked by the term "transitional justice" could also be applied to the way the NGOs are going about their campaigns. They post short but stunning videos on forums like Facebook to reach the younger generations. They take out TV spots that show, in dramatic reenactments, how people of different generations and backgrounds encounter loss in their everyday lives. All these efforts are meant as transitions, and represent important movements from silence to communication, from invisibility to visibility. The NGOs hope to spark conversations that will draw generations closer, so that stories from the war and its aftermath will not perish with older Lebanese, thus robbing younger people of information that would help them make sense of their country's history. They also hope that their efforts will encourage mutual recognition between Lebanese of different backgrounds, who (perhaps unwittingly) share many of the same experiences of continued loss.

Most important for this study, however, is the ways that these NGOs encourage Lebanese to do exactly what the government incites them not to do: that is *to go looking* for their missing loved ones. Indeed, the NGOs challenge the persistence of Lebanon's public secret not only by pushing for legal reform and transitional justice, but also by making their mission felt within the space of the city, the physical site where the state keeps bodies buried and with them, knowledge that survivors across communal lines

have a right to know. In what follows, I describe two protest efforts by different but related NGOs, ACT for the Disappeared and SOLIDE. I argue for considering these practices as a set of performances, following Diana Taylor's understanding of performance as "embodied practice...[which] offers a way of knowing" (Taylor 2003, 3).<sup>80</sup> Embodiment is a key facet of the movement for government transparency regarding the missing and the disappeared, as it addresses both the spatial and corporeal logics of the public secret. Here, performance transmits knowledge, offering an epistemological intervention that works over and against the tide of institutional foreclosure, the "epistemic murk" generated by the public secret. The performance of protest defaces the spatial and discursive sites where shared memory is buried. It pushes up against them, in a "drama of revelation" that uncovers the "secretly familiar" (Taussig 1999, 51), re-marking and claiming them as the sites of solidarity. Just as survivors take on the rights of the disappeared in their absence, so too do their bodies re-present in real space the lives covered over by the government.

I analyze these spatial tactics for the ways in which they disrupt the stasis and silence the state has cultivated around the issue of the missing and disappeared, and

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor elaborates on the various definitions of "performance" in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. On one hand, she writes, "performance" is the object/process of analysis of performance studies, including dance, theatre, ritual, political rallies, funerals, etc. – all processes that "involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event-appropriate behaviors (Taylor 2003, 3). It is also a methodological lens, she writes, "that enables scholars to analyze events *as* performance" (Ibid.). Categories like citizenship, gender, ethnicity, etc., are performed daily as part of an actor's participation in the public sphere. Understanding that such things are performances, and *how* they are performed in a particular cultural context, renders them epistemological practices, ways of knowing (Ibid.). In this chapter, I focus on both more obvious performative practices (a protest) as well as performances of the everyday (a protest encampment-cum-domicile) in which the quotidian is uprooted and re-performed as a radical act of solidarity. As Taylor writes, "Performances travel, challenging and influencing other performance...[and yet] they are, in a sense, always in situ" (Ibid).

suggest that the presence and movements of the protestors not only resurrect the memory of their loved ones, but also resurrect the idea of a broader public, linked by shared memories, concerns, and possibilities.

### **Enough Waiting: November 17, 2012**

For more than a month in autumn 2012, posters for an event called “Enough Waiting” had been plastered across the city’s walls. The posters stood out amongst the usual brightly colored advertisements for upcoming club events and concerts. The posters’ design – yellow tape reminiscent of police tape, branded with the number 17,000; bright red words printed on a muted white and gray background – included minimal information: the event’s beginning and ending times and locations, and the address of its Facebook page. A visit to this page revealed the event as a protest “march” of sorts: a caravan of buses would circle the city, beginning at the National Museum and ending up at the edge of the Beirut Central District. In between, it would stop at a series of sites – Horsh Beirut, the Tahwita Cemetery, and the Mar Mitr Cemetery – where thousands of the civil war’s dead apparently lay in mass graves. The event boasted a guest list of over a thousand people.

Having attended similar events in Beirut, I had modest expectations for how many of these invitees would actually show up. While to be sure protests in Beirut have in the past verged on the spectacular, attendance at many such events remains rather small. The crowds at these events, too, frequently share protestors – young, well-educated Beirutis who claim membership with a number of NGOs. When I arrived at the Enough Waiting event’s starting point on November 17, 2012, I was surprised to find a sizeable crowd

milling about in front of Lebanon's National Museum. Amongst the roughly 150 people in attendance, I recognized a number of young people from social gatherings and smaller protests. They stood together at the edges of the crowd, smoking and chatting with one another. Some wore the event's red and white t-shirts; a few wove through the assembled protestors and journalists, and handed out small pamphlets bearing a description of the gathering's aims and the route the group would take together.

Another group of young people sat on the ground in a rough semicircle facing the museum's steps. This group seemed younger than the activist crowd, perhaps young enough to be members of Lebanon's "postmemory" generation, those who were born after the war or just before its end and rely solely on received community and family narratives to understand it (Larkin 2010).<sup>81</sup> All of them wore the event's shirt; a few also shifted uncomfortably, adjusting dark blue vests. As I drew closer to the group, I recognized these heavy garments as bulletproof vests.

Soon enough, I saw what this well-armored half moon was protecting. Unlike other demonstrations I had attended, which were frequently fueled by the energy and passion of young Beirutis, the "Enough Waiting" event focused on a group I had not previously encountered at the city's protests. On the steps spanning the length of the museum's façade, several older people sat side by side. I later learned that many had made long trips, often from villages far outside Beirut's city limits. A visit to Beirut was a rare event for them, one they had made in spite of difficult roads and uncomfortable

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<sup>81</sup> Larkin draws heavily on Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory. See especially *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997), and *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

transportation just to attend the day's events in the capital, the space meant to represent the nation.

This group, comprised mostly of women, sat close together, shoulders touching. Their conservative dress seemed oddly striking in the midst of young people in t-shirts, tight jeans, and stylish glasses and haircuts sitting on the ground or standing before them. Some wore hijab, others carried small crucifixes or wore small Virgin Mary pendants. All held portraits in their laps, sepia and black-and-white photographs of men and women who looked about the age of the younger people in attendance. I wondered if they were seeing reflected in the young faces around them their brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, husbands, and wives. Did the activists' youth remind them just how much time had passed between their own youth and this day? Did the years roll away in front of them, back to the moment each of those faces in the photographs disappeared?

Taylor (2003) describes similar relationships between generations of protestors in Argentina – Las Abuelas (grandmothers), Las Madres (mothers), and los H.I.J.O.S. (children) of the disappeared. These relationships and the protest movement to which they belong have developed along generational lines since the beginning of Argentina's "Dirty War" in the 1970s. Taylor notes that these groups have documented their genetic connections through DNA testing, and that their activist work also shares "genetic material" (Taylor 2003, 168-9). This *DNA of performance* can be located in the photographic materials they use as both scientific and performatic evidence of the presence/absence of their loved ones: "The photographs...present a kind of proof evidence of the existence of the people in them" (Ibid., 176).

In Lebanon, the state long claimed to not have the DNA technology to identify people's remains, which was yet another way of keeping the public secret in tact. Such technology is now available in Lebanon and yet the government continues to stall, though organizations like the Red Crescent have started genetic testing programs. The process is slow, however, and there is little funding with which to carry it out. As such, the photographs held by family members in front of the museum incur a special importance: not only do they make visible evidence of what the state has so carefully buried, but they also transmit to a younger generation the DNA of performance – the traumatic memory and political commitment archived in their bodies, and the absent bodies of their family members (Ibid., 164, 178).



Figure 8 The DNA of Performance: Family members hold photos of their loved ones outside the National Museum, Beirut

While members of the older generation re-presented their disappeared relatives' lives to the youth in attendance, behind them, Lebanese army soldiers patrolled the entrance to the museum, eyes trained on the crowd, watching, as though at any moment someone might attempt to storm the gates of history. Still one wonders, what history? For while the museum's stated function is primarily archaeological, it seems curious that a national museum deals with the country's longest, most devastating conflict in a decidedly cursory way. Housed within the museum's elegant corridors is a collection of ancient artifacts from Lebanon's various historical periods. There is little in the museum to illuminate the fraught history of modern Lebanon, however, save a video one can watch, or just as easily ignore, at the end of an afternoon walking through the museum's chronologically-organized collections. The film narrates how people looted the museum during the war, stealing several of its treasures and damaging many others. Evidence of this sort of violence lies just out front, in the courtyard where the amputated stumps of Roman columns languish in a weedy yard, on full view as one enters the clean, echoing museum lobby. Although its traces and echoes haunt this place, the story of the civil war is cut short, a fact that resonates as especially odd considering the museum's location on Beirut's Green Line, the informal boundary that divided the city between east and west during the war. The *mathaf* (museum) area is notable, in fact, as a site notorious for the kidnappings that occurred in and around it. No trace remains of the checkpoints where people were interrogated and disappeared, however. Instead, soldiers stand guard in front of the museum and the nearby General Security headquarters, where security officials filter through the identity documents of Lebanese and foreigners, tracking their movements in and out of the country, deciding citizenship cases, granting or denying



work permits. The traffic swirls through a nearby roundabout, its constant noise and movement pressing onward day and night between the silence that sits heavy within these two sites.

On this day, however, the protestors were determined to have their demands seen, and heard. Above the crowd and the pacing soldiers, huge banners lettered in red and affixed to the museum's pillars made plain, from several streets away, the claims to knowledge issued by those assembled. "Enough Waiting," they read in Arabic and English. "It is our right to know." Eventually, a middle-aged woman stepped to the center of the group seated on the steps. Thirty years ago to the day, Wadad Halwani organized the first meeting of the Committee of the families of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon. As she took the podium, the crowd grew quiet, drawing closer together against the noise of the traffic jam out on the street, the faces of the teenagers seated on the ground upturned towards the sound of her voice. Camera shutters snapped, recording her image. Cell phones recorded her voice, which carried out over the sounds of daily life in Beirut – the chaos of cars, horns blaring – as she recounted the story of her husband's disappearance in 1982, a tale she had told so many times before, in so many different venues. His disappearance rallied her to action, precipitating an entire movement around the civil war's missing and disappeared. In her speech, she drew attention to the many different people touched by the practices of kidnapping and enforced disappearance, reminding people that every community lost people this way. The young people, too, must join the fight for truth, she said, for though they might not feel it, the war still resonates in their lives, as their surviving relatives had inevitably lost friends and family members with no recourse to the truth, with only an absence where

they used to be. It would be up to the youth to carry on the fight, to gather their families' stories, to remember.

As her speech ended, music played over the speakers and the crowd began to move towards a caravan of buses parked in front of the museum, partially blocking the flow of traffic, much to taxi drivers' chagrin. As the family carried the pictures of the missing slowly towards the buses, the windows of which carried the movement's slogans in large red letters, young reporters and university students met them with notebooks, pens, and microphones in hand. Like many others, I stood as near as I could to these conversations, longing to hear, but not wishing to be intrusive. It did not seem to matter, however: as the women recounted their experiences for the reporters, their eyes met those gathered into informal audiences to listen in. Some, noticing our proximity, turned slightly toward us so, it seemed, we could better hear what they had to say.

I threaded through the crowd, listening in as one generation told its stories to another. One woman made her desires plain: it was the least the government could do, she said, to let the families know, to bring the bodies back to their communities for a proper burial. Another told a student about her brother who was kidnapped and presumed to be in Syria; he was never sent back to Lebanon, never recovered. With the current situation in Syria, she said, it was so difficult to keep hope.

The young people in the crowd had apparently taken seriously Wadad Halwani's injunction to pay attention and record the stories of the older generation, as a first step to carrying them forward. Transmitting the DNA of performance, after all, would necessitate the presence of participants willing to perform the role of the audience;

willing, in other words, to bear witness to the traumatic memory and political commitments of the families of the missing (Taylor 2003).

The term “witness,” of course, is a tricky one. In his writing on the Holocaust, Giorgio Agamben, for example, argues that under no circumstances can trauma survivors bear witness to true trauma. They cannot speak to the truth of the trauma, as the mere fact that they survived signifies that they have not fully experienced it. Only the dead – whose voices, whose very existence have been decimated, utterly undone by the force of the trauma – constitute the true witnesses, and the dead, he writes, have nothing to say:

The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. And yet to speak here of a proxy makes no sense; the drowned have nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted. (Agamben 2000, 34)

Yet just as the family members incur and fight for the rights – for justice, for truth – lost by their missing relatives, so too, perhaps, do they take on the burden of the story, no matter how partial, of how those rights were lost. As those who carry the burden of absence, the families are, under human rights law as previously noted, also victims of enforced disappearance. In other words, just because “proxy” witnesses cannot understand the full extent of the trauma in question, does not diminish the importance of these stories – the missing stories of the disappeared, yes, but also the stories of the families in the wake of disappearance. In fact, in a society like Lebanon, where the mechanisms of power exercise a denial of the past in the service of self-preservation, and to the detriment of the populace, these stories and memories bear special weight.

The family members, proxy witnesses though they might be, felt compelled to speak for the disappeared, to testify/witness *for them*. If the disappeared cannot speak

their truth, the families can at least speak theirs. The rhythm of their stories – lives cut abruptly short, the terrible languishing that followed in their absence – push up against the silence of the state, and its insistence on forward movement.

Then again, in Felman and Laub's (1992) configuration, the witness is not the speaker, nor even the see-er, but rather is the *listener*. Indeed, communicating trauma is not solely constituted by spoken testimony, but also necessitates mutual participation in telling *and* listening:

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is [...] the process and place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo* [...] the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his [sic] very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself... (Felman and Laub 1992, qtd. in Taylor 1997).<sup>8283</sup>

This witnessing, then, represents a transmission of knowledge, a certain epistemology, as well as an interpolation of the listener as *partial owner* of the trauma, linking her or him to the past. Importantly, speaker and listener share knowledge, but also generate it "*de novo*," solidifying a shared investment in addressing the effects of the trauma. To be sure, the surviving family members have listened for years to the

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<sup>82</sup> Taylor (2003) notes the role of performance in transmitting traumatic memory. Bringing trauma studies (focused on the individual) into conversation with performance studies (focused on the public/collective) reveals how "social actors turn personal pain into the engine for cultural change" (Taylor 2003, 168). Indeed, the comparison of trauma studies and performance studies shows multiple overlaps, not least of which is the role of the witness/listener in carrying on the political work being performed, as noted here.

<sup>83</sup> Agamben takes issue with such a formulation, in which the problem of testimony finds its remedy in film, which mediates between the inside and outside of trauma, serving as a connection that could not have existed during the moment of trauma (in this case, the Holocaust). For Agamben, this sort of connection constitutes an "aesthetic possibility [derived] from a logical impossibility" (Agamben 2000, 36).

deafening silence of the state. But here, in front of the museum, they filled it with their stories, passing them on by cultivating an audience for their transmission.

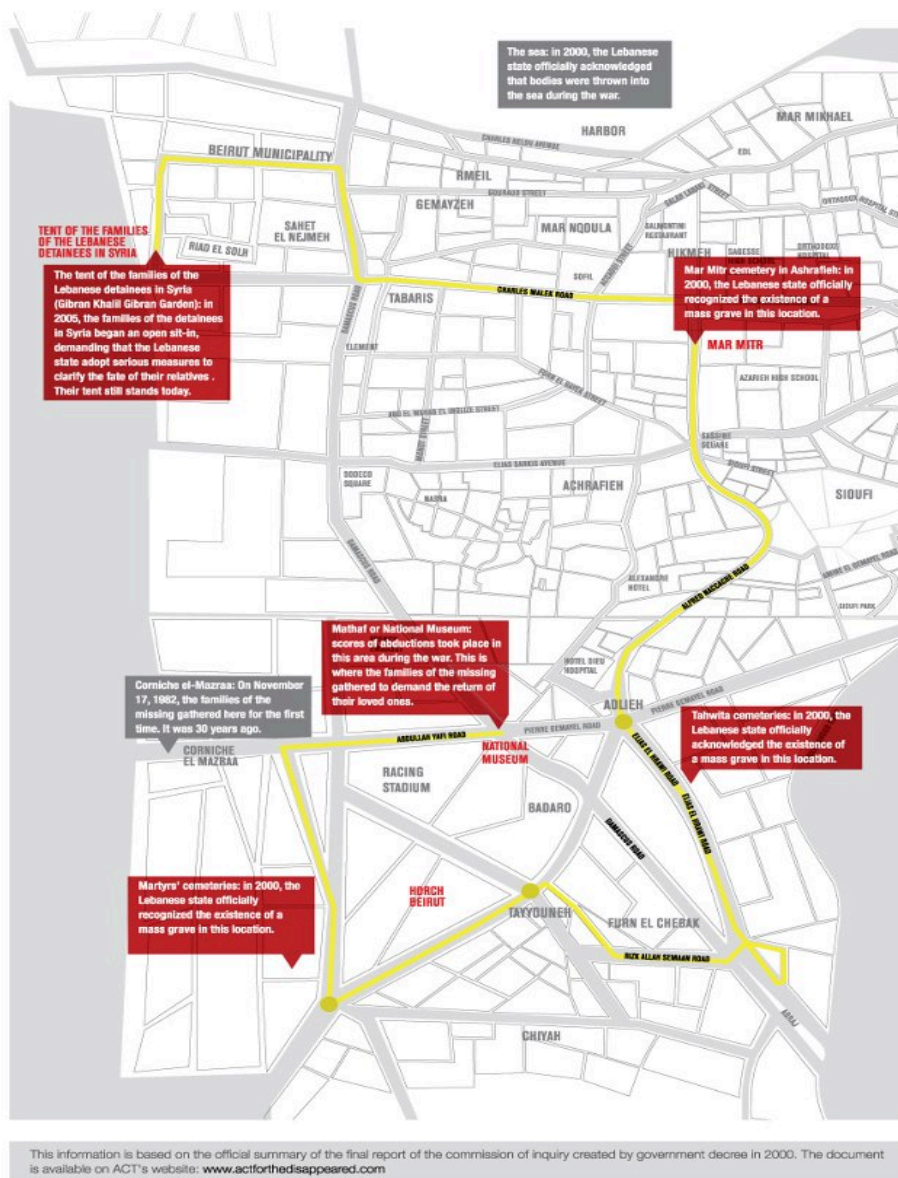


Figure 9 Map of route taken by *Enough Waiting* demonstrators. The captions provide information on the alleged mass graves located by the state.

Interviews completed, reporters retreating to tend to their note and scan through photos on their cameras, the crowd boarded the tour buses, young activists helping the families of the disappeared up the steps and into their seats.

On the buses, young people chatted and laughed, trading bits of news about friends, classes, families, and lovers. The families of the disappeared sat in twos and threes, speaking quietly together. They clutched maps provided by ACT for the Disappeared, on which were printed the locations of several mass graves around the city and the route the procession would take. One woman traced it with her finger and wondered aloud whether we would be able to enter. Her companion did not know.

A chorus of horns greeted the buses' arrival at the first stop, Horsh al-Sanawbar. Taxi drivers craned their necks out their windows, clucking their tongues at the buses' slow approach to the curb.

The group disembarked from the buses, reassembling across the street from the park, at the entrance to the Martyrs' Cemetery. The cemetery sits in a neighborhood that notorious for its strange configuration of open and forbidden spaces. Through the gates, we saw the graves of this traditionally Sunni Muslim cemetery, sitting in irregular rows under aromatic pine trees. The survivors peered through the fence, gazing on the space in which the remains of many civil war disappeared might share the same ground with their fellows who had been given proper burials, waiting to be accounted for. The proximity of the Beirut War Cemetery, which sits just across a small road, made even more acute the way the civil war dead have been left to languish, unnamed and unmarked. This cemetery holds the remains of over a thousand casualties of European campaigns in the region during both the first and second World Wars. British, French, Indian, Greek and

Turkish soldiers rest alongside members of the Egyptian Labour Corps, who were hired on as assistants in efforts to divide and control the land. They rest in simple but elegant graves, their identities – names, nationalities, occupations, birth and death dates – neatly recorded in the graveyard, and on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) website.<sup>84</sup> The Lebanese, however, lay somewhere beneath the well-manicured lawns, the shady trees, bereft of identity, their lives granted far less importance than those of the foreigners whose occupations, colonial politics, and interventions institutionalized the divisions, the seams that would eventually rupture, and swallow them whole. Finally, they turned back to the crowd of activists, pictures of their missing relatives once more held out before them, and posed for photographs.

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We climbed back onto the bus, continuing east through the Tayouneh Roundabout and crossing, roughly, the Green Line that served as the city's principle boundary during the civil war. Heading down Elias al Hwari highway, we passed empty lots and clusters of residential areas until, finally, we arrived at the Tahwita cemeteries. Like Horsh al-Sanawbar, the cemetery supposedly serves as the final resting place of many Lebanese, where they lay in an unmarked grave. This site, too, was originally constructed as a burial ground for foreigners. The space now known as the "Anglo-American Cemetery" (AAC) or *al-Inglizi*, was originally commissioned in 1914 by the British Ambassador, the Syrian Protestant College's (now the American University of Beirut) administration, and the American Mission, as a burial ground for British and American citizens living in

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<sup>84</sup> One can find a detailed account of the Beirut War Cemetery's history, as well as photographs, a casualty records at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website: [cwgc.org](http://cwgc.org)

Beirut. During the civil war, the cemetery incurred severe damage, and over the last several years the non-profit associated with the AAC has made efforts to rehabilitate the space, as its website says, “as a sacred space for those who have died and a peaceful respite for the living.”<sup>85</sup> Under this “Centennial Restoration Plan,” begun in 2014, work has proceeded rapidly, with Phase One of two already complete as of June 2015: the walls surrounding the cemetery have been shored up and restored. Next, the plan will see to the tending of individual gravesites and the paths that run between them. Vegetation will be nurtured to beautify the space in order to “[create] a lovely, lasting memorial that is pleasing to the eye and highlights [memorial stones].” At present, the website provides a detailed list of the dead interred within the cemetery, including birth and death dates, and the locations of their graves. Photos on the website show British and American citizens visiting the AAC and the British War Cemetery each Remembrance Day, the day during which members of the Commonwealth of Nations pay tribute to the members of their armed forces who have perished in combat. In the photos, people lay poppies and wreaths, read poems. Here, far from their homes, whole families of foreigners rest peacefully side by side, honored by their countrymen. Here, perhaps hundreds of Lebanese lay nearby these well-tended plots, limbs and stories alike tangled, buried, and ignored by their government.

The cemetery was also closed to their survivors that day, as we arrived after opening hours and therefore could not access the space. A college-aged participant next to me muttered to his friend about foreigners’ having more access to Lebanon than the

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<sup>85</sup> Anglo-American Cemetery, Beirut, Lebanon website: [anglo-americancemeterybeirut.blogspot.com](http://anglo-americancemeterybeirut.blogspot.com)



Lebanese. Despite the onward movement of the group that day, the dogged insistence on transparency and access to the truth, the very ground beneath our feet made plain the ways in which that truth had been literally buried, closed off, denied. Not even the gates to public spaces would open to us.



Figure 10 Family members hold photos outside the Anglo-American Cemetery, site of an alleged mass grave, Beirut

But the survivors made do. After trying the gates and finding them locked, they simply turned again to the street, rehearsing the same movements they had in front of the museum and Horsh al-Sanawbar: they offered the pictures of their loved ones to the crowd and the passing traffic. A car would slow, now and again, so that those within could take in the scene. The families posed for pictures, standing in front of the cemetery's tall wrought iron gates, crowned by a measure of chain link fence. Relatives

passed around white lilies, flowers of motherhood and rebirth, posing with the bouquet for photographs.

Though the protestors were sedate and respectful in this place, I would still suggest that their carefully staged performance in this space represents what Taussig calls *defacement*. That is, their very presence at the gates to the spaces that supposedly hold the remains of their loved ones, serves as a revelation of the public secret: where the public secret works “to maintain that verge where the secret is not destroyed through exposure,” defacement “brings insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery” (Taussig 1993, 3). Such is the case with the protestors who re/mark on the closed space of the graveyards by bringing their bodies (archives of memory) and the photographs of their family members to quite literally (de)face the discursive, spatial, and *corporeal* silence of the state. The performance of mourning of visiting the (supposed) gravesites, also uncovers a “secretly familiar” – the connections shared between groups and generations, their common legacy of loss (Ibid., 51).

These connections manifested themselves more plainly when we boarded the bus once more. On this leg of the journey, I noticed new groups forming. Younger people approached the families of the disappeared once again, sitting with them and engaging them in conversation, asking gently for their stories, and sometimes sharing their own – an uncle or aunt about whom the family refused to talk, the losses that marked out both a silence and sometimes a palpable presence in family life.

We arrived at Mar Mitr cemetery, in the bustling heart of Achrafieh. The main thoroughfare that carves through Achrafieh’s hilly terrain was jam-packed with traffic, as usual. On this Saturday afternoon, cars were pulling into the parking structure belonging

to the massive Spinney's supermarket, its green and yellow lettering looming high above the traditional quarters cradled within the winding streets barely visible from the road. Mar Mitr, as its location in Beirut's memoryscape warrants, is an Orthodox Christian cemetery. Repeating the frustrations of the day, the gates were already closed to the public, and so the families once more posed for photographs, some of them making the sign of the cross as they approached sacred ground. The crowd peered through the generous spaces between fence posts to take in the beauty of the place. Though the iconography was solely Christian, this at least served as a formal resting place specifically for Lebanese, their grandiose family crypts visible through ornate wrought iron fences, angels and crosses rising several feet above the cemetery gates.

As the group boarded the buses for one final ride, I decided to take a taxi down to the last stop on the route, hoping to arrive ahead of the caravan and get a sense of the space. Though the traffic was heavy, the taxi sped me towards downtown. I noticed with renewed attention the empty lots, and the building sites crowded with cranes and the sounds of construction. How many of these cradled the remains of the disappeared? How many bodies lay beneath the foundations of the buildings erected under the auspices of progress and renewal? How many steel supports touched human bone, somewhere deep in the soil?

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I arrived at the Gibran Khalil Gibran garden, a rare green space on the edge of the Beirut Central District. Situated at the edge of the city center, and meant as one of its entrances, the garden sits adjacent to the United Nations Economics and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) building. In the garden, a small group of

people waited for the buses' arrival. Among them were some of the women who have kept vigil since 2005 at a peaceful protest encampment erected as a living public memorial to those still presumed missing in Syria. I came to know them in later months, as I will show in the next section. At the time, however, I was unacquainted with them, and so approached three young people seated underneath one of the garden's trees.

One of these young people was Maya, a woman in her early 20s. She told me she had worked on the publicity campaign for the day's event, including its TV spots, flyers, posters, and pamphlets. Like so many attending the protest, Maya also sought transparency and connection with those who might understand some of the absences haunting her life. A child of the diaspora, she grew up in Canada, and was always interested in learning more about Lebanon. As is the case with many in the Lebanese diaspora, she did not hear much from her family about their country of origin. She had never visited before moving to Beirut earlier that year. Though she knew her parents left Lebanon during the war, she told me they had flatly refused to talk to her about the circumstances surrounding their departure, or about the war in general. "I'd heard about it, of course," she said. "But being here and working on this campaign, I feel like I'm discovering this whole history that I never learned. I had no idea about the missing, or about how many people the war affected."

Maya's experience exemplifies that of many in the Lebanese diaspora and their descendants, who travel to Lebanon to live and to work, entering the fractured space and time of Beirut's memoryscape. We often come to Lebanon loaded with questions that have not, and in many cases *cannot* be answered by the usual sources – not by history books, nor by family recollections. Like native-born Lebanese our age, we try to piece

together, from the scant evidence available to us, a picture of the place where our families' histories begin. But our movements through this space and time carry a certain naivete. Arriving without a literal or figurative map, we are subjects of a fractured memoryscape, identities caught between spaces and narratives, between what is opening before us and what has long been foreclosed. And yet, perhaps in some ways, our movements are freer, less beholden to the divisiveness that so often directs political and social life in Lebanon. As much as we may learn the repertoires of daily life, we may also perhaps radically traverse spaces our families in Lebanon and abroad do not, and hear stories they never will. As we return to Lebanon, it is perhaps precisely the relatively uncharted territory of our memory maps, our dissociation from a history that cannot be approximated, that will allow for other futures to be imagined and, perhaps, written.



Figure 11 A man photographs pictures of the missing and disappeared, reproduced as a poster for an exhibition by NGO UMAM, Gibran Khalil Gibran Garden, Beirut

As we talked, a man stood nearby, studying portraits of the disappeared, lined up in perfect rows on a poster, found throughout Beirut, for an ongoing exhibition put on by NGO UMAM. He looked closely, leaning in as though searching for someone he knew. Or perhaps many of those faces looked familiar to him. He photographed the poster once, twice, leaned in and squinted again. Behind him stood a large canvas printed with the same slogans as the signs at the museum. It faced the city center, stark in its blankness, as though reflecting the city's teeming silence, begging for something to be written. "What is that canvas?" I asked Maya. From across the garden, we could see the

procession arriving, communities and generations mixing together as people descended from the buses. “It’s a petition to the government,” she said. “Today all those people will mark it with their names, so maybe the people [the missing] will someday reappear in Beirut.”



Figure 12 Poster at the end of the *Enough Waiting* event. The text reads, "Your signature contributes towards revealing their fate." Beirut.

### The SOLIDE Encampment

I first saw the camp where the *Enough Waiting* event ended sometime during spring or early summer 2012, likely as I was crossing from east to west Beirut on foot or by taxi. Its army drab tent made it look like a security outpost. Although it was located in a garden already bordered by two visible security booths, its proximity to the

UNESCWA building seemed to suggest the same. Things were tense that summer in Beirut, as the civil war in Syria continued, and increasingly drew Lebanon into its conflicts.<sup>86</sup> Checkpoints cropped up and disappeared on a regular basis. Returning to Beirut in fall 2012 after a brief trip home, I found the tent still there.

I had resumed my walks through the city, this time going from west to east, as I was living in Koreitem, near Beit Hariri.<sup>87</sup> I left my flat early in the mornings to walk to Arabic lessons across the city in Gemmayzeh, taking the same route each day: walking through Hamra and up towards the Fouad Shehab Bridge, I made a hard left at the tiny street winding down past the cascading fountain in the National Unity Square, which sits next to the Grand Serail, the Prime Minister's headquarters. Two weeks after my arrival, a car bomb in Sassine Square put the city on high alert, and as new security borders were erected, routes and rhythms through the city shifted once again. The road next to the memorial, leading through downtown past Martyrs' Square and into Gemmayzeh, was closed by huge rounds of barbed wire, in front of which stood soldiers armed with AK-47s, their eyes scanning passing cars and the odd pedestrian, their hands tightly gripping triggers when unfamiliar vehicles slowed in front of the barricade.

On my first walk across the city after the car bomb's residual violence – days of audible gun fights, the smell of burning tires, and rumors of RPGs in nearby

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<sup>86</sup> For example, in May 2012, Sunni cleric Sheikh Ahmed Abdel Wahed was killed at a Lebanese army outpost in northern Lebanon. In the aftermath, neighborhoods in Beirut saw clashes between Sunni factions opposed to the Syrian regime, and those loyal to Shaker Berjawi, a Sunni political figure who supports Assad.

<sup>87</sup> The family of late former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, including his son Saad, also a former prime minister, has maintained a home in the area for many years. Consequently, the main street off the alley where I lived was heavily secured by security barricades. Taxis and friends with cars would often avoid this area, as they were likely to be stopped and questioned while trying to drive through.



neighborhoods – died down, I approached downtown and found my way blocked by these soldiers. Assuming the barricade was only meant for vehicles, I asked if perhaps I could pass through to the sidewalk on the other side. They offered alternative routes: cross the street and take a taxi, or walk down a steep set of stairs under the bridge and through the garden below, where the tent sat, quiet and seemingly empty of people.



Figure 13 Gibran Khalil Gibran Garden, facing the Fouad Shehab Bridge, Beirut

This little camp became a regular sight on my morning walks. As the unstable security situation persisted, so too did the barricade. Closer inspection revealed posters on each side of the tent, made out of large pieces of white poster board and covered in Arabic script and photographs. Several white plastic chairs and a couple of tables stood beneath the wide expanse of tree branches sheltering the tent. These changed location –

sometimes they seemed to be deliberately under the tree; other times they sat out in the open, under the sun – but almost always they formed a rough circle. I rarely saw people in the park, with the exception of the odd young Muslim lovers, perhaps from the surrounding neighborhoods, who apparently found the garden’s weekday desolation a safe place to be alone.

On Sundays, however, it seemed all the children from adjacent neighborhoods came streaming out to make use of the garden. They sprawled on its benches with their mothers, surrounded by picnics and toys, or ran over its grassy hill. The garden was one of the few green spaces accessible to the public at the time; the Sanayeh Garden was being renovated, and Horsh al-Sanawbar, as previously noted, is closed to most Lebanese.<sup>88</sup> Centrally located, it felt a bit like the eye of the storm – a slice of calm in the midst of constant traffic, muezzins’ calls and church bell chimes meeting above its space.

During an interview in January 2013 with ACT’s president Justine di Mayo, she asked me whether I had been down to the SOLIDE sit-in. As she described the camp, I recognized it as the tent I had been passing every day. I had been hesitant to peek into the tent, I told her, as it remained unclear who, if anyone, was there. “You should go,” she said. “They love visitors.” She put me in touch with Ghazi Aad, head of SOLIDE, and he happily arranged to meet me the following Thursday at the camp’s weekly gathering. Over the next few months, I visited the camp on a semi-regular basis.

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<sup>88</sup> Sanayeh Gardens, a rare oasis in a country where the green space to inhabitant ratio is around 0.8sqm/person, was closed for over two years for renovation between 2012 and 2014. \$2.5 million USD went into the project, and the park finally reopened in June 2014.



Figure 14 SOLIDE encampment. Several women keep vigil here. The large portrait depicts the late Audette Salem, a leader in the movement for government transparency regarding the missing and disappeared. Her son and daughter went missing in 1985.

At these gatherings, camp regulars share with each other and occasional visitors the stories of their missing loved ones. On one of my first visits, an elderly woman named Em Ahmed approached Ghazi. I recognized her: clothed in the same light blue hijab and blue robe in which she appeared on the cover of an Amnesty International report on the missing and disappeared in Lebanon, and bent nearly parallel to the ground, she walked painfully slowly over to where Ghazi and I sat. Shuffling through her papers, Em Ahmed produced a plastic file, yellowed with age, containing her son's ID and a glossy photo of him. She eyed me and asked Ghazi if he had heard anything more about her son. Ghazi sighed. He had not heard any news, but as always, he would work on it. She pointed to the Amnesty International report and held it up. They had interviewed her once, she said, but it had been a while.

Indeed, it had been a while. The camp at this point, in spring 2013, had been up for nearly eight years, ever moving, though the city around it shifted and changed with each new conflict or construction project, and the barricade that usher them in and out. Older photographs of the tent show a series of different posters attached to its front and sides, and different constellations of people sitting nearby. A handful faces appear in almost all the pictures, however, and were present each Thursday.

The camp once attracted many people. In the days after Syria's ouster from Lebanon, families and NGO personnel met regularly with interested parties, including human rights groups and journalists.<sup>89</sup> Because so many of those who disappeared during the war were presumably taken to Syria, the topic was largely off-limits until Syria's retreat in 2005. After that point, families felt free to share their stories more publicly and the camp quickly became a reference point. "Everyone [still] knows," Ghazi said, "that if you want to talk about this missing or the detainees, there's that place, in downtown Beirut."

And yet traffic to this space has slowed in recent years. The typical political inertia has set in, says Ghazi; the women who tend the camp do not know what to do if he is not there. One of them confessed that she did not know much about the NGOs, but rather entrusted Ghazi with that part of the work.

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<sup>89</sup> The Syrian occupation of Lebanon began in 1976, after its intervention against Palestinian guerilla fighters at the behest of Maronite Christians. The regime of Hafez Assad signed the Red Line Agreement to limit Syria's military presence in Lebanon, but this agreement was later ignored as Syria moved in large artillery units, tanks, and warplanes. In 2005, after Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination, and amidst a climate of suspicion, Syria was ousted from Lebanon, and the occupation ended. However, to this day the two countries are linked not only by their shared borders, but also through Syria's financial and military support of Hizballah, and Hizballah's open fighting in the Syrian civil war on behalf of the regime.

Still, every Thursday, the day that camp tenders switch shifts, the usual crowd comes from around the city to sit together from late morning until mid-afternoon. Ghazi always makes an appearance, bringing what news he has of the latest developments, if he has any at all. On the days I visited, the conversation moved between talk of these developments, stories about the missing, and playful banter. One man clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "This guy is Shia. I should hate him!" he said, laughing. "But it's okay. I tolerate him here." Though he was joking, his point resonates: those who gather at the camp come from a variety of ethnoreligious backgrounds. As denizens of the camp, they share both common loss and common quarrels with the Lebanese state and Syria, both of which have been hard-pressed to release information on the missing.<sup>90</sup> These shared experiences forged an unlikely community, enacted in the garden which the camp attendees treat as they would any other terrace in their own neighborhoods. They eat together, sip coffee, and smoke for hours while they chat.

Though most of the socializing took place outside the tent, I had the chance to enter it on two separate occasions. One day in early spring, I sat with the community for several hours, listening to stories. We had been drinking coffee out of small plastic cups, held gingerly between thumb and forefinger. Around noon, the women who had been sitting vigil brought out freshly washed and cut radishes and tomatoes, and a bowl of olives. Soon after, two men arrived with large plastic bags full of mana'eesh, warm flatbread covered in za'atar (a blend of herbs and spices). As a guest, I was treated to the

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<sup>90</sup> I have already detailed the Lebanese state's reticence regarding the missing and disappeared. Syria has likewise remained silent on how many Lebanese detainees it might still harbor, although it has released a number of them over the years, most notably in 1998 and 2000.

food and roundly admonished for trying to offer payment. “You have a Lebanese grandmother,” Ghazi joked. “You should know better.”

After the meal, the women cleared away napkins and scraps of food, leaving cups out for a fresh pot of coffee. The process was slow, as the women carefully balanced the meal’s remains on their hands and forearms, and navigated the pebbled ground between the circle of chairs and the tent. They disappeared through its back flap, leaving a couple of plates behind. I picked these up and followed them to the tent’s entrance, where I stood, unsure if I should enter. When they saw me, they clucked over me, insisting I relax and enjoy. I held out the plates to them, and they smiled. “Faḍaleh,” they said. *Come in.*

I stepped into the tent, surprised by how such a seemingly compact structure could hold so much. Several carpets cushioned the floor from the hard ground beneath. A lofted bed lay against each of the longer sides of the tent, neatly made with pillows and tightly tucked blankets. On the far side of the tent, opposite the door, a shelf held plates, cups, and a kettle. Most improbably, a large refrigerator stood against the far wall.

Diana Taylor (1997) has addressed the ways that the Madres in Argentina performed traditional gender roles in a way that subverted the meaning of those roles. That is, they mobilized their motherhood to legitimize their political practice, an action that in turn radicalized conventionality (Taylor 1997, 182-222). Certainly the women at the camp in Beirut cut a sympathetic figure, whether out at protests or tending the tent in the garden. Although men were also present in these spaces, the focus, as noted in this chapter’s section on the *Enough Waiting* event, was consistently centered on the women. In the Beirut context, the women also performed the duties of home in a makeshift

domestic space-cum-sit-in, transporting the traditionally gendered realm of the home-space out into public. But what turned their traditionalism into a “daring gesture” (Ibid., 196), was how they outfitted that space, and the community they cultivated around it. Keeping house here also means making it personal beyond basic domestic objects.

Set amongst these creature comforts lay several religious items, both Muslim and Christian. Someone had carefully hung a framed icon of Jesus Christ, sacred heart aglow, directly over the refrigerator. Prayer mats were rolled in a corner. One rarely, if ever, comes across a domestic space in which these objects co-exist: mixed-sect families within the same religious are rare enough; mixed-religion families are largely forbidden.<sup>91</sup> And yet here, the women tending the camp challenge the status quo, simply by engaging in the intimacy of their daily routines. As Majida, an elderly Muslim woman, told me of her activities during her shifts at the camp: “I cook, I wash, I pray. All the normal things.” In the performance of an unlikely intercommunal domesticity in this proxy home-space, the cause for the camp – the loss of the people who inhabited the women’s actual homes – is also rendered both spectacular and banal, which it certainly is: while the number of people still missing is staggering, it attests to the fact that no community was immune from enforced disappearance.

This space, too, is where personal memories intersect, and where they can be shared. I visited Majida one afternoon to speak with her about her work at the camp.

After greeting me outside the tent, she ushered me inside and into a chair. She bent to

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<sup>91</sup> The debate about civil marriage in Lebanon is ongoing. Though some politicians argue that there is nothing in the constitution preventing people from different sectarian backgrounds from marrying each other, many religious authorities still vocally oppose these unions. Inter-sectarian couples therefore marry abroad. For more details, please see Aziz (2013), “Lebanon’s First Civil Marriage a Sign of Change.” <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/lebanon-first-civil-marriage-political-change.html#>

retrieve something from a neat pile of pamphlets and posters stacked in the space under one of the beds. She turned to me, a photograph of a young man in her lap. Her brother, she said, had disappeared during the war. She narrated the story of his disappearance with a steady rhythm that made me think she had told it to many other visitors to the camp. When I asked to photograph her, she posed easily with her brother's portrait, eyes downcast and solemn.

All the women who keep vigil at the camp have such files on hand with information about and photographs of their disappeared relatives. These archival materials tell the story of the missing and disappeared in tandem with the "official" literature housed in the camp, which includes items like Amnesty International and International Center for Transitional Justice reports. Although the women sometimes bring out copies of these reports for visitors, researchers and reporters have been drawn to the camp by the chance to hear firsthand from the women about their loved ones, and to see the space the women have created around the shared memories of their loss. The camp, then, houses two sorts of archives: the official literature compiled by interested NGOs, and the living archives represented by the women. In the tent, an unlikely domicile, the women greet visitors as guests rather than researchers, companions who may receive their stories and carry them out into the wider world.

The camp has also provided a community for Lebanese who lost relatives after the war, often under suspicious circumstances. There was one younger man who came to the weekly gatherings. He seemed at home amongst the others, and I assumed for a time that he was one of their younger relatives, perhaps a son, nephew, or even a grandson. One Thursday, I found him standing on a bench beneath a tree, adjusting a large poster



bearing the face of a balding man not much older than himself. The poster had faded in the weather – hot sun and winter rains – and had been tilting in its place on the tree. The poster finally secured, he dusted off his hands and descended to the terrace. I approached him, introducing myself and asking about the man in the photo. His name was Charbel, he said. The man in the photo was his brother, who had been murdered nearly 15 years ago in Spain, where he had gone for a job. This brother had left Lebanon for an opportunity with an airline, but shortly after his arrival, he was robbed and murdered. The family has not been able to obtain details about his death. “It has nothing to do with the war, I know,” Charbel said, “ but being here helps me.” Although Charbel has talked about his missing brother on various media platforms, including a friend’s online magazine, he has had little response to his pleas for an investigation. As he put it, “I don’t think the authorities can help me, even though they should. But being here, I know these people understand what it’s like not to know.”

### **Current Work**

The consistent efforts of NGOs working on the issue of the missing and disappeared have been gaining more traction over the last few years, not least of all with younger people like Charbel and the participants in *Neither Dead, Nor Alive*. ACT for the Disappeared and related NGOs have cultivated an active presence on social media, advertising public events related to the issue, and posting relevant media clips. Their activity on Facebook and Twitter offers yet another public space through which people can share their stories, ask questions, and stay informed about current developments. It is

clear that the issue's visibility continues to increase, as those affected by enforced disappearance become visible to one another.<sup>92</sup>

This visibility does not correspond to a change in the Lebanese state's work on the issue. On March 4, 2014, the State Shura Council, one of the highest judicial authorities in Lebanon, granted families of the missing and disappeared full access to reports from the 2000 reports of the Official Commission of Investigation into the Fate of the Abducted and Disappeared Persons. After months of delay – under the unsurprising pretense of maintaining civil peace - on September 20, 2014, the Lebanese state finally handed over the Commission's report. Unfortunately, the report did not contain any groundbreaking information, but rather repeated some of the same information and platitudes that has been included in previous reports.<sup>93</sup>

On April 13, 2014, the anniversary of the civil war's beginning, a law drafted by family associations and civil society organizations regarding the issue of the missing and disappeared was submitted to the Lebanese Parliament. If signed into law, this proposal would finally ratify the International Convention that would affirm Lebanon's participation in international human rights law. It would also set into motion a series of procedures that would address the right of the families to know the truth. These measures include public access to previously closed archives regarding the missing and

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<sup>92</sup> Future work will consider efforts to address the issue of the missing and disappeared on social media, and in the narrative space of film. Eliane Raheb's 2013 film *Layali bala Noom* (Sleepless Nights) is a documentary that follows the intertwining stories of Assad and Myriam through time and space. Assad served in the Lebanese Forces as a director of intelligence, and Myriam lost her son Maher, who fought for the Communists, in a battle with the LF. Raheb and organizations including ACT for the Disappeared organized several events around the film. Family members of the disappeared, including Myriam, attended many of the events, where they both asked questions of NGO representatives and answered questions from the audience.

<sup>93</sup> Bassam Kantar, "Families of Missing Open Case: Journey of Truth Begins" (trans. from Arabic), *Al-Akhbar* <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/216421>

disappeared; holding perpetrators accountable for their crimes; and the responsible exhumation of mass graves, which would be a step towards identifying the remains therein. In effect, this law would overturn some key tenets of the 1991 amnesty law.

Still, the draft law's journey has been long, and it is difficult to imagine its passing muster in the near future. Indeed, the developments mentioned above have been met with a fair amount of skepticism, as they came ahead of a presidential election.<sup>94</sup> Even when the draft law passes, the conditions under which many Lebanese live, conditions made by the civil war and reinforced in the "postwar" years, will take quite some time to change.

Any optimism generated by these modest developments has also been tempered by a sense of frustration. The war in Syria has exacerbated longstanding tensions in Lebanon, which have shown themselves as the faultlines along that carve up Lebanese society. Earlier this spring, when I posted a Facebook link to an article that detailed the festivities commemorating this year's war anniversary, my friend Omar commented: "Yeah, let's see if it ever *ends*." Omar's assessment of the state of Lebanese politics is especially poignant in light of the fact that he was born just *after* the civil war ended. Like many others his age, Omar grew up in Lebanon but did not learn about the war in school; however, as he says, he's "not dumb" – the same divisions exist that have always existed, and they play out in cycles of more and less violence.

In the next chapter, we will see how a group of youth, many of them around Omar's age have come to understand these divisions through their extensive engagements with the city – both challenging and repeating its boundary lines.

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<sup>94</sup> The presidential election was held in April 2014, but because none of the candidates met the required vote majority, it has been postponed over and over again. So far, it has gone through 15 rounds, without a successor to Michel Suleiman. The next round is set for December 2015.

Portions of Chapter 2, “Badna Na’ref (We Want to Know): Unearthing the Public Secret of Lebanon’s Missing and Disappeared,” are forthcoming in the volume *Communicating Memory and History* (2016), edited by David Park and Nicole Maurantonio

### Chapter 3. El Shāri‘ Elna?: Writing the Street in Beirut<sup>95</sup>

Over the past several years, and especially in light of the Arab uprisings that began in late 2010 and early 2011, street art in the Middle East and North Africa has been frequently spotlighted by global media and scholarship. Much as with social media, news reports treated the apparent ubiquity of street art in affected countries with a certain curious and hopeful fascination. According to these stories, street art in the region virtually burst forth out of nowhere. Curiously, though often the object of scrutiny and, historically, moral panics in the “West,” in the context of the uprisings the art was re-cast as an expression of the democratic desires of Arab youth in the face of oppression. Not only that, this street art appeared to prove that the Arab Street - a term that has long had metonymic value as a catch-all concept for the perceived chaos of both Arab ideologies and public spaces - could in fact be organized and aesthetically beautiful.<sup>96</sup>

Scholars working on the MENA region likewise noted the political and cultural potential of these interventions, as a mode through which people might reclaim public space, and in so doing recover their agency (Khatib 2013a, Abaza 2012). Importantly,

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<sup>95</sup> I take this title from street crew Ashekman’s popular tag, which means, “The Street Is Ours.” Originally, this was the dissertation’s title. It had to change, however, when EpS, a self-professed rival of Ashekman, took issue with it. The phrase was thus demoted to a section title. If EpS reads this dissertation, I hope he finds this change satisfactory.

<sup>96</sup> Asef Bayat (2003) notes that in the Arab world, the street serves as the physical space of collective dissent. Drawing comparisons to the role of the “street” in historic political shifts worldwide (e.g. the French Revolution, anti-Vietnam War protests, anti-colonial and labor movements), Bayat argues that while the street is critical for political expression of ordinary people, the case of the Arab Street presents particular problems, especially as it is represented in “Western” media. Rather than simply a stand-in term for public opinion and collective sentiment, the Arab Street is instead cast as an extension of Orientalist renderings of the so-called Arab Mind: “either ‘irrational’ and ‘aggressive’ or... ‘apathetic’ and ‘dead’” (Bayat 2003). Either way, these negative characterizations carry implications for how Arab politics and dissent, as well as their related spaces and people, are understood globally.

these interventions were inherently communal. Lina Khatib has argued that in the context of the Egyptian revolution, street art communicated new narratives through which Egyptians “[reached] out to others within their own community by drawing on shared cultural references and heritage” (Khatib 2013b, 299). Charles Tripp likens this work to the formation of “a common vernacular of solidarity and defiance” through which people become collectively empowered in the face of oppressive regimes (Tripp 2013, 261).

Lebanon did not take part of the Arab uprisings and Beirut, like many urban centers across the region, has a history of street art that long predates the revolutions. However, the excitement over Arab street art – from graffiti to murals – proved contagious and the last few years have seen no shortage of articles and short documentaries exploring Beirut’s scene.<sup>97</sup> Like reports on the art of the uprisings, these accounts celebrate what such work might say about Lebanese youth: namely how, despite reports of a country on the brink of chaos and youth either more interested in partying than politics, or else susceptible to radicalization – young Lebanese are invested in engaging with their capital city by beautifying it.

In a sense, these narratives repeat the local logic of “beauty as progress” sometimes associated with Solidère’s rehabilitation of Beirut, while missing the conditions that precipitated it, and the social and cultural repercussions of this rehabilitation. The motivations behind and consequences related to such art in Lebanon have a more complex and compelling story, one that is still being written.

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<sup>97</sup> See for example Al Jazeera World’s documentary *Walls That Speak* (2013), a film about Beirut’s graffiti, and the feature “Global Street Art – Lebanon” (2013) on the Museum of Contemporary Art’s YouTube channel.

In this chapter, I consider the role of “street writing” in demarcating and documenting the spatial boundaries and histories of various publics. To be clear, I do not wish to suggest that these publics exist in utter isolation; there is overlap and interaction between publics and the individuals who make them up. Still, street writing (as I define it below) can tell us much about the spatial, political, and social histories of these publics. Where does this writing appear? Who is allowed to write, and what are they allowed to say?

Locating street writing in the neighborhoods and in-between spaces of Beirut, I argue that while such interventions in Lebanon, and especially in Beirut, might be ubiquitous, they are not always democratic, nor harbingers of intercommunal togetherness. While in some ways they mirror the revolutionary and community-centered ethos of the street art related to the Arab revolutions, they also visually mark out different territories, and trace the contours of spatially-distinct publics which are unique in the caliber by which they experience privilege and poverty, access and denial, and mobility and stasis.

### **Street Art, Graffiti, or Public Art?: Defining the Terms**

Deciding what to call the practice of conscientiously marking public space presents certain difficulties. As cultural texts and practices, graffiti, street art, public art, and any number of similar practices, do not exist as immutable categories. They share the same materials, and often the same spaces and audiences, and their respective histories are intertwined. Yet popular imaginaries frequently delineate between them in terms of their apparent (il)legality (Philips 1999, Young 2014). “Graffiti,” for example,

carries connotations of subversiveness, related to its historical connections with disenfranchised youth who “bomb” the street with their signatures, or tags, as a means of claiming space for themselves and the crews or gangs to which they belong. “Street art” registers as somehow more respectable – operating beyond letter-based graffiti, street artists often use more formal art techniques (painting, stenciling, even knitting) to deliver their messages (Waclawek 2011, 18-30). “Public art” has likewise popularly come to stand for “commissioned” artworks that turn the street into a sanctioned art space (for example, Christo Yavacheff’s *The Gates*), or even the politically- and socially-motivated, but rarely sanctioned, work of Banksy. Indeed, Banksy’s fame and the recognition he has received in the art world exemplify how slippery the categories can be. Intellectual work on these urban practices likewise mirrors this shiftiness: from one text to another, one finds similar cultural texts categorized completely differently. Indeed, as Phillips (1999) points out, part of what makes these urban interventions so intriguing is that their definitions are always just out of our grasp (Phillips 1999, 39). Trying to parse out presumed differences along lines such as illegality and respectability also “[gives] people an excuse not to understand what graffiti is and why or how people are using it” (Ibid, 44).

Riggle (2010) argues that in a sense *all such practices* can be categorized as public art, since they exist out in public. But the real crux of public art, he claims, is that it is *for the public*, rather than the art world. As such, members of the public can do what they like to the work – they can read it against its intentions, interpret it according to their own ideas and experiences, and respond to it in manners both intellectual and physical. They can interact with it, in other words, philosophically and physically, shifting its



meanings and appearance through their interventions. Yet this definition does not consider deeper questions about the ideological or philosophical space of the street. That is, it does not broach the ways in which streets themselves are marked by the imaginings and histories of *various publics*. I would add, then, that these practices and the texts they produce can also tell us much about a public, or rather multiple publics, through people's engagements with them. Further, sometimes these interventions simply *are not for the public*. They are not private, *per se*; they still take place in public space. However, they might also take their shape solely around the desires and whims of the practitioner, rather than because of any larger sense of community or political purpose.

As with any practice, too, no matter how “global,” the specific context must be considered when thinking about the significance and reception of such urban interventions. Neil Jarman (1998) shows how public murals in Northern Ireland have functioned as sectarian markers, as tourist sites, and as memorials for those who have died for their cause. Teresa Caldeira (2012) has shown how, while hip-hop style graffiti have been incorporated into the cityscape in São Paulo, even curated for tours and art exhibitions, other practices like *pixação*— a style of tagging specific to Brazil, done by young men from disenfranchised communities – are still considered subversive. In the Lebanese context, the discourse of criminality, which almost always at least partly frames thinking on such practices, falls apart. These urban practices, whatever one may call them, are not technically illegal in Lebanon; instead, as many of my interlocutors told me, they occupy a legal “grey area.” As we shall see, this in-between legality both opens up the city, allowing it to be written upon, and also makes it quite risky to do so.

For the purposes of this chapter, I call the work of conscientiously marking up public space “street writing,” for reasons internal to its context and function. First, most of the people interviewed for this chapter call themselves “street writers,” even as they employ the lingo of this globalized mode of expression to talk about the texts they create. While I will generally refer to their practices as “street writing,” I will employ this lingo – tagging, bombing, stencils, etc. – as the writers themselves use it. Secondly, “street writing,” as the action associated with being a street writer, seems particularly appropriate to the framework of this dissertation. It gets at the *process* of writing in the street and how this writing itself *brings the street into view*. By “street” I mean the literal street, which transforms as writers make their mark; as well as the metaphorical street(s), as in the public(s).<sup>98</sup>

The fact that the practice of street writing is relatively publicly permissible in Lebanon – and especially in Beirut, where it proliferates – makes it an ideal cultural practice for understanding the limits of public discourse. That is, certain patterns and movements in street writing – which images and messages get policed and which do not, where these images and messages show up in the city, and who can write without fear of retribution – can show how the city’s publics constitute themselves not only spatially, but also ideologically, imaginatively, and *relationally*, and reveal who has the “right to the city.”

### **The Origins of Graffiti in Beirut**

Moving through Beirut - by bus, taxi, private car, or on foot - one cannot miss the

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<sup>98</sup> Kirsten Scheid (2012) has made a compelling case, in the context of the Arab revolutions, for refusing to label as “art” the street interventions celebrated in global media. For Scheid, calling something “art” is to “empty it of everyday, political, historical meaning.”

writing on the walls. Though its type and frequency vary between neighborhoods, its ubiquity indicates an unlikely common mode of expression that is practiced in the city's diverse areas. One may find it on crumbling walls, where its colors target the destruction, running easily over the holes left by the bullets and decrepitude that came before it; or these same colors are later spectacularly shattered by urban violence. One is just as likely to find it on new building projects - first on the fences that protect their construction sites, and then on the smooth walls that emerge with their completion. It is a particularly resilient practice, cyclically buried under layers of posters, construction, and infrequent "beautification" efforts, only to be resurrected in its original form by its (very persistent) authors, or supplanted by newer tags. It is both conversation piece and conversation: in a city where people have very little control over matters social and political, graffiti is an everyman's pulpit, where debates get visibly played out through the scripting and rescripting of slogans. It is planned and spontaneous, well-executed and scribbled, stenciled and free-form. It is political, social, cultural, and it contributes to the marketplace, of both goods and ideas. Sometimes it sells revolution, but just as often it becomes the eye candy that announces the opening of a new nightclub or the launch of a clothing line.

Graffiti took off in Beirut during the civil war, when Beirut's shifting territories and demographics necessitated the development of practices to clearly mark physical and ideological space. As Tala Saleh notes in *Marking Beirut: A City Revealed Through Its Graffiti* (2009), this "silent war between different political groups" took on various visual forms. Stencils of logos belonging to militias and parties communicated dominant groups' ownership of particular areas, and warned off outsiders. Political slogans, on the

other hand, were used by militia members and lay people alike as a street shorthand for sentiments about the ongoing conflict. The anonymity of these slogans both gave voice to those who would not otherwise be heard, and assured their safety in spite of their dissent. Where individuals could not speak in any official venue without fear of repercussion, the walls were a veritable cacophony of political sentiment.

Though to be sure the city presents a more fluid space than during the civil war's 15 years, one can still find the same stencils in their likely places. The fact that graffiti can be found throughout the city does not mean that its practitioners move through, or have access to, all Beirut's many quarters. Rather, tags belonging to local groups (parties, militias, clubs) mark the walls of certain neighborhoods. Predominantly Christian Achrafieh, for example, bears stencils that indicate its historic association with the Lebanese Forces and Lebanese Phalanges (Katā'ib Party). While some of these markings have faded to mere ghosts on the walls, others are fresher, indicating the continued presence of the parties in the neighborhood, yet another (quite literal) sign that in many ways the war is not over. Though Saleh points out that after the outbreak of violence in 2008, many groups agreed to rid their corridors of such indicators, in an effort to stymie the tide of what might very well have turned into another civil war, many of these slogans have reemerged in subsequent years and taken on new significance as waves of conflict have stirred up old enmities within the city.<sup>99</sup>

### **Logos, Love Letters, and Politics: Current Graffiti in Beirut**

In many ways Beirut's current walls retain several traits of the city during

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<sup>99</sup> See footnote 48 for a description of the conditions of this violence.

wartime. Casual scrawl litters the walls in every sector of the city and its outskirts. One happens upon charming homemade stencils at the tops of the city's many flights of stairs or on the walls of the traditional quarters. Many areas are covered with quick-draw style tags as well. On the way out of Beirut to the south, there is a corridor of graffiti all along the highway. Cars, vans, trucks, and motorbikes speed through this corridor at all hours of the day or night, making it a particularly perilous place in which to tag. There are hardly any sidewalks here on which to stand out of the way of traffic, and one would be hard pressed to find a decent stretch of the wall that is not covered, at least in part, in graffiti. Somehow the danger of the task is part of its allure, however, the very thing that makes it worth doing, for these tags are by and large love letters. From roughly-sketched hearts and arrows accompanied by the beloved's name, to dates of importance in a couple's relationship and longer tributes, the stretch of highway is a veritable tunnel of love. Most of these are addressed to women, suggesting a primarily male authorship whose wooing combines public declarations of affection with a not unimpressive bravado as they put their lives at risk to communicate with their intended audience.

Although some of these writers leave a calling card in the form of their name, many are anonymous. This is an attribute shared with much of the more casual graffiti in the city - the tags that are found in absolutely every area, to greater and lesser degrees. These other anonymous tags take a variety of forms, including quick-draw graffiti and stencils, the most popular and widespread forms. The placement and content of such tags reveals important information about both authors and audiences.

Borrowing from the legacy of civil war-era graffiti, stencils can be found throughout the city. As previously mentioned, they often mark the territory of a

particular party or group, which is often the same area it was during the civil war. Thus, one finds Katā'ib party tags in East Beirut's neighborhoods, and those belonging to groups like Amal and the SSNP in West Beirut's Hamra. Every once in a while, of course, one will come across a stencil belonging to a group that *does not* claim the territory – perhaps a reminder to local party sympathizers that boundaries are in fact permeable.

In certain sectors, stencils explode over the walls in layers of bright color and eye-catching design. The area around the American University of Beirut, which runs down from Hamra Street to Bliss Street in West Beirut, is an exceptional space for cataloguing this sort of street art. These stencils range in size, style, and message. Many announce the different youth culture organizations around the city, including the Beirut Groove Collective (a small turntable under which is stamped “BGC”) and Creative Space Beirut (“Make Designers Not Clothes”).<sup>100</sup> Others are expressly political, documenting ongoing struggles within Lebanese culture. These include the “Fight Rape” tag that has appeared and spread over the last few years, and which is attributed to feminist collective Nasawiya; and the “Think Lebanese, Think Laique” tag that belongs to the Laique (or secular) Pride movement.<sup>101102</sup> Many draw from MENA popular culture, such as the

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<sup>100</sup> The Beirut Groove Collective was founded in 2009 by two Lebanese DJs, Ernesto C. and Rami O. According to their Facebook page, their stated objective is “to document, promote and preserve the best in African and African-influenced musical traditions – particularly Black American musical strains – jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, rare-groove and hip-hop.” Their motto is “Funk Ain’t Noise Pollution.” See <https://www.facebook.com/theBGC> for more information. Creative Space Beirut (CSB) is a free school for fashion design. See more at <http://creativespacebeirut.com>.

<sup>101</sup> The struggle to pass legislation that protects women in Lebanon from violence is real. In 2014, Parliament passed a domestic violence law at first considered a step in the right direction. However, subsequent amendments defined domestic violence too narrowly to adequately protect women. Further, pre-existing personal status laws, administered by religious courts, still take

stencil of Egyptian diva Um Kalthoum linked to a conversation bubble that says “Bous el wawa” (Kiss the booboo), the title of a song by current Lebanese diva Haifa Wehbe.



Figure 15 Stencil - Hamra, Beirut

Sometimes stencils promote current cultural events, such as movie premieres. In the spring of 2013, for example, a striking stencil depicting a cedar tree planted on the moon showed up in Gemmayzeh and Hamra. The text beneath the image read, simply, “Put a Cedar on the Moon,” in reference to *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, a documentary about Lebanon’s little-known 1960s space program.

Increasingly, however, stencils have been coopted by corporations and local businesses to promote commercial products and event venues. The areas around

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precedence over the law. For more information, please download the full Human Rights Watch (HRW) report at [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/lebanon0115\\_ForUpload.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/lebanon0115_ForUpload.pdf)

<sup>102</sup> The *Laique* (Secular) Pride movement began in 2009, with the aim of abolishing the confessional Lebanese system in favor of a secular civil state. While proponents of confessionalism argue that it protects minorities by assuring that no one sect achieves dominance, secularists argue that once everyone in Lebanon is “simply Lebanese,” the concepts of “minority” or “majority” will cease to matter, and worries over authoritarianism will diminish.

universities, and especially around AUB which is generally held to be a more liberal and affluent environment than some other university neighborhoods in the city, are prime real estate for such ventures. Thus, in the side streets that lead from Hamra and bleed into Bliss Street, one finds an archive of political and cultural tags that is also peppered with stencils for international corporations like H&M, beverages like Lebanese beer Almaza, or new hotspots in Beirut's nightlife geography. The would-be readership for such tags is clearly the city's youth - and not just the youth in general, but rather those who can afford to go to a private university and so likely have the disposable income to spend on such pastimes as movies, alcohol, and nightlife.

Some of this type of stylized intervention graffiti causes public discussions. For example, locals defaced several H&M tags because of the corporation's alleged complicity with the occupation in Palestine. Most such discussions, however, happen through a sort of dialogic graffiti - that is, graffiti that is written, responded to, and sometimes written over, in demonstrations of both solidarity and dissent.

During the time I spent in Beirut, in intermittent stretches between 2009-2014, the conflict in Syria grew ever more violent and relevant to Lebanese daily life. First Hizballah's open involvement in the conflict, then the intercommunal fighting it provoked in Beirut and in other cities such as Tripoli, and finally the waves of refugees crossing the border and straining Lebanon's resources and tenuous peace even further - all made public debate a necessary but difficult thing. To be openly pro- or anti-regime was to invite, at the very least, heated debate. As I have mentioned in other chapters, during the time I conducted research in Beirut, the city's geography - its movements, symbols, and boundaries, both obvious and tacit - changed at rapid intervals, mainly as a



result of the effects of Syrian civil war on Lebanon. I encountered some of the symbols of these effects fairly early on in the conflict. In November 2011, eight months after it began, I met with a professor at AUB. As we talked over coffee, she glanced out the window, and then glanced again, holding her gaze there. “I hadn’t even noticed those,” she said, pointing to the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) flags that had apparently been hoisted overnight above the gates to the university.

The walls of the city, however, became a largely safe and anonymous space on which people could voice their sentiments and affiliations, as well as debate current events. Some of these interventions remained in their original iterations for as long as I passed them, including one stencil that read, “We’re sorry if we disturbed anyone. We’re in Syria, building a country.” Many other conversations had several layers to them, several speakers all “speaking” in hasty quick-draw scrawl. One particular conversation I encountered in August 2012 was especially vitriolic. The original read, “Suria badha raqbat Assad” (*Syria wants Assad’s neck*). A respondent scribbled out the middle and added “wa bas” at the end: Syria wants Assad and that’s it.



Figure 16 Wall near the American University of Beirut. The tag originally read, "Syria wants Assad's neck." It was later edited to read, "Syria wants Assad, and that's it."

These tags can tell us about the debates, priorities, and tensions circulating in Beirut, and in Lebanon at large. As anonymous iterations of personal and political loyalties, they act as bellwethers of public sentiment, revealing the capital's many debates about current events. Certainly over the course of my fieldwork I found it quite easy not only to figure out which neighborhoods "belonged" to which parties or publics, but also how those communities reckoned with Lebanon's ongoing political and social shifts. The ubiquity of these markings and conversations, furthermore, suggested that both Lebanese authorities and public(s) at large accepted them as part of the city's text. That text would change, of course – some writing would provoke written response from those who viewed it; other writing would get painted over, presumably by local residents or

authorities who found its message distasteful. But still, the practice flourished throughout the city, a shifting narrative line both connecting and clearly separating its many quarters.

Now, however, I want to turn to a particular group of individuals, Beirut's street writers. Rather than working anonymously, they take great pride in claiming *ownership* of their work and, through it, the space of the city. As such, they tie their identities as much to the practice of street writing as to a range of public spaces, a radical action indeed in a city that in many ways remains divided. However, as their reflections on their own work reveal, these spatial and ideological boundaries are always in flux, a fact they must negotiate and which informs their practice. After a brief description of an outing with one of the "crews," I focus on writers' assessment of their own work, and the experiences they have had while carrying it out, including their interactions with private citizens, law enforcement, and each other. The fact that these writers purposely reveal their identities in their work means that they have also experienced the immediate effects, whether positive or negative, of its reception. As Halsey and Young (2006) argue, knowing about writers' lives can tell us much not only about urban spaces, but also about a society's "political, spatial, and visual orientations" (Halsey and Young 2006, 298).<sup>103</sup> Thus, the writers' stories – perhaps more than any purely academic analysis of the work itself – reveal the limits of writing openly in Beirut, demonstrating not only *what* can be written, but also *where* it can be inscribed on the city's walls, and by *whom*.

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<sup>103</sup> Hannah Elansary (2014) points out that discourses around street art during the Arab Spring did not account for reception, which is an important part of the analyzing the transformative potential of any artistic practice. Future work might consider the reception of street writing in Beirut by interviewing locals who encounter it in their neighborhoods.

**In Plain Sight: Writing with Ashekman**

As previously noted, street writing is not technically illegal in Lebanon, so that even unsolicited work usually gets a pass where the law is concerned. Several writers with whom I spoke described getting stopped by the police, the army, or private security guards. Often these run-ins resulted in a verbal “slap on the wrist”: the authorities reprimanded the writers, and asked them to leave. Sometimes the writers would return at another time, often at night, to finish the work; other times, they heeded the warnings and left the wall in question alone. Most writers with whom I spoke claimed that it was fairly simple to get permission to paint large walls out in the city. The people to whom these spaces belonged (residents, business owners) and who tended them (parking attendants, valets) – indeed, even police and army personnel – were more often than not amenable to the writers’ interventions in their spaces, or the walls, sidewalks, and lots adjacent to them. I witnessed this permissiveness on a cool winter day in 2012, when I went out with street writers-cum-rappers Ashekman (Omar and Mohamed Kabbani) on one of their Sunday morning writing sessions.

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The Kabbani twins roll up to the front of my apartment building in a huge black Hummer. It is only 8 in the morning, but the bass is turned up to a level that even at a busier time of day would compete with the cacophony of Beirut’s traffic in the bustling Hamra district. I climb into the back seat, next to a cardboard box holding several cans of high-end spray paint and a series of sketches, studies of the day’s piece. We proceed through Beirut’s streets, quiet and empty but for some older locals, sanitary workers picking up the detritus of Saturday night’s festivities, and many cats, the city’s sentinels.

As we drive towards the outskirts of the city, Mohamed tells me they scouted this wall a few days ago. I expect the wall to be out of public sight, assuming the twins will worry about “getting caught.” I am therefore surprised when Omar pulls the Hummer up onto a curb on the Charles Helou highway, the busy northern artery that brings traffic into and out of Beirut. The wall is tall, about 10 feet high, and covered in the detritus of old posters, disintegrating from the early winter rains. Rolls of barbed wire, glinting silver in the sun, crown its ledge and I glimpse a small Lebanese flag flying just high enough to avoid catching on its spikes. Mohamed notices my looking, and says, “It’s an army post. There are tanks behind the wall. But don’t worry. It will be fine.”

I am not so sure. The older gentleman manning bright piles of ripe fruit at his stand just a few meters away has noticed us and has not stopped looking since. I wonder if being here is prudent, if perhaps I’ve signed up for something that could have more than minor consequences. From previous conversations with Mohamed, I’ve gathered that he and his brother are pretty well connected politically and socially, though he has been coy about the extent of these connections. In any case, they enjoy a certain *wāṣṭa* that will be useful if someone decides that their project should stop. I cannot claim the same. Still, when Mohamed hands me a trowel with which to remove the layers of old paper stuck to the wall, I do not hesitate. I take it and begin to chip at the wall alongside the brothers.

The layers are surprisingly sticky and stubborn, but we lift up and under with our trowels or pull with our hands, and soon enough the skin of the city - the promotional posters announcing past concerts at venues that may or may not be open anymore, the campaign posters of various parties – starts falling to the sidewalk. I ask about these

places and groups in passing, and neither Omar nor Mohamed seems to know or to particularly care about them. The wall's the thing. The texture of the city's past – its ephemeral fancies and events – must be cleared for them to make their mark.

And yet of course the texture asserts itself anyway. Beneath the grimy paper, we find bullet holes, and the veiny cracks that come to every block of cement as it ages. The army post and the fruit stall, too, are part of the texture, as is the traffic that is now picking up as the day gets going in the city. Clusters of casual tags by other writers – Physh, EpS, and Phat2, among others – bracket the section of wall the twins have chosen for this morning's work. Some of these writers have put up large pieces along this stretch of highway, within easy view of the cars carrying thousands of potential viewers each day.

Our presence on the main road this Sunday morning draws a lot of attention. At one point, a man pulls his small car out of the stream of traffic and over to the curb. He leans over the passenger's seat, where a young boy sits, and rolls down the window. Omar walks over to them, and the man says that he and his son are curious about what the twins are painting. Omar tells them to wait a second, and then brings over the full sketch of the piece so they can see in miniature what the wall will look like once the twins have made their mark. Father and son muse over it, admiring its vibrant colors, and the boy asks if he can take a photo with his phone. Omar enthusiastically agrees and the man backs up the car a bit so that the boy can get the best angle possible. After snapping a few shots, they wave goodbye and pull into the traffic once more.



Figure 17 A Sunday stroller watches as Ashekman work on a large-scale piece. Karantina, Beirut.

Later, an older gentleman walks by, a rare stroller on a Sunday morning, wrapped in a coat and scarf against the damp December air. As he approaches, he eyes the scraps of poster board and cardboard, the small army of spray paint cans and the torn-down posters littering the sidewalk. He stops in front of the wall, hands behind his back, taking it in. Both twins turn around and greet him. “Sabah el kheir,” they say. “Sabah an-noor,” he replies. *Good morning*. He watches them work for a while, Mohamed free styling the biggest part of the piece, while Omar carefully cuts with a penknife the stencils he has sketched on large swaths of cardboard. It is meticulous work, a fact the man seems to appreciate, nodding as he watches. He moves on, continuing his walk.



Figure 18 Omar Kabbani, sketching stencils. Karantina, Beirut.

I start to feel a bit more at ease. No one seems phased by our presence on the side of the highway, or our rather aggressive engagement with the wall, the evidence of which lies scattered all over the pavement. That Omar could take such care in sketching and cutting out Arabic stencils while his brother free-styles on the wall speaks volumes about what sorts of constraints they face, or rather the sorts of constraints from which they are exempt. Even the fruit salesman has stopped looking at us with such intensity, returning



to the work of selling fresh fruit to the people who pull over to his stretch of sidewalk. I catch him glancing over occasionally, keeping up with the work's progress.

But the most obvious evidence of how permissible is the twins' intervention comes when a jeep - marked by the national flag decal and flashing lights of a Lebanese army vehicle - pulls up to the curb. When the passenger side windows roll down, five men become visible sitting in the jeep. They look at me. "Shou hayda?" one passenger asks. *What is this?* I beckon to Mohamed to come speak to the soldiers. He saunters to their car, at ease, and explains that he and his brother are "writers" (*kitaab*) and that they are putting up a new piece of art on the wall. The soldiers want to know what it says. Mohamed says it is just the crew's name, Ashekman. The soldiers laugh, amused that the twins have chosen as their name the word for a car's exhaust pipe. Mohamed does not mention why they chose this name: they see themselves and their art as playing an important role in exposing and expelling the "shit of society." The soldiers pull out their mobile phones to photograph the piece, which by this point is almost finished. "Ktir helū," one says, as they start to drive away. *Very nice.* Mohamed calls after them, telling them to follow Ashekman on Facebook.

### **Writing (in/of) the Public: Beirut's Street Writers**

Like Ashekman, Beirut's street "writers," as most of them prefer to be called, are in the main young and male, and most are between the ages of 19 and 30 years-old. They organize themselves and their work in a variety of constellations. Some, like Yazan Halwani or Ali Rafi, most often write alone, although they sometimes collaborate on larger projects with fellow artists. Many others, however, walk the line between solo

work and writing in “crews.” The main crews in Beirut include REK and ACK.<sup>104</sup> These crews overlap considerably, and include some of the most well-known and visible writers in the city, including EpS, Phat 2, and Sari “Physh” Saade. Ashekman are the exception, rarely working with other crews or writers.

### *Writerly Origins*

Most of Beirut’s writers were children during the civil war, but lived outside Lebanon for the majority of the conflict. Their parents took them away to places like France (where some of them have citizenship) and the Ivory Coast for the duration of the conflict. Thus the writers experienced an exceptional amount of social and economic mobility from an early age. Although they returned to Beirut after the war, their privileged upbringings meant that the majority of writers came late to the geography of war, to the divisions and barricades communities imposed on themselves in efforts to remain safe. They heard war stories from their parents and other relatives, narratives that became integral parts of their childhood and the feelings they had about Beirut. However, they do not share actual memories of the city during wartime, the sights and sounds of violence that colored the city and shaped many of their peers’ experiences of it.

Instead, the divided city presented just the sort of geography that invited the textual trespass most of the writers romanticized as children. All writers I interviewed mentioned being initially inspired by hip hop culture and images of graffiti from the United States and Europe, where young people, especially young men, used graffiti to

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<sup>104</sup> REK members claim that the meaning of the acronym has changed over time, though “Red Eye Kamikazes” is probably the name most associated with the crew, owing in part to their beginnings as self-described “stoners.” ACK stands for “All City Kings.” Another common tag is TG, which belongs to an international group of (mostly French) artists.

claim space for themselves in societies in which they found themselves largely excluded. Most Lebanese writers began sketching on paper at home, practicing their tags and dreaming up bigger pieces, before taking their work public, moving it off the sketchpad and onto the wall. Phat2, one of the younger writers, tells the story of his writerly origins, which rings true for many others:

I started in 2003. Like most kids start doing graffiti, I started on my laptop in my class, at home, just sketches and papers. I kept on doing it until 2009, kept practicing at home without going into the streets. Then in 2009, I made my first piece and the rest is history, like they say.

Most writers recall these initial pieces with a fair amount of self-deprecation and embarrassment. Often they would tag under cover of night, just to see what it felt like, just to see if they could get away with it. Writers recounted similar stories in which their first forays into street writing were not precipitated by experiences of disenfranchisement; the writers did not initially feel they had to write themselves into public space because they had been excluded in some way from public life in the city. Rather, a major life change – like going to university or moving back to Beirut after being raised abroad – precipitated the desire to write. Taking to the streets, writers felt out the walls of their city as they simultaneously redefined the boundaries of their own lives. Remembering his first tag, Phat2 says,

It was embarrassing. It was my first year of university...and I did a piece on the wall of the university. It was even my first week of my first year. So I wanted to try it out, went to the wall, painted it at night, after midnight some time and in the morning it was gone. I did not get the chance to see it in daylight. They painted [over] it.

EpS, too, recalls his initial interest in public writing as being intimately linked to a particular time and place; but, importantly, never to a need to claim space for himself:

When I was in Ivory Coast [as a child] I had already discovered graffiti through magazines and stuff like that and I liked to draw since I was a kid. I liked characters. I always drew funny characters and things like that. Then I discovered graffiti and it was awesome. I wanted to do this. I was looking at pictures and wondering how they get such clean lines, shades and colors. I could go to the shop and the paints were the bad quality. I said I was going to try it and you are never getting a straight line...unless you practice and you have something to relate to. I tried in my friend's room where I painted my first surfboard. I even did a graffiti next to the place where I surfed....When I moved to Lebanon and decided to do graphic design, the six months that I was here studying for my bachelors, I did not go out. I was just working so I drew a lot...I decided not to focus on graffiti to be able to discover other sides and be stuck because on the graphic design side you need to be able to give people another image than the graffiti. So I wanted to experiment on other [things] for two to three years. I did not do [only] graffiti. Then I saw graffiti signs [tags] pop up on the walls here in Beirut and decided I wanted to be a part of it and I took the initiative and did it.

Many writers noted similar connections between their formal education as artists, often as graphic designers, and their work in the street. These connections again suggest a certain privilege endemic to Beirut's most prominent writers. That is, the majority of them described their street interventions as stemming in part from cultivating aesthetic sensibilities rather than from the need to stake political claims out in public space.

*El Hitan 'am Tehkini: Chaos and Possibility in 2006*<sup>105</sup>

Cultural practices, of course, do not exist in a vacuum; rather, their meanings are determined by the contexts in which they are executed. And so it was that street writing's meanings and potential changed for many writers during a particular episode in Lebanese history. The markings that caught EpS's eye had cropped up during the 2006

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<sup>105</sup> Once again, I am indebted to Ashekman for a pithy heading. This title of this section was taken from their song of the same name, which translates to "The Walls Are Talking to Me." The video can be found on YouTube, and is worth watching for its visual cacophony of many of Beirut's tags.

Lebanon War, the 34-day conflict with Israel that left large parts of Lebanon's south, as well as the southern suburbs of Beirut, destroyed. This devastating period came on the heels of the heady Independence Intifada (or Cedar Revolution), a response to former PM Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination that ultimately ousted Syria from Lebanon. Lebanon's political constellations had been shifting over the following year, bringing about a period of great change and momentum, which was halted by the onset of yet another war.<sup>106</sup>

Young people responded the war's onset with a hedonism born of despair and resilience. They partied in protest, a staunch refusal to respond with fear to Israel's military action. Although some young people were privileged enough to have the option to leave Lebanon, holding passports from other countries, many chose to remain in Beirut as a form of defiance and solidarity. Rock band Scrambled Eggs put on a show in a basement café, advertising it with hastily printed posters that read "See You in Beirut, Whatever Happens." People stayed out late, drinking and dancing as the bombs fell within earshot.

But for these festivities, many streets stayed empty during that month. The atmosphere, a strange mix of violence and revelry, made the city absolutely ideal for street writing. According to Beirut's writers, this marked the beginning of the scene's heyday. As Physh remembers,

To be honest...people were partying all the time, everyone was drunk on the streets all the time. It was a wild one. It was sad for all the other stuff that happened, but there was still a positive side. For the first time,

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<sup>106</sup> In the wake of Hariri's assassination, the Cedar Revolution, or Independence Intifada, called for the end of Syria's occupation in Lebanon. On 14 March 2005, a month after the assassination, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese demonstrated in Beirut to that effect. A new anti-Syria political block too shape in the aftermath, taking its name from the date of the demonstration, March 14. The pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance also formed during this time. Both alliances include been 13-15 parties, across the sectarian spectrum.

*everyone* was drinking and getting along...[Everyone] is [usually] really...stuck to their groups.

I heard similar stories from friends and family: the feeling of community, often primarily constituted around one's upbringing in a particular ethnoreligious identity or geographical area, expanded in the moment of crisis. For a brief time, Lebanese had a common cause around which to rally, and a common enemy against which to protest.<sup>107</sup>

This sense of solidarity expanded across Beirut, and informed how the writers were working and moving in the city. With the exception of the southern suburbs, which were under attack by Israeli planes, the city quite suddenly opened up, both literally and figuratively. Writers moved through Beirut, taking advantage of the *esprit de corps* to put up big pieces as well as quick tags. Their movements and interventions demonstrated a shift in territorial logics: while previous to this period, such marking would be a writer's way of laying claim to a *specific* neighborhood, in the wake of the war, the sense of ownership changed, broadening to include the majority of the capital.

Their work in the city echoed – indeed, was made possible by – the sense of togetherness brought on by the conflict; at this rare moment, national solidarity took pride of place over other loyalties.

Like many Beirutis, writers felt a new affinity for their city, and were inspired to publicly suggest that a larger sense of community could be sustained, and that it could happen from the streets. Street writing had been recast for them as a potentially effective mode of political expression. The writers did not buy into the idea of the Lebanese

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<sup>107</sup> Lamyā, previously mentioned in this dissertation and a staunch supporter of the Katā'ib Party, remarked to me during my first visit to Lebanon in 2009: "You've got to hand it to Hizballah, they really saved Lebanon."

government or particular parties - especially Hizballah, which had been largely glorified for its singular efforts in defeating the Israeli army - as entities capable of promoting and maintaining the unity glimpsed in 2006. Rather, writers located this potential *in the city and its people* – in other words, in the street. Suddenly the significance of the “street” reverberated with possibility – venue, audience, and the force that might carry out street writing’s promises of cross-communal engagements. To that effect, Physh and Phat2 did a series of collaborative large-scale projects with slogans like “Beirut Will Never Die” (*Beirut Ma Betmut*) and “If Beirut Could Speak” (*Beirut In Hakat*). The focus of these pieces inscribed on the walls of the city the idea of a connected Beirut, one that could live and speak in unison. The writers insisted that by turning away from religion and politics, they were breaking with a certain “Lebanese mentality” that Phat2 describes as tantamount to being a sheep, where one joins up with a political party or movement simply because of one’s background and upbringing.

Physh in particular remembers wanting his work during the years following the 2006 war to contribute a social message to the people of Lebanon.

I try to stay social [rather than overtly political] since I do not really believe in governments. So I try to stick to something everyone would understand. Not just one side, sect, or whatever...[The work of the writers] was the only sociopolitical graffiti that was not stenciled and about a party or some religious sect or whatever.

Sometimes the writing took on an unintentional meaning as the public at large viewed it and began to comment on it. Phat2 reflects on his individual work in the years after 2006. Public readings of and responses to his pieces contributed to the meaning he saw in his work, and encouraged him to reevaluate it as a force for social change:

[Political and social] meanings came along by default. It was not

something that I intended it to do, it was not my goal from the beginning, it just came along by itself. At first, I started out just doing texts, any writing, just vandalizing stuff. Then I realized later on that people were taking notes and were seeing things that I was not seeing or intending to do. They were interpreting my works by themselves and finding stuff that I did not mean to do. It started taking form by itself, then I realized it *is* what I am doing! ... It is just like in Lebanon, you know how everything is separated into political parties? You have the Lebanese Forces, the Patriotic Movement. Everyone has his party and they think that their area *belongs* to them. So by going around and tagging their areas [we] are kind of infiltrating their areas and reminding them that that is *not* their area, it is *Lebanon* and that is *Beirut*. It does not belong to you. It belongs to *all* of us! ... I am kind of breaking all those limits, little by little, small strides here and there.

In Phat2's recollections, street writing offers the possibility of radical connection.

Writer and street (literal and metaphorical) inform each other, the writer benefiting from the interpretations offered by "readers," those people who encounter the work out in the city. Indeed, ideally, such interplay between the work of inscription and reception would extend both the space and time of the writing itself, such that public responses to a work would encourage self-reflection on the part of the writer and inform pieces more attuned to different communities' needs, or to the commonalities between these communities.

Unfortunately, Phat2's experience as a conduit for connection was not long-lived.

### *Post-2006: A Denial of the Political*

In recent years, the troubles that have long plagued Lebanon - political conflict or stasis, lack of infrastructure, gross inequality - have been increasingly highlighted through a series of violent episodes and bureaucratic stagnation. The same politicians have more or less stayed in power, despite continued mismanagement of the country's resources. Parliament illegally extended its term, for example, and a presidential election



has been deferred over and over again for over a year. Meanwhile, the conflict in Syria continues to spill over the borders into northern Lebanon, and even into Beirut, where old tensions have at times been reignited and suicide bombings have increased. The influx of refugees puts additional strain on the already insufficient Lebanese infrastructure, which in the best of times cannot provide clean water or electricity to the country's regular population of approximately four million.

Some writers have responded to this hostile climate by taking up the mantle of social responsibility. EpS is one writer who has taken the opportunity to produce work with an explicitly social message in light of these problems. The piece for which he is best known is *simple* - a wall-sized power outlet in gray scale. The outlet is its own closed circuit of representation. Nothing can be plugged in, the plug emits no real charge. When paired with the slogan scrawled across its higher reaches, however, it offers a pointed reminder of one of the problems faced by Lebanese throughout the country. The slogan reads, simply, "Power to the People." Paired with the image of the outlet, it reminds Lebanese that the government has continually failed to provide this basic utility - electrical power - to the *entire nation*.<sup>108</sup> It is, further, a commentary on how powerless the people have been to change this and the many other ills resulting from a corrupt and ineffective state system. If only because of the fact that they suffer a host of similar abuses at the hands of their government, the Lebanese constitute a "people."

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<sup>108</sup> Here it is important to mention that some communities are affected more than others. In wealthier areas, for example, some families can afford a generator, which switches on when the power goes out. In villages, one wealthy family will often own a generator and charge others in the community to use it.



Figure 19 EpS, *Power to the People*. Beirut

Many such messages can be found in the most visible places, especially along the Charles Helou highway leading out of the city, and in the Sin el Fil industrial area between Gemmayzeh and the Armenian quarter, Bourj Hammoud. Writers select these areas because they stretch between neighborhoods, along large thoroughfares that carry traffic in and out of the city. EpS speaks of choosing specific sites for the pieces in which he expresses his social and political desires:

...When I want to do something very exposed it means I have a message for this and I want it to be here because I know people are going to see it and I am going to bring them to react, so I am not going to do it in a hidden place. When I do this, I do it because I know I want a lot of people to see it and I want this reaction from them.

Indeed, EpS's "Power to the People" piece, executed along the Charles Helou highway, was made legend in an iconic photo that appeared in 2012. In the photograph, a lone Sukleen worker, recognizable in his uniform and by the refuse clamp and plastic bag

he carries, walks in front of the piece.<sup>109</sup> EpS's work took on a recharged significance by way of this photo's publication and circulation via social media. With the presence of the Sukleen worker, the art now seemed to speak volumes about the waves of immigrants coming into the country, many from Syria, who were fleeing from violence and then faced new manifestations of it – in the form of homelessness, discrimination, random attacks throughout the country - once they reached Lebanon.<sup>110</sup>

Yet not all writers have been so inspired to engage in public social commentary or debate in Lebanon post-2005/2006. Often enough, a feeling of bitter disillusionment has taken root and festered, changing once again how the writers understand themselves and their work in relation to the city. Physh, for example, has felt a shift in his work. Disappointed by the persistent divisions that have lingered and grown since 2006, he claims his work has become increasingly apolitical. Instead, he writes from a place of frustration, in search of catharsis.

Usually whenever I am going out and I get a little drunk, I get the urge and I just go write. . . .It is a form of relaxation, stress relief. I feel better after I do it, every time. I feel more relaxed, like a weight was lifted from my shoulders. Perfect. It is like a drug.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Sukleen workers can be found all over Beirut, either on foot or riding in sea-green trucks that match their uniforms. Their job is to pick up the city's refuse, whether it has been piled dutifully in neighborhood bins or has been left on sidewalks and in gutters. With environmental concerns and littering sanctions only in their nascent stages in Lebanon, there is plenty of this waste to collect and the Sukleen workers can be seen day and night working through the streets of Beirut. They are not only marked by their uniforms, but also by other signifiers. Most Sukleen workers are foreign and poor, members of the very population that inhabits the Karantina quarter where, incidentally, the Sukleen company keeps its waste management plant.

<sup>110</sup> Popular media and NGOs have documented numerous attacks, often carried out by civilians, on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including the deaths of several men in Beirut. For more information, please see <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/30/lebanon-rising-violence-targets-syrian-refugees>

<sup>111</sup> Artistic street interventions are often affective experiences not only for those who view them, but also for those who execute them, as Halsey and Young (2006) and Young (2014) have shown. The act of writing in public space, whether illicit or not, offers an adrenaline charge, or a

Many writers deal with their frustration by going on “bombing campaigns,” during which they write their personal tags over and over until they have used up all the paint in their cans. Despite his pointedly critical interventions, which aimed to cultivate a sense of solidarity across the city, EpS speaks to the catharsis of “bombing” in an effort to mark out his own space in Beirut:

[With] the bombing, you think less. It is more that you just let it out as it comes... When I go bombing, I would choose some place and then walk around and paint as long as I have paint, do as many stuff as I can on many places.

Simple visibility seems to be a priority for most of the writers these days. Phat2, for example, selects highly visible spaces simply to draw attention to *himself*. Initially gratified to see his work uniting, at least symbolically, different districts of the city, he claims he has left behind that part of his writing. He has “given up” on politics and on the political or social potential of street writing, and art in general. Now, he says, he only paints for fun, for himself. For him, the main goal of visibility is simple notoriety, the recognition of his name in the space of the city. He described a piece he was planning at a construction site:

It is between two zones, right on an intersection, cars going this way, this way and that way. It is a very busy place especially during the day. I would be a fool not to paint there. I am going to use the cover of the night and the construction works to paint it and once everything clears up and they finish construction, it will be spot on! [My work] is in plain sight and clear. *It is just my name, nothing behind it.* (my emphasis)

Though the writing has apparently been evacuated of any meaning beyond the mere existence of the sign in space, the bombing campaigns sometimes have a territorial

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therapeutic effect. In her 2014 study, Young notes that many of her interviewees cited a traumatic event, illness, or personal loss as motivating factors in their art.

logic. All of the writers know each other by varying degrees: despite the media attention given to Beirut's writers over the last few years, the scene is still fairly small. Despite the fact that crews sometimes carry out larger projects together, they often walk a fine line between collaboration and competition. Moving around the city, one sees pockets of tags that look like textual dog piles. Once someone tags a building or wall during a bombing campaign, that space becomes particularly alluring to other writers. They, too, want to make their presence felt in the space, or to protect their "turf." As EpS notes:

[My neighborhood] is a territory. Whenever I would see a piece in my area right here [Jal el Dib, on the outskirts of the city], I am going to go and have a piece right next to it and say 'I am here too'

The writers describe experiencing a physical and emotional emptying through bombing, with which they unload their frustrations upon the city they both love and loathe. The satisfaction they experience during their "bombing campaigns," of course, depends upon the extent to which they can fill up the city with their names, writing themselves into it, carving a space all their own on the walls that have again been transformed into barriers between communities, rather than the medium or text that connects them. To be sure, trespassing these boundary lines through the city in some ways recalls and repeats the geographies and practices of war. Writers, like soldiers in other eras, fight to gain territory, and to defend their own space against outside influence.

### *Beautification and the Limits of Urban Engagement*

And yet, although perhaps the territoriality expressed by street writers, and the catharsis they describe in indiscriminate "bombing campaigns" may seem like mindless vandalism, all the writers spoke of a deep affection and respect for Beirut. As Physh

notes,

In the beginning, it was mostly ‘Beirut’ [that I wrote]. Even now, people are writing ‘Beirut’ but we [REK crew] are off of that. We wrote a lot of ‘Beirut.’ It is time for us to sort of represent ourselves for a bit. [But] Beirut is always in what I am writing.... We have to represent our city. It is where we grew up and what taught us everything.

Physh is, of course, talking not only about the physical space of the city, but also its inhabitants. Indeed, every writer I interviewed also spoke of the desire to cover up the city’s war scars by painting over its pockmarked walls, and offering something beautiful to the public. Physh recalls an early desire to cover up the damage of war with paint. Nearly two decades of conflict, as well as the intermittent fighting that came after the civil war, resulted in a city that Physh describes as ugly, and in need of care:

It was 20 years of just explosives. So we would find whole walls shot up by bullets. We started to use those to our advantage. We have so much cement in this country. Everything looks like cement, so we attack those as much as we can....[These] places need a lot of paint because it is all gray and dull.

Mohamed Kabbani of Ashekman echoes this sentiment:

I think the Beirut municipality should pay us because we are beautifying the city. Really, frankly, because you see like all the walls are full of posters of pop singers, of politicians, and even of bullet holes. What we do is simply cover it....we are doing something positive.<sup>112</sup>

Both Physh and Mohamed speak of the rehabilitative qualities of their work.

Writing in the streets is an “attack” on the ugliness of a postwar city, where cement has been deployed to cover up the city’s wounds. It is also something beautiful that counteracts an urban visual landscape populated by billboards peddling the equally empty

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<sup>112</sup> Alison Young notes that street writers do not only want their work to be oppositional (Young 2014, 29). Many are expressly concerned with how their work might *beautify* space, either because the artwork is itself a thing of beauty, or because it brings beauty to passersby (Ibid.,30).

messages of political and cultural icons. The writers thus see their work as both physically and ideologically healing the space of the city. Their work, as they understand it, accomplishes what the state cannot: literally working from the ground up, the writers reveal the city – its problems and possibilities, its ugliness and its beauty – to its people.

This work is also deeply personal. EpS describes his desire to make the city beautiful as a sort of home-making, in which he writes himself – his emotions, his state of mind – onto Beirut's walls. His work decorates the space of the city in a series of portraits, the way one would hang photographs on a living room wall. He notes that he chooses both space, subject, and colors based on his mood at the time:

The way that I do the fill in is aggressive, mellow, whatever you feel whenever you do the piece. It is like taking a picture of these emotions and that is the picture. You can remember it.... This is what I like about it, it is like when you are in your place and you hang stuff inside. You like to see them, you place this one here, and this artwork here because you have them like this and you feel better and at home when you have this one.

Indeed, although they profess an anti-politics to their current work, and suggest that they write now out of sheer self-interest, how the writers describe their relationship to Beirut suggests a longing for the city and its possibilities. Their movements crisscrossing through the city, almost compulsive tagging of its walls, and their desire to create something beautiful in the midst of destruction and decrepitude, all suggest a particular politics to the writers' practice, a desire to heal the city's wounds and to bind themselves to it. Even simple tags, which do nothing more than record the presence of the writer, a ghost of his movements through a particular area, have a message. As EpS says,

Even when I am just writing EpS on the wall, it is the same feeling.

Sometimes I do not need to have a complete message, and it is not always about explaining. But I think the fact that you go out and just paint is a message itself already.

This message takes shape not only in the places where the writers make their mark, but also in light of the places where they *do not*.

Some limits are set by common knowledge about the city's boundaries. In other words, writers do not cross these boundaries because they understand that to do so would be to disrespect the borders of territory that is clearly not there for their use, a choice which could be dangerous. Although the writers professed bravado and a desire to see their names across the city as motivating factors behind their work, each acknowledged, albeit begrudgingly, that certain areas remained forbidden. For example, nearly every writer claimed they would write down in Dāḥiyya, in Beirut's southern suburbs, an area characterized by its tight-knit community and affiliation with Hizballah. However, on my walks through this area, I never once saw one of their tags, with the exception of hop hop group Katibe 5's Jazzar, a Palestinian Lebanese writer who has lived in the neighborhood most of his life. EpS admitted to being wary of writing in Dāḥiyyah:

It is going to be harder [in certain neighborhoods]... As soon as you are there, take your stuff out and starting painting, people [sometimes] come and start asking questions, but there are areas that you *know* people are going to come and start asking questions. [They] come and go to you and see what you are doing. Most of the times you have to choose somewhere that you are more comfortable. Eventually if you go to Dāḥiyya, even if you are not going there to paint, most of the time if you are not from around here they know, so people will look at you and try to see.

In Dāḥiyya, as indeed in any other neighborhood where one feels one does not belong, one cannot simply insert oneself, physically or ideologically, into the space.

Writing or even moving through the area might be seen as an affront to the community in



question. Certainly such publics police their public spaces. As my friend Hassan reminded me when I visited him at his falafel shop in Dāḥiyya, “You need to be careful with your cell phone when you come here. You don’t want people thinking that you’re taking pictures. They’ll take it from you.” Just *who* might be watching was unclear, but Hassan noted that just because I could not see them did not mean they could not see me. I was clearly not a local, and simply not intimate enough with the neighborhood to know where to look for them. Local watchmen were everywhere, and with good reason: Dāḥiyya is one of Beirut’s most vulnerable neighborhoods, due to its heavily Shi’i population and Hizballah’s presence. This does not mean that Dāḥiyya is without its own street writing and other unique visual signifiers. Posters of Hassan Nasrallah adorn walls and shop windows, the party’s unmistakable yellow and green flags fly from lampposts and minarets, and quick-draw graffiti mark up underpasses and the outsides of apartment buildings. Importantly, however, these signifiers are all produced by members of the public that claims the neighborhood as its own. Writing there is one is not part of this community would not only be disrespectful of certain invisible boundary lines, but also had the potential to incur the suspicion of the neighborhood, or even the mobilization of local security forces. Similarly, Jazzar noted that Dāḥiyya was basically the only place he felt comfortable tagging. People in the neighborhood know him, and the fact that he lives in Dāḥiyya means he has a certain right to the space.

Then again, there are some areas that are off-limits to most of the writers because they consider them “too beautiful” - either because they are traditional quarters or because they are very new, like Solidère’s downtown. Though Physh admitted to one “bombing” incident at a cupcake shop downtown, he says that none of the writers

typically tags in the BCD. Like the outlying Dāḥiyya neighborhood, Beirut's center has a heavy, if more obvious, security presence. As previously described, army soldiers guard central avenues, and private security guards stand watch outside of the area's boutiques. Surprisingly, however, Physh limits his work in the area not because of this surveillance, but rather because he appreciates what he considers to be the area's beauty:

It is a nice area. I like it. I feel like it is an antique and I would not carve my name in an antique table. It looks nice. It does not need my graffiti. [People] hate it because of what it stands for and how it was built. But that does not mean it is not pretty. A lot of people hate models, but they are still pretty, right?

Interestingly, all the writers noted that they rarely visited the BCD, as it is not a comfortable space for them. Although, as Physh says, it may be “pretty,” its restaurants, clubs, and many of its retail shops were too fancy. More than that, however, many of the writers claimed that the BCD simply did not *feel like* Beirut. As an ironically exclusive space, the capital's center did not constitute part of the writers' urban imaginary.

Beirut's writers are thus in the process, even in the midst of continued disenfranchisement and frustration, of *making* the city. Though to be sure the practice of marking the street is informed by a certain masculinist bravado - “who has the biggest balls,” as Phat2 puts it - the refusal of the overtly political is in itself a politics, in which, in spite of the way that individuals feel crushed under the weight of the Lebanese state's inefficiency and encroaching violence, these same individuals literally write themselves into the cityscape, marking it as their own. Memories and identities get left in colorful ink on the walls of the city; loyalties and arguments are commemorated in the small dog piles of tags and, sometimes, the more confrontational work of writing over each other's pieces. They feel themselves, perhaps more than most, to be part of the very fabric of the

city itself, its different quarters opening up because of the medium/genre in which they have chosen to work. Though many of the writers have left behind a role that has overt social or political implications, the fact that they still try to insert themselves into as many spaces as they can, to cover as much territory as possible (obvious restraints excepting) nevertheless links the city together in a chain of common signs that is difficult to miss if one but pays a little attention to the writing on the wall.

Of course, there is another tension here, a certain flipping of hedonism from graffiti's early heyday in Beirut, when social and political change both felt like possibilities, to what might seem like an overt self-interest, a falling back on personal gain and fame. This frequent indifference of the writers seems to echo the apathy with which the general Lebanese population is often charged.

Yet sometimes writers' interventions carefully straddle the line between politics and aesthetics, the beauty of the work thus artfully *obscuring* its politics, or at least blunting the bite of its commentary. Such a technique is particularly useful when writers decide to deal with hot-button issues. In recent years, the calligraphiti work of writers like Yazan Halwani has been drawing attention across the city. Halwani's work is notable for its striking artistry. His pieces grace entire walls, both adorning the cityscape and calling attention to the city's contours. The majority of the pieces center around artfully shaded likenesses of well-known Lebanese personalities, from national icons like Fairuz to local heroes, like Ali Abdullah, a homeless man who was well-known around the AUB/Bliss Street area before his death in 2013. Intricate Arabic script haloes their faces, demonstrating an artistry that at first was criticized for its departure from more "traditional" Western street art styles so popular in the MENA region. In many ways, in

fact, Halwani is an outlier amongst Beirut's writers: not only is his style notably more intricate than other work, but he also encodes within it messages that speak to Lebanon's difficulties.

In 2012, as Halwani was starting to gain attention in Beirut, I had the chance to take a bus tour he led to different street art pieces around the city as part of Beirut Art Center's "White Wall" exhibition.<sup>113</sup> One piece was particularly indicative not only of Halwani's skill, but also of the political and social climate in Lebanon. Seen at a distance from the road, the piece appears to be a large-scale portrait of Samir Kassir. Like Halwani's other portraits, it is carefully rendered, its blues and oranges laced through with Arabic writing. Despite its beauty, executing this piece, he told his audience, presented a big risk, not only because Kassir was a somewhat controversial figure, but also because of the quote attributed to Kassir that Halwani included next to the portrait: "Inna Al Ihba'at Laysa Kadaran." *Desperation is not a fate.* Worried that security forces might read the portrait and its quotation as either a critique of Lebanon or an incitement to radical change, Halwani took care to ensure that the full content of the piece could not easily be viewed from the street. As he described it, coming at the piece from the side while driving, or standing directly in front of it, would not reveal its message. Police stopped by once or twice, on foot or in a car, while he was working, and asked what he was painting. After admiring the calligraphy and bright colors, they seemed satisfied with his vague answers that he was working on something quite abstract and they left him

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<sup>113</sup> The White Wall exhibition was held at the Beirut Art Center, and in Beirut's streets, between September and November 2012. Billed as giving "new impetus to the Lebanese graffiti scene," it featured 15 international artists, collaborating with local writers. See <http://www.beirutartcenter.org/exhibitions.php?exhibid=278&statusid=3>

alone. Seen from a distance, however, the quote is quite clear. One can see it from the overpasses that link some of Beirut's neighborhoods.

The couching of both critique and a desire for connection within pop culture icons has been another technique taken up by Beirut's street writers over the last couple of years. Halwani, for example, has mobilized popular culture icons in his recent work. In June 2015, he executed a piece called "Eternal Sabah," a portrait of Lebanese diva Sabah who, by Halwani's estimation, "was loved by all and was able to challenge the rules of society." Although in Sabah's case, these challenges had more to do with gender expectations than with cross-communal solidarity, the location of the mural lends it a particular politics as well. Halwani chose a building known as the "Heart of Beirut" for the piece. During the pre-war years, the building housed the literary Horseshoe Café, an intellectual hotbed for Arab artists and thinkers. As Halwani notes on this Facebook page, this mural seeks to help resurrect Hamra as the diverse Arab cultural hub it once was.

In January 2014, two bombs in the Haret Hreik area of Dāḥiyya killed eight and wounded 123. Claimed by the militant Sunni groups Abdullah Azzam Brigades and the al Nusra Front (al Qaeda affiliates), the bombs were linked to the fighting in Syria. Ashekman responded by creating a piece featuring 1980s video game character Bomberman. In the piece, Bomberman is running, carrying a bomb, past graffiti reading "Maṭlub," *Wanted*. The piece is not located in Dāḥiyya, for reasons mentioned above, a fact that in some ways makes it even more powerful. The tragedy's import is lifted out of its neighborhood, the public space in which occurred, and is transplanted elsewhere, where those who view it are incited to catch its perpetrators.

And yet not all commentary on Lebanon's political and social issues garners the same support, or is allowed the same visibility.

Here I would like to offer the story of Semaan Khawam to illustrate some of the limitations of public expression in Beirut. Indeed, in comparison to the street writers' experiences working Beirut, Khawam's reveal another side of the politics of beautification. That is, even the obviously political can be rendered innocuous, publicly read and appreciated for its aesthetics, when skillfully executed. By contrast, however, Khawam's overtly political work, in its bare social and political commentary, shows the limits of public discourse about some of Lebanon's most historically contentious issues.

### **Trespassing the Lines of Memory: Semaan's Story**

Semaan Khawam is a slight, handsome man in his early 40s. His tousled hair, square-framed glasses, and stern mouth give him an almost professorial look. He speaks directly, from the heart, taking long drags on his cigarettes between phrases. When something strikes him as funny, which is often, his mouth broadens widely, letting out a contagious laugh.

Semaan is a Syrian-Lebanese artist residing in the Doura area of Beirut, just north of the Armenian quarter, Bourj Hammoud. He moved to Lebanon in 1988, towards the end of the civil war. Though taking up residence in a war zone may seem an unlikely decision, Semaan was compelled to move. Several people in his family had problems in the Syrian regime, including his uncle, a doctor who was forced to work for the Assad family; and his father, a journalist who incurred suspicion because of his work. Nearly his whole family made the move, a transition made possible by his mother's joint

Lebanese-Syrian citizenship. In Beirut, Semaan bounced between relatives' homes in East Beirut throughout the war, collecting the experiences and memories that inform his current work.

During the last two years of fighting, Semaan witnessed skirmishes between various groups, which he often watched from his balcony. When the violence ramped up, he would sit away from the windows of his flat to avoid stray bullets and write furiously in journals that would inform him later work. He became accustomed to the sounds of war, he says. The gunshots and shelling were soon familiar, and when fighting abated for a bit, he would scavenge the streets for the casings and metal they left behind. He collected some for himself, but there was a market for such things, and with money tight, he took advantage of the opportunity to make some cash by selling these remnants to people who could refashion them into secondhand, but viable, weaponry.

Other sensory experiences proved more difficult to assimilate. The smells of garbage and death made the air heavy. Semaan described these:

The smells, the smells are still stuck in my head. I think one thing can bring all these cities [at war] together and it is the smell of war, the gunpowder and the garbage. The death is a common thing also...The sounds you get used to, but until now when there is the smell of garbage, when they burn garbage...[or when] they do not pick up the garbage....it is really hard to forget. It gets stuck.

Semaan argues that the experience of war is itself a major animating and *unifying* force throughout the region.

In this society, between Libya and Syria, in Arab society, the notion of war is viewed from the day you are born. You have an enemy for the country, and your government is your own enemy. It is a given thing: you are an enemy for your own government, because you cannot go against it....[You] disappear. Simply, you disappear.

Disappearance is not always physical, of course; though as noted in Chapter 2, people disappear all the time in times of war, Semaan alludes to a more subtle, perhaps more insidious, fading away. People fade into the background in the wake of failed promises, the threat of violence, and poverty, all of which they learn to accept as parts of their lives.

Semaan's work pushes against the expectation of acquiescence, the ways in which people take for granted that their lives will always hang in the balance of larger forces against which they are powerless to fight. Though he identifies mostly as a painter and poet, by his estimation such art will not effect change, principally because it is "not addressing the right people." Instead, he saves his political work for the street, for the public at large.

The street art...has nothing to do with [my other art]; it is my political work. As an activist, I use the street to say whatever I want to say directly because I do not trust the media. I do not trust the newspapers. They are [each] part of a political party. The work that is on the street, *that* brings the work closer to the people.

For Semaan, the media acts as another force or institution that maintains the anomie endemic to the Lebanese public sphere, rather than engendering dialog and debate. The street instead is the medium on which he chooses to write his texts. Addressing the common experience of war, in the public space of the street, Semaan believes, can effect radical change in terms of changing people's perspectives and expectations. By calling out what is common, he works to challenge what people have come to expect, the desperation that is taken for granted.

If I don't change the scenery, nothing is going to change...[we] need to change the scenery of the city...Because geography in the city, the urban planning of the city, the look of it will change. In terms of perspective,



when your perspective has changed, your thoughts will change according to it...It's a process.

Semaan's work marks up the visual terrain of East Beirut, though he has also ventured into Hamra, in the western part of the city. Many of the pieces openly provoke, such as a series of three toilets - in red, blue, and black - that read "Throw the government in the toilet. Throw the elections in the toilet," direct commentary on state corruption.<sup>114</sup> Another, ubiquitous, tag consists of a miniature green soldier with black boots and a black Kalashnikov rifle. Sometimes, one finds a set of dates scrawled beneath the boots: "1975- ". The first year marks the beginning of the civil war, and the absent ending date of course marks the absence of its end. Though he does not sign his work as many younger writers do, often a little cartoon stencil bearing a striking resemblance to his face appears nearby these pieces.

Semaan has seen his stencils defaced, mostly blacked out by cheap paint from spray cans, or Sharpie markers. He welcomes such textual violence, seeing it as the opening of dialog:

For me, it can diffuse the tension between the people on the street, when people can start to relate to one another in that language - in the art language. Because whenever someone comes to erase where I paint instead of shouting, instead of shooting at him, [it is a conversation]. This is the street art 'tribute' ...the way it can communicate with the people, whether they like it or not.

Semaan's provocations have garnered not only public attention, but also the

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<sup>114</sup> Lebanese elections are famously frustrating events, with accusations of vote-buying and ballot-stuffing rampant at every round. Most recently, Lebanon has been unable to elect a new president over the past year. According to the Lebanese constitution, a candidate must earn 2/3 of Parliament's votes. None of the first-round candidates managed to meet this threshold, in part owing to pro-Hizballah members of Parliament boycotting the voting sessions to avoid electing a president (always a Maronite Christian) who would question their party's fighting in Syria. For more information, see the Carnegie Middle East Center's website: <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=58965>

notice of the authorities. In September 2011, he felt the weight of this attention for the first time. While working in Karantina on a public mural meant to commemorate the civil war, two men in street clothes approached him and asked what he was doing. These men, Semaan says, were military police. They detained him for three hours before having him sign a contract vowing that he would never do this sort of art again. Semaan left the mural unfinished, but the next day found him covering a different wall with his soldier stencils. He was caught twice more while he worked, and called into two different police stations. The last time, he refused to go down to the station. As a result, he was charged with “violation of administrative charges” and vandalism, and a trial was set for April 2012.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> See <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/5872>. SKeyes (Samir Kassir Eyes) Center is a Lebanese watchdog organization that monitors actions taken against the cultural producers (journalists, artists, musicians, intellectuals, etc), and defends them in the event that their freedom expression is violated. The organization furnished a lawyer for Khawam, and holds many of the documents pertinent to his trial. For a time, I was in touch with Ayman Mhanna, Executive Director of the Samir Kassir Foundation (the organization that founded SKeyes), about accessing these documents. As of spring 2015, I have yet to see them.



Figure 20 One of Semaan Khawam's soldiers. Mar Mikhael, Beirut.

The trial's announcement drew the attention of young activists, who turned out in droves for a "Day of Expression" in support of Semaan in February 2012, using stencils he made to paint the city with anti-censorship messages. Civil society organizations involved themselves as well: SKeyes, the branch of the Samir Kassir Foundation concerned with censorship, furnished Semaan with a trial lawyer, and later recruited him to speak publicly about media freedom in Lebanon as part of the Foundation's "Small Talk" lecture series.

Semaan's work and subsequent arrest are the rule, rather than the exception, to

public dissent in Lebanon. Far from the politics of beauty that informs the work of the younger graffiti writers, Semaan work touches topics and institutions that many people feel to be untouchable: shared memory of violence and its inevitable, cyclical return; and state entities like the army and the government. Other artists doing similar work have faced similar consequences. Bloggers Ali Fakhry and Khodor Salameh were detained after they were caught spraying slogans in support of the Syrian revolution in 2012. The resulting protests saw the injury of members of the media by the ISF (Internal Security Forces). The fact that such arrests and violence continue suggests that authorities are only willing to look the other way, as they often do with street writers and their crews, when the message being written on the city at least *appears* to maintain the status quo, a fact which reveals one set of fault lines that continue to inform public discourse in Beirut, and in Lebanon more generally.<sup>116</sup> Memories of past conflicts color public discourse *and* public space in Beirut, shades of which are made even more vibrant in the shadow thrown over Lebanon by the specter of the civil war in Syria. Trouble arises when people get caught outlining its lineages and current contours.

Nevertheless, when we spoke, Semaan had bigger plans in the works, in the form of what he is tentatively calling the Beirut Laboratory. Mean to be a permanent interactive space, the Beirut Lab would be a site where people could both share and archive their memories of the war.

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<sup>116</sup> A more recent, markedly absurd illustration: at the 2015 Miss Universe pageant, Doron Matalon (Miss Israel) snapped a selfie with Saly Greige (Miss Lebanon) and two other contestants. When the image circulated on social media, critics demanded that Miss Lebanon be stripped of her title for posing with the representative of an enemy state. Michel Pharon, Lebanon's Tourism Minister, ruled that she should keep her title, as she did not have bad intentions, as evidenced by the apology she issued on Facebook, in which she claims she was "photobombed" by Miss Israel, who had been trying to capture her on film since the beginning of the competition.

Semaan has a theory about memory and war:

...The people are their own memorials. [We] can take my experience and your experience and we need to put them all together. Your story is not enough, my story is not enough. [We must] build the whole picture.

For Khawam, narrating shared memory will lift the veil on the true nature of suffering. Suffering, such as it is, is not individual, but is something that stretches across time and space. Yet though the impetus to mend, repair, and stitch together narratives from across the city is strong, and Semaan has found collaborators, he has had difficulty securing funding, and so the project remains as yet unrealized. Still, Semaan says he will continue to work on publicly disseminating his very singular message:

I have a simple message, whether you agree with it or not, that is a different thing. But when I do it [street art], I do it with the intention that it is for *everybody*. The simple message is wake up. Wake up!

## **Conclusion**

Semaan's work and the work of the street writers represent distinct ways of claiming the city. The street writers show their engagement by paying attention to aesthetics in public space, and reflecting on how their art might unite the city's different enclaves. In writing through the city, they have sometimes hoped, perhaps they have shown that the city belongs to everyone. Semaan, too, writes himself and his politics into the city, hoping to provoke the passersby to voice their opinions. This work, he says, is for *everybody*, an imaginary community or public that can and should talk back to him and to each other.

Though Semaan work has incited a more vitriolic response than the work by the street writers, he and they both seem not only to desire a crossing of borders, but also to

believe that, if others desired to do the same, they could. That is, Semaan and the street writers believe in the power of the people to artistically and politically engage with the city in the same way they do. In a way, then, they too hold dear the democratic potential of an art *for and by* the public.

However, in some ways their art and the cultural and institutional responses to it *still obscure* the fact that there are other publics in Beirut, publics that perhaps are not privileged to participate in this sort of writing, in which both self and community are inscribed into and stretched across the city. After all, both the street writers and Semaan, though they have by turns been questioned or even detained by state entities, were still let go, and show no signs of stopping their very public work. But for Palestinian refugees, for example, the city is a very different sort of space. Though they constitute an important part of the city's fabric and its history, they do not enjoy the same sort of freedom afforded the writers to participate in its spaces, or to actively engage in the street writers' imaginary public sphere. Although Palestinian refugees have been in Lebanon since the 1948 *Nakba*, they and their descendants are not considered citizens, and face myriad discriminations politically, socially, and culturally that make Lebanon a very difficult and dangerous "home" indeed.

### ***Postlude. Re-membering in Exile: Making Home in Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps***

In the course of this dissertation, we have moved from the center of Beirut, where shared memory is a ghost haunting the emptiness of downtown; to alleged mass graves where the corporeal evidence of common trauma lies buried; and further afield onto Beirut's highways and into its alleys, where young street writers' work publicly outlines the limits of memory and connection in a city they long to claim as their own. Now, we move even further out to what might be considered the margins of Beirut, those neighborhoods where Palestinian refugees have resided since the *Nakba* forced them from their land nearly 70 years ago.<sup>117</sup>

Any discussion about claims to space and memory in Lebanon must include the Palestinians. Though they may occupy the margins of Lebanese society in numerous ways, they have been absolutely central to Lebanon's politics and culture since its very inception, and played a major role in the civil war that remains the lacuna with which the country must reckon.

To be sure, no shortage of work exists on Palestinian memory and claims to the homeland.<sup>118</sup> Palestinians in exile constitute perhaps the most obvious example of a

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<sup>117</sup> "*Nakba*" (catastrophe) refers to Palestinians' forced exodus from Palestine. The date is usually cited as 1948; however, Zionist aggression against Palestinians started well before 1948, gaining momentum in 1947 towards the end of the British Mandate of Palestine. The *Nakba* resulted in the exile of nearly three-quarters of the Palestinian population from over 450 towns and villages, many of which were destroyed to prevent the return of their inhabitants.

<sup>118</sup> No list I could offer here would be comprehensive. See Collins 2004, Darwīsh 1995, Naguib 2009.

mnemonic community in Lebanon. Doubly excluded from both their homeland and Lebanon, their memory work – in the form of commemorative ceremonies, public art, and a range of other cultural practices – is an essential tool for survival. This mnemonic community has an expansive, networked memoryscape, which extends not only to the homeland, where many refugees have never been, but also between camps throughout the MENA region, each with its own population and sense of identity, its own practices and ways of remembering, and also a common past that unites them.

Yet as Diana Allan has noted, Palestinian memory and aspirations have for too long been relegated to abstractions in international policy, as well as scholarly work. She calls for an attention “to the multiple registers through which refugees imagine and engage their future” (Allan 2014, 159) – in other words, how they *imagine otherwise*, beyond the time and space of their exile. In this postlude, I want to address, however tentatively, how Palestinians use the space of the camps not only to remember the homeland, but also to *make home* in exile. I had occasion during my fieldwork to visit two camps: Bourj al-Barajneh, in Beirut, which I visited frequently for get-togethers with friends; and Beddawi, in Tripoli, which is known for its public murals. Although Beddawi sits beyond the spatial boundaries of this dissertation’s field site, its public art merits inclusion, in light of both Chapter 3’s emphasis on “street writing” and as a complementary site to Beirut’s Bourj al-Barajneh. Indeed, focusing on the practices and people of one camp would further limit this research, which is in itself a preliminary intervention into what might be future work.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Some names and identifying details have been changed in this chapter to protect the identities of my interlocutors.



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Burhan Yamani stands by his oil paintings, set around him as though they were his children. We are in his living room in Beddawi camp, just outside the northern city of Tripoli. Yamani's wife has painstakingly helped him move these large pieces off of walls and out of storage for this occasion, a visit from his friend Nizar and two foreigners he has never met. In between tales from his long artistic career, we sip tea and smoke in companionable silence. Nizar leans back in his chair, and appraises the body of work belonging to the oldest, and by far most revered, artist in the camp. "You escaped from the 15<sup>th</sup> century," he says, "and by chance I met you here."

Yamani smiles, and recounts his early days as an artist, when he was inspired by da Vinci. Without money to attend university to study the masters, he had to rely on personal experience and practice to advance his craft. The classical style, he says, gives you the truth.



Figure 21 Artist Burhan Yamani in his living room, Beddawi Camp, Lebanon

Yamani wishes to capture the truth of the Palestinian experience in his work. One of the only surviving members of the *Nakba* generation in Lebanon, Yamani spent his first seven years in Palestine. He remembers, he says, all the old roads, stone by stone - both those of his village, Zar Natar and those that led his family away in 1948. He bases much of his work on flashbacks, memories of his home that still come to him. These memories now reside in oil and acrylic, caught in frames in which people ride on donkeys, going wherever they please; in nature scenes depicting cool water running through green valleys; in the image of his parents, sitting in a tent, newly exiled and on their way to Lebanon.

In Yamani's oeuvre, these memories mingle with imaginings of what Palestine must be like now for those who remain. Israeli soldiers wielding guns confront

Palestinian men at checkpoints set up to monitor and curtail their movements. Children lie wounded in dusty streets, and families reside in makeshift dwellings, relegated to precarious spaces, cut off from the land they still consider to be their home, the land where Zionist settlers have exacted dominion over both the people and the land, cultivating it for their industry and colonies.

I notice a painting of an ancient structure rising out of a green valley, blue mountains cresting the sky in the background. The structure stands alone, surrounded by lower buildings, arches, and trees. This, he tells me, is a depiction of Qubbat As-Sakhrah, the Dome of the Rock. He found a black-and-white 19<sup>th</sup> century photograph of it, and determined to bring it to life by rendering it in full color. These days, the area around the structure is much different, but this image - caught in time - resonates with a particular poignancy: there are no people here to sully it with their struggles over meaning and dominance. The land is still one, with this place, the Holy of Holies, rising up in the middle of it. “This,” Yamani says, “is my natural right. If I get back my Jerusalem, already I get back my whole Palestine. This is the symbol of the homeland.”

Taking one last look at his paintings before leaving, I have an uncanny feeling of being in the midst of many homes, almost a hall of mirrors in which memory and dreams - different ideations of “home” - reside together despite the difficult fracturing of time and space. This feeling is made even stranger by the fact that we are standing in a liminal space: a dwelling, a “home,” rooted in the homeless space of exile. In many ways, Mr. Burhan’s work is a conduit for the people living in the camp, for whom the homeland can only be imagined, and yet who must still - indeed, are compelled to – *make their home* in exile.



Figure 22 Burhan Yamani's rendering of Qubbat As-Sakhrah, the Dome of the Rock

### Reckoning with “Home”<sup>120</sup>

The idea of “home” is as varied as the intellectual traditions that have tried to reckon with it. I do not wish to offer an overarching definition of the term; to do so would be to grossly misrepresent the shifting complexity of how it is understood between times and spaces. Instead, let us briefly consider some of ideas of “home” that might illuminate how Palestinian refugees make home in exile, the space that constitutes the very opposite of the conditions of home, and yet in which they must nevertheless reside.

The basic idea of “home” is often a physical dwelling, rooted in a particular time

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<sup>120</sup> I am indebted to Shelley Mallett for many of the ideas in this section, which she compiled beautifully. See: "Understanding Home: a Critical Review of the Literature." *The Sociological Review*. 52.1 (2004): 62-89

and space. This type of shelter, however, constitutes only one aspect of what home means and what sort of social work it does. More than just a physical structure, home is often the site where people form and perform their primary relationships. As such, home is from the first a *relational* concept (Giddens 1984, Saunders and Williams 1998). We can expand this relationality towards an understanding of “home” as constituted by sets of relations extending far beyond a mere dwelling.

When we speak of “home,” we often invoke a place very far from our present position, in terms of both time and space. Whether it is the site of our nostalgia, or a place so filled with pain that we have worked hard to escape it, its physical and imaginary site stores many of our earliest memories and experiences. It is a place we may conjure by the simple act of remembering. As such, home can be something we carry with us, bringing the past into our present, and even our future (Massey 1992, 1994; hooks 1991). It is, in effect, *movable*, trans-spatial and -temporal: here and there, now and then (Case 1996, Ginsburg 1999). And then, too, home might exist only in our imaginations, as a place we have yet to see or experience but for which we nevertheless feel a deep longing (Ahmed 1999). We may spend our lives in search of this place, this ideal home (Tucker 1994, Somerville 1992) where we at last feel a sense of peace, enlightenment, or belonging.

Whether known or unknown, home also situates us in relation to the real or imaginary others who inhabit(ed) it. In some instances, these are people we clearly remember, intimate relations who color our feelings about home, whether good or bad. In other instances, these people exist only in our imaginations - ancestors who lived in our homeland, for example, or people who live there now, whom we can imagine but

have yet to meet.

Whatever the case - whether home is real/imaginary, here/there, now/then, or all of the above - it must absolutely be *made* (Douglas 1991, Jackson 1995, Ingold 1995, Ginsburg 1998). That is, home is never a given, but rather consists of *practices* that construct it, bring it into being, and continue to change or maintain it. The work of *home-making* might be conducted in real time and space, or in our imaginations. The expressive practices through which we reconstruct and recover the idea of home matter as much as the work we do in the material world. In the case of those who have been exiled from their homelands, these expressive practices often constitute the only way to (re)connect with home – to *re-member it* – especially if home has never been visited, and so exists only in their dreams or imaginations.

Edward Said has written about the difficulties of recreating home in exile. “To see a poet in exile,” he writes, “is to see exile’s antinomies embodied and endured with a unique intensity” (Said 2000, 138). Here is a person, Said seems to say, whose main objective is to express the world in which she or he lives. And yet trying to express the “mutilations” brought on by the condition of exile, of being severed from one’s own home, is an impossible task; unless one is also living in exile, one cannot understand what it is like to live in a fragmented world. This is perhaps increasingly true for subsequent generations after the *Nakba*, who have the difficult charge of re-membering something/someplace they have not seen.

How does one come to know that place? Or to (re)produce a sense of it in exile? After the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) left Lebanon in 1982, Palestinian refugees turned to NGOs and local organizations for help addressing their concerns.

Framing the Palestinians' plight in terms of human rights and international law, these organizations deployed the trauma of the *Nakba* as a point of departure for rights claims (Allan 2009, 2014; Khalili 2007). Within that framework, the loss of the homeland – indeed, the memory of the homeland itself – had to be kept alive, and so it was through commemorative events, performances, and cultural practice. Recently, however, refugees' participation in commemorative events in the camps has dropped significantly, a trend that signals their frustration with NGO priorities, which refugees see as being staged for international audiences rather than their communities, and put on for the benefit of NGOs' coffers (Allan 2014, 40). As Allan notes, Palestinian refugees cannot be reduced to the trauma of the *Nakba* and its commemoration, nor to the related longing for the homeland. Foregrounding the *Nakba*, she writes, "...elides the creative ways refugees deal with a traumatic past, their hopes for the future, and the new subject positions they are articulating in relation to it" (Allan 2014, 67). Put another way, focusing solely on the lost homeland leaves little room indeed for thinking about how Palestinians are claiming real space for themselves in the present.

To be sure, Allan does not claim that this shared trauma does not matter, or should not be addressed. As we will see, narrativizing the *Nakba* takes on special importance in the communication of memory between generations of refugees. However, along with carrying the trauma of the *Nakba*, Palestinians in exile also carry within them the possibility to act *in the present*, an agency they exercise by claiming space for themselves, and making their home where they are, even when the constant dream of the homeland imbues their current situation with a perpetual temporariness.

In addition to more typical commemorative events – parades, plays, and

communal gatherings, for example – Palestinian refugees come to make home, and understand it in relation to their homeland, through other modes of engagement.

Refugees “experience identity and belonging not just at the ideological level of symbol and doctrine but at the visceral level of embodied practice” (Allan 2014, 215). While, per this dissertation’s focus on movement and performance, I agree that embodied practice constitutes an important way of both transmitting and receiving knowledge, I do not believe that “embodied practice” and “symbol and doctrine” are mutually exclusive categories. This postlude describes some of the embodied practices I observed in two Palestinian refugee camps, which *simultaneously* deployed typical symbols of the Palestinian visual lexicon. Palestinian refugees assemble the symbols, stories, and materials of both the homeland and their current home in exile, in order to both communicate memories of Palestine and to *make home* in the camps.

### **Losing the Homeland: Palestinians in Lebanon after the *Nakba***

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at the beginning of 2013, the organization was monitoring 10.4 million refugees worldwide. An additional 1.5 million Palestinian refugees live in the 58 camps located across the Middle East, which were set up and are run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). UNRWA began its operations in 1950 to “care for” Palestinians displaced by the creation of the state of Israel.

This displacement, the *Nakba*, dates back nearly 70 years. Dealing with the humanitarian fallout from World War II and the Holocaust, the UN suggested splitting



Palestine into two independent states - one Jewish and one Palestinian Arab (United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL) 2007b, cited in Fincham 2012).<sup>121</sup> The partition would grant 56.4% of the territory to the Jewish state. At the time, Palestinian Arabs owned 93% of the territory and represented the majority demographic at 66% (Chatty and Hundt 2005, 14). Fighting broke out the day after the plan was announced, with the Zionist paramilitary organizations claiming victory. In 1948, Israel, as the Jewish state, declared its independence and sovereignty. Its Palestinian counterpart never emerged.

Instead, about 750,000 of the 900,000 indigenous Palestinians fled the territory, or were forcibly expelled by Jewish militias. They moved into surrounding countries, including Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. 110,000 refugees took up residence in Lebanon, a move that would become permanent when, on June 16, 1948, the Israeli government adopted legislation to prevent the return of Palestinian Arabs to their homeland. Meanwhile, Palestinians were not integrated into the cultures of the Arab countries in which they found themselves, as the countries' governments claimed that full integration would compromise Palestinians' right of return to their homeland.

Today, UNRWA estimates that more than 5 million Palestinian refugees are eligible for the agency's services, with more than 1.5 million of these living in the 58 recognized Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the

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<sup>121</sup> UNISPAL is the acronym of the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine. The collection contains more than 30,000 text documents of current and past UN material. <http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/udc.htm>

West Bank (including East Jerusalem) (UNRWA).<sup>122</sup> These camps are defined as “a plot of land placed at the disposal of UNRWA by the host government to accommodate Palestinian refugees and set up facilities to cater to their needs.” (UNRWA) Unless incorporated by UNRWA, other Palestinian residence areas outside of the occupied territories are considered “gatherings.” The agency runs schools, health centers, and food distribution centers both inside and outside the camps.

The land on which the camps were set up, many of them over half a century ago, is often state land or land leased to the state by private landowners. As such, though Palestinian refugees have lived on the same land for generations in exile, they do not own it. And while the state regulates much of the land, refugees are deprived of very basic needs, including electricity, functional sewage and plumbing, and paved roads. During the rainy season, a single wire woven into the intricate web of power lines will sometimes be dislodged, falling into the muddy roads that run through the camps. Each year, several people die from electrocution. Camps are overcrowded, but expanding their area is not permitted, so they grow upwards instead. The extra stories that locals add to their domiciles are not always structurally sound, which has caused buildings to collapse.

As of summer 2014, 449,957 registered Palestinian refugees lived in Lebanon’s 12 camps. (UNRWA) Besides being deprived of humane conditions in which to live, these refugees must also reckon with the Lebanese state’s determined exclusion of Palestinians from all manner of participation in public life, which includes being barred from an estimated 20 professions, and banned from travel both locally and internationally

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<sup>122</sup> Much of this information was culled from UNRWA’s website, which is frequently updated. To read more on the history and current statistics of Palestinian refugees, please see <http://www.unrwa.org>.

(with certain rare exceptions) (UNRWA, Fincham 2012). As a result, Palestinians in Lebanon are forced to rely on UNRWA for basic services. The original motivation for not integrating Palestinian victims of the *Nakba* - safeguarding their future opportunities to claim a right of return - seems to have all but disappeared in Lebanon. Instead, Palestinian refugees have been relegated to both the social and spatial margins.

Palestinian identity from the *Nakba* forward has been intrinsically spatially defined. First came the exile itself, during which thousands were displaced from their homeland. Next came the legal inscription of what it meant, and still means today, to be a Palestinian refugee. At its inception, UNRWA defined Palestinian refugees as such:

Palestine refugee: shall mean any person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict. (UNRWA Consolidated Eligibility and Registration Instructions)<sup>123</sup>

Descendants of those exiled in 1948 are included in this definition because the core characteristics that define refugees in general apply to them; namely, the inability to return to one's homeland, and a lack of protection by the country of origin's government.<sup>124</sup>

As Bowker describes it, the refugee sense of self, though separate from the "official" definition of refugee identity, is still tied to the loss of both home and livelihood (Bowker 2003, 66). This identity, so tied to absence and to loss, is the great void with which Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon and elsewhere must contend and around which they must improbably construct a sense of belonging, self, and community.

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<sup>123</sup> This definition is cited in Bowker (2003, 65). The most recent legislation (2009) maintains the same definition. Please see <http://www.unrwa.org/resources/strategy-policy/consolidated-eligibility-and-registration-instructions>

<sup>124</sup> As Bowker (2003) notes, both UNRWA and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) maintain the importance of family unity

Such a task is not an easy one, and the role of the camps in the process has drawn many critics, who claim that the existence of the camps and UNRWA's work in them, stymie refugees' ability to move beyond the *Nakba*. That is, according to these critics, instead of attempting to assimilate Palestinian refugees into the cultures of the countries in which they now live, UNRWA's work in the camps, in concert with the violent cultural of neglect perpetrated by countries where Palestinians have settled, encourages Palestinian refugees to instead hold fast to the dream of returning to their homeland (Ibid.). This dreamspace is yet another non-place that they inhabit, a perpetual in-between.

Much has been written about the negotiation of identity, belonging, and even innovative forms of citizenship in the camps, including the roles of oral history and education, both formal and informal, in staging and solidifying a sense of history and "Palestinianness" outside the homeland.<sup>125</sup> Comparatively little has been written about the actual *space* of the camps, although two examples of recent, extensive work on the camps – Diana Allan's *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (2014) and Julie Peteet's *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (2005) – provide rich accounts of identity- and place-making in Shatila Camp in Beirut. However, where Peteet's work is concerned with Palestinian place-making in the camps *in spite of exile* – that is, dealing with exile in part by employing an insistent desire to return to the homeland, Allan's account, as previously mentioned, questions the framing of Palestinians as "historical and ideological subjects, but not contemporary material ones" (Allan 2014, 214), a distortion which, she argues, robs Palestinians of the way they

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<sup>125</sup> See for example Bowker 2003, Chatty and Hundt 2005, Farah 2013, 2014; Fincham 2012, Shomali 2014.

are living in their present, and planning for their future.

Drawing on Allan's work, I turn now to two different camps, Bourj al-Barajneh in Beirut and Beddawi, which is just outside of Tripoli in northern Lebanon. As previously mentioned, while I had occasion to visit Bourj al-Barajneh regularly, as I have friends who live in the camp, I was only able to visit Beddawi twice, as fighting in Tripoli between Sunni and Alawite groups limited any regular travel north. My own introduction to and movement through the camps will be described in detail, as it sheds light both on the tight-knit ethos of the communities as well as certain kinds of knowledge - spatial and visual - that reinforce each community, making a home out of the liminal space of a refugee camp. On all my visits to the camps, I was fortunate to have guides who spent exceptional amounts of time explaining the sights, sounds, and routines of each community.

### **Bourj al-Barajneh**

Built by the League of Red Cross Societies in 1948 to receive refugees during the *Nakba*, Bourj al-Barajneh was meant to temporarily host 10,000 people. The space has assumed a permanence, however. The original refugees have settled in and raised children, who have in turn started their own families. The hope of return - though still an important part of Palestinian community discourse and identity - does not have the same imminent quality it once did, as itineraries and mobilities both within the occupied territories and from outside their borders have been increasingly curtailed. Now the majority of people within the camp are unemployed and heavily dependent on UNRWA

programs.<sup>126</sup> The camp has a history of violence, including the War of the Camps during the Lebanese civil war.<sup>127</sup> Although its various militias have settled into a fairly steady peace, occupying a series of buildings that sit side by side on a single street in the camp, the neighborhood and the people who live in it continue to feel the push and pull of geopolitical tensions and violence. The most salient example of this is the influx of Palestinian Syrians who have moved across the border into Lebanon and taken up residence in the country's camps. Before the Syrian civil war, estimates put the population of Bourj al-Barajneh at between 18,000-20,000 people (in other words, twice what it was built to hold). More recent estimates, which include refugees from Syria, such as those fleeing the violence in besieged Yarmouk camp, indicate numbers well over 28,000. Minimal resources are now stretched to their absolute limits, and the camp has become perilous for reasons other than immediate violence, including increasingly dangerous buildings and limited infrastructure.

I first visited Bourj al-Barajneh Palestinian camp in May 2012. I had recently met an American named Paul at Saifi Urban Gardens, the hostel where I was staying. Owned by a local family, Saifi also includes a language school, a café, an art space, and a rooftop bar on its colorful grounds. It is a wonderful place for foreigners - both expats and tourists - to mingle with locals of all stripes, who work at Saifi and frequent the café both

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<sup>126</sup> Lebanon's labor laws have traditionally operated on the principle of reciprocity, meaning that only foreigners whose home countries can offer work permits to Lebanese can enjoy such benefits in Lebanon. Before 2005, Lebanon banned Palestinians from working in over 70 professions. A 2005 amendment opened up low-level jobs, but continued to bar them from "elite" professions like medicine and law. Further, Palestinians cannot receive inheritance or own property in Lebanon, nor can they receive state-sponsored health care or attend public schools.

<sup>127</sup> The War of the Camps was a subconflict of the Lebanese civil war that took place in different episodes between 1985 and 1988. During this time, Shia militia Amal besieged several Palestinian camps, including Bourj al-Barajneh and Shatila in Beirut, and Rashidiyye camp in the south.

on Friday nights for the weekly Arabic music party, and during weekday afternoons to smoke narghileh, chat, eat, work, and play *tawleh* (an Arab version of backgammon). Paul had moved to Lebanon in the hopes of helping deliver medical supplies to those most in need, especially Syrian refugees. He intended to use his training as an EMT to help train local medics and civilians in urgent care treatment and tactics. Paul was also staying at Saifi, where he met Amir, a young Palestinian man who was active in the political and social life of his camp. If Paul wanted to help, Amir suggested, there were plenty of people right in Beirut who could use his aid.

Soon, Paul was moving into the camp, taking up residence in a utilitarian but relatively comfortable flat at the top of a crumbling stairwell near the camp's entrance. From these makeshift headquarters, he drew up plans for various projects around the camp: solar panels to alleviate the camp's electricity problems, a children's center where kids could play safely out of the camp's cramped and busy streets, and crash courses in medical training for camp residents. Paul's arrangement in the camp did not last very long, as some in the camp were uncomfortable with an American taking up residence in their midst, and some elders were wary about the projects Paul was working on. Although Paul's altruism was respected, it was also regarded with no small measure of caution.

Nevertheless, Paul did manage to funnel some funds he collected from his church and community of family and friends back in the United States directly into the camp. One of the first projects he helped realize was a mural, to be painted on a high wall across from the camp's main mosque. Along with some young men from the camp, he recruited me and two other foreigners staying at Saifi to help with its painting.

We hired a taxi in front of Saifi, the driver surprised - as every driver would be

when we went back for subsequent visits - at our destination. We headed South, Paul ready to call Amir as we got closer to the camp, in case the driver got lost. The camp bears no visible external markers by which one might orient oneself to its location. As it turned out, we were able to get there just fine, Paul's eyes trained for landmarks - a gas station and a bridge - that would become familiar sights over the next couple of years. The driver pulled over to the side of the highway, and we exited the taxi, making our way up a flight of stairs and over a bridge to the other side. Though the camp itself is small (one square kilometer) and self-contained, with very clear boundaries, activity in the streets just beyond the camp's walls is steady and chaotic - people going in and out of sweet and nut shops or a mechanic's garage, racing in and out of the camp on motorbikes, taking their trash to large bins by the highway. There are small security tents just by the camp's entrance where men sit day and night, keeping watch. Facing them, the entrance to the camp seems both solid and amorphous, its upper reaches marked by reams of flags and banners that flutter in the wind. These banners declare the presence of the different groups, including militias, which call the camp home or have affiliates within it. Pictures of martyrs sway from rope strung between buildings, introducing visitors simultaneously to the space and the history of a camp that has long been considered one of the most difficult and dangerous in Lebanon.

We entered the camp under the surveillance of the men at the security tent as well as camp residents who were walking in the streets, working the small stands, entering or leaving the mosque, or lounging in cafés. The wall where we would be painting belonged to the second story of a building adjacent to the mosque at the front of the camp. We climbed a ladder to reach the platform (the roof of a small adjoining building) where we



put our paint cans, brushes, and other equipment including a second ladder we would use to get to the upper reaches of the wall. The mural was to be quite large, visible from the front of the camp. We had no idea what we had signed on to painting, but were soon presented with a sketch by Omar, one of the young men leading the project. The piece featured a rough map (more of an outline) of the original borders of Palestine, and the barrels of three Kalashnikov rifles, accompanied by the black, red, white, and green colors of the Palestinian flag. Saida, one of the other foreigners helping with the mural, expressed surprise at the boldness of the design, and the men laughed, “Shoo? *What?* You don’t like it?”

Although Saida and I were onboard with the project - reasoning that the walls should reflect the people of the camp rather than our opinions (we had, after all, signed on to help, not to direct), Paul had stronger feelings about it. Upset by the rather obvious invocation of violence to achieve victory, Paul refused to take part in the painting. Several times during the day, he and Amir exchanged heated words on the street below the mural, which Amir would later recount to me. It seemed that Paul, whose main desire was to work on peaceful initiatives in the region, saw the mural as reinforcing the violence that accompanies old regional conflicts, rather than offering a message of hope for the people of the camp. Located next to a mosque and in plain view of the children’s center Paul was working on, he worried that the mural would undermine the messages of tolerance and understanding he understood as central to his work in the camp.

For Amir and the other young men working on the project, the mural represented something completely different. Instead, they saw the mural as an inspirational message for their community, a way to keep spirits up in the face of extreme and protracted

destitution. After Paul moved out of the camp at the behest of some of the camp's elders, he and Amir remained friends, but agreed that they could not work together. Paul readily admitted that he did not understand some of the barriers he was facing in the camp with regard to his work there. He just wanted to help, after all. For Amir, these perceived barriers were less about Paul's trying to help than the camp residents' attempting to actualize their desires while being pulled between an incredible lack of support from the Lebanese state on the one hand, and rather unsatisfying intervention efforts by international NGOs and seasonal projects on the other.

"These Western groups come to our camp with money," he told me. "But they all have their own projects. They say they want to give us money, but they don't know what we need. They don't listen to us. So we get money for a children's center or for yoga classes for the children, but we still have problems - electricity, sewage, these types of things. They want to do their own projects. And then they leave."

This disappointment extends to UNRWA as well. As Fincham has noted, UNRWA schools are the only educational centers in the camps (Fincham 2012, 123). Their curricula abide by the educational standards and practices of the host country, which means that certain histories remain untaught and obscure. As previously noted in this dissertation, such absent histories include the whole of Lebanese national history since 1946. Incredibly, such omissions extend to the history of the very people UNRWA schools are charged with educating: the narrative of the *Nakba* is glaringly absent from Palestinian refugee children's education. This is not because the teachers are non-native; indeed, most of the teachers in UNRWA schools are themselves of Palestinian descent. Many with whom I was acquainted in Beirut complained about the curriculum they were

forced to teach. “They [the children] don’t even learn their own history,” said Rami, whose family has Palestinian roots. Rami works with Palestinian youth in after school programs which emphasize arts practices - mainly painting and drawing - as ways for the youth to build community and deal with the violence they often witness in the camps, and the discrimination they face in Lebanon more generally. For Rami, as for many others, the very organizations that were meant to be helping the Palestinian refugees were actually harming them. Programs that hid or denied the Palestinian experience damaged Palestinians’ sense of community, belonging, and identity over time, a loss that had the potential of leaving them even more adrift in a society (Lebanon) that continually denied them any semblance of basic rights. Many educators worry that the spatial and temporal distance from the homeland experienced by refugee youth over generations will leave them disengaged, apolitical, and without a sense of purpose, dangerous prospects indeed for a demographic of disenfranchised youth. If they cannot understand their past, the logic goes, how will they reckon with the direness of the present and effect change in the future?

In light of this lack of institutional support, cultural engagements and everyday interactions take on increased significance to the community. Indeed, on the level of everyday life, Palestinian refugees tell their stories and their history in myriad ways, whether at home, at school, and in the street. Fincham notes that UNRWA schoolteachers, often Palestinian themselves, teach Palestinian history and culture in off-book activities. Songs, assignments, celebrations, and art projects that are not aligned with the official curriculum all serve to cultivate a sense of Palestinian identity, even in a state of being increasingly distanced from the homeland by both time and space (Fincham

2012, 123).

Groups and cultural initiatives often come through the camps bringing supplies, which are expensive, as Paul did, to “beautify” the space. Mahmoud, whom I met through Rami, works for UNRWA and has for years kept a computer file of the various works of public art put up in the camps around Lebanon.<sup>128</sup> There is a variety of such work, he says, but often it caters to the donating group’s vision of what should be represented - namely, commemoration, a lack of confrontation, a willingness to be peaceful, and of course, aesthetic beauty. Thus the painters in the camps do not possess the autonomy enjoyed by many of the street writers discussed in Chapter 3. Mahmoud gave an example of one such case, in which Palestinian artists from all over Lebanon were brought to Beirut to work on a children’s yard in Shatila camp. Instead of painting work that reflected the realities and histories of the camp’s community, they were encouraged to paint bright shapes and images - balloons, cartoons, and *Sesame Street* characters, for example.<sup>129</sup> The colors and shapes of more typical Palestinian art, which I will discuss below, were expressly banned from the space. “It was bright, which was nice. It was nice to look at,” he said. “But it had nothing to do with the community. The artists were brought there but they did not have the freedom to do what they wanted.” In accepting the materials offered by outside, often Western, foundations, it seems that Palestinian refugee artists must also accept the conditions of these foundations’ visions.

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<sup>128</sup> I use the term “public art” here as my interlocutors used it interchangeably with “street art” or “graffiti” to talk about the art in the camps, with the exception of Beddawi’s murals. In any case, “public art” seems to capture the ethos, per Riggle (2010), of all of these interventions in the spaces of the camp, as much for what they tell us about the public’s vision of itself, as for what they say about the ideological claims of NGOs working in the camps.

<sup>129</sup> In other contexts, the deployment of *Sesame Street* characters has been a strategy for teaching tolerance between Israeli and Palestinian youth (e.g., Warshel 2009).

There is thus also a tacit compromise. The audience, or public, for the art shifts from community members to a Western audience whose view on Palestinian identity, one might assume, has been largely colored by mass media accounts of the ongoing struggles faced by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. In this rendering of life in exile, prevalent in many of the camps, the urgency of Palestinian refugees' realities get obscured by not only visually, but also discursively. The focus rests staunchly on beautifying the space, according to the aesthetic and discursive wishes of sponsoring NGOs, rather than the desires of the community, leaving much to be desired in terms of what public art is meant to do – that is, speak for and to the public in which it is located.

Bourj al-Barajneh has managed to maintain a certain degree of autonomy where its public art is concerned. Further, large-scale pieces like the one we painted at the camp's entrance are not the only home-making practices residents use to constitute the camp as a particular public. Indeed, the space is continually made not only by the iconography painted on its walls, but also by the movements of its residents, as well as the camp's very organization. The camp's streets are its veins, carrying the traffic - both foot and motor - of the residents through its one square kilometer. But, far more than that, the streets are the site where one can observe the processes and practices by which the camp's residents make their home.

Soon after first meeting Amir, I was invited to his family home inside Bourj al-Barajneh for dinner with some friends, all foreigners. On that first gathering, he sent his teenage cousin, Ziad, to meet us at the gate of the camp. Ziad walked us through the camp, greeting neighbors and fielding questions about these new faces as he did so. None of the streets was marked with a name, but rather bore other markings that would

make each distinctive when I returned on subsequent visits. One set of walls in particular stood out. Situated just off the main public space, a rather oblong square, they bordered a dirt alley, rutted with dried motorbike tracks. As we walked uphill towards this alley, several pieces came into view. On the right, a hodgepodge of different icons covered the space, mainly in black, white, green, and red - the palette of Palestinian identity. Familiar shapes - a map of Palestine, a figure breaking its chains and wearing a kūfiyyah scarf - cut striking figures on the white of the wall.



Figure 23 Bourj al-Barajneh Camp, Beirut. The Arabic (partially cut off) reads, "Free Palestine from the river to the sea."

The wall bordering the alley on its left, by contrast, was covered in Arabic script, all hand-painted, in rather tidy columns. At the time, I had neither the time nor the skills to read it, but would later find out that each column represented a different village in

Palestine, mainly from the Galilee, the region from which the camp's residents originated. The narrative of the villages is personified in a first-person voice (*Ana*), which recounts the variety of times and spaces each village stretches between. Not only do the narratives tell the story of how many people originally inhabited the village in Palestine, but they also speak of how many left, and where they ended up. The walls provide coordinates and distances, both to Beirut and also to Jerusalem (al Quds), the most important and contested site in Palestinian, and Palestinian-Israeli, history. As Amir would tell me as we walked through the camp nearly a year after that first dinner, “[People] can come here to read their history.” The wall archives the basics of the villages’ communal memory, marking them as unique, and yet united in how they are perpetually related to the homeland.

These two walls, where the majority of public art in the camp has long been located, also reflect the organization of the camp itself. While all residents of the camp feel themselves to be part of a larger Palestinian identity, oriented to both the homeland and the home-space of the camp, they also carry with them the identities of the villages their ancestors left behind over half a century ago. Indeed, the camp itself is organized around these village identities. Each “block,” which is more a loose gathering of buildings, houses descendants (and sometimes even original refugees) from one of these villages. These blocks often share one or two common courtyards, where extended family and friends will gather for meals, to smoke and talk, or sometimes even to watch TV if the electricity is on and someone is in possession of an electrical cord long enough to connect a television set to an outlet.

Many of the blocks, and individual domiciles, bear more personalized markings

as well. Two years ago, for example, Amir's mother made the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. When she returned, as is tradition, camp residents had painted the wall outside the family house with colorful script and decorations (embellished scrolls and palm trees), welcoming Em Amir home. The piece is a communal effort, but also distinguishes the house as one belonging to a devout, respected Muslim. The family do their best to maintain the painting, as it serves as a point of pride.

Such practices and iconography offer a glimpse into some of the home-making practices that illustrate the several levels of belonging within the camp. Residents cluster their domiciles in groups that represent their villages in the homeland, as a mode maintaining traditional ways of living together. The public art on the walls, too, archives long-ago and recent histories, while reminding residents of their commitments to the larger concerns of Palestinians in exile everywhere – namely, the maintenance of a larger Palestinian identity in pursuit of the recovery of the homeland.

Residents employ other sorts of engagements to make the camp home as well. Movement through its streets, and how this movement is monitored, also constitute practices by which the space is made, and cared for.

After Amir and I had known each other for some time, and I had visited his family in their home on numerous occasions over the course of a year, we at last made tentative plans to walk through Bourj al-Barajneh together. I asked him if I could take pictures around the camp. "Inshallah," he said, in reply. *God willing*. If the mood in the camp was right, it might be okay. By this point, he had stopped sending Ziad to meet me at the entrance. "You know the way, and people recognize you," he said. "Just walk to my house." When I arrived at his home that day, I showed him the small iPod Touch with



which I had taken his photo so many times. This was okay, he said. He had been expecting a much bigger camera, the state-of-the-art equipment that many NGOs and researchers had used on previous visits.

Amir has played host to many such visitors, and is indeed perhaps the perfect guide through Bourj al-Barajneh. He is extremely involved in the life of the camp, on both cultural and political levels. He regularly organizes youth activities, sometimes in conjunction with UNRWA and other times with other Palestinian organizations. He is also a leading member of one of the camp's foremost militias. Straddling and often mixing both these roles, Amir is well known and well liked. In a neighborhood and community this small, of course, such familiarity is not difficult to achieve; people recognize each other, and often know each other's families - and any news pertaining to them - quite intimately. Amir, however, seems to incur a particular affection from everyone in the community. Whether one walks with him through the camp or out in Beirut, someone is bound to call out his name in greeting, clapping him on the shoulder or planting on him the customary three kisses.

As we walked together, we traced the large web of Amir's relations through the camp, pausing here and there to greet friends and family. We stopped into a small enclave to meet one of his best friends and to peruse the goods on offer at his newly-opened perfume shop. We bought snacks at a tiny market where Amir asked after the owner's family and reached down to pet the store cat circling between his legs. Getting around for him was so easy, whereas for me, the camp spread out like a labyrinth; a few times, we found ourselves back in a street we had already walked down, following it in a different direction towards another destination. I commented to Amir that I wondered

how he remembered where everything was without street signs to guide him. “You just know,” he said. “The camp is home. You know it by heart. You know, you remember that this building or painting is next to this other one. You memorize. You remember where people live, where they work.”

Buildings, blocks, businesses and domiciles stand in relation to one another. Knowing the relationships between buildings and those who move between them, who lives and works where, reading the walls for tributes to pilgrims, upcoming events, or even quick-scrrawl messages between camp residents (on one wall, a frustrated family member had written in black spray paint, “NAZIH, FIX THE ELECTRICITY!”), becomes a way of making sense of the space of the camp, its past and present marking out a map one can follow through it. If the space of the camp is in part made by the ways its residents appropriate the geography and iconography of the homeland, navigating it is likewise a technique of orienting oneself to history, both the past and the present.

Present conditions in the camp require that one develop other sorts of navigational skills, as well. Traffic can be thick in the narrow streets, people and motorbikes vying for space around tight corners. Sewage and the threat of fallen electrical wires become concerns during the rainy winter season. Behavioral expectations also script how people move through the space. For example, on one visit to Amir’s family home, someone in our party pulled out a camera to photograph some of the camp’s public art. Amir quickly asked her to put it away, and pointed to the small surveillance cameras hidden well above the street. “You need to be more careful,” he said. “You need permission to photograph here, because of the security situation.”

Such surveillance constitutes a necessary part of camp life, given the general

vulnerability of the population as well as the relatively high number of militia groups who reside there. Indeed, this surveillance is also a technology of *self*-surveillance, a way for members of the camp to keep tabs on each other, and to ensure the safety of residents. Amir has survived assassination attempts in the past, and he credits the surveillance cameras with recording the evidence necessary for him to ask for greater protection from his own party, as well as associated groups in the camp.<sup>130</sup>

These practices demonstrate not only how residents of the camp make their home in its space, but also the ways they experience this home differently. While united by a common history, the narrative thread of exile is only one story which residents of Bourj al-Barajneh use when weaving together a sense of place, belonging and identity. As demonstrated by the narratives of the different villages, the camp's layout, the myriad markings on individual residences, and even the necessary surveillance of the camp space, camp residents are as invested in narrating their past as in creating their present. Indeed, the past does not exist as in some archival vacuum, but rather comes alive in the space of the camp, inviting residents to deploy its geographical orientations, narratives, and iconography towards claiming space for themselves within Beirut, and within their own neighborhood as well.

### **Beddawi**

In 1955, UNRWA built Beddawi camp, which today houses over 16,500

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<sup>130</sup> Amir explained that at the moment (June 2013), the militias were all more or less at peace with each other. This was not always the case, but with the influx of Syrian Palestinian refugees taking up residence in the camp, and the already meager resources strained, some measure of working together was absolutely necessary. Though I had been welcomed into Amir's group's headquarters in the camp, he did not introduce me to members of other militias as we walked down the row.

Palestinian refugees. Set 5 kilometers outside the northern city of Tripoli, Beddawi spreads out in a plateau beyond a bank of hills. Still, this landscape does not fully protect it from the violence that has besieged the city below in recent years. The cab driver I hired to drive me to Beddawi from Tripoli's city center asked me why I was in Tripoli and, further, why I would want to visit the camp. I said I was meeting a friend, and he admonished me that the whole area was far too dangerous to just be visiting. He pointed out a building to the right of the road, the second story of which had been cracked open like an egg, its contents still spilling into the street below. Such sights were not uncommon; I had encountered buildings that looked much like this one throughout Lebanon. But the cab driver persisted: this had happened only the week before, when the fighting connected to the Syrian civil war had moved up from the city and into this area. "Be careful," he told me. "Try to leave before it gets dark."

While I agreed that it was best to be on a bus out of town before nightfall, I was also looking forward to visiting the camp. Mahmoud had put me in touch with Usama, who runs youth programs at the UNRWA school in the camp, passing along Usama's phone number to me after checking in with him to see if he had time to host a visitor.<sup>131</sup>

On the phone, Usama had been brief but accommodating, and suggested that I make the trip within the next two days. A close friend offered to come along to photograph the art, as long as we had permission to capture it. Usama confirmed that this would not be a problem, and so we set off together on the two-hour bus ride up the coast

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<sup>131</sup> Mahmoud, who had introduced many a foreign researcher to people in the camps, including Diana Allan, was full of useful information, not least of all that I must be perhaps a little more conservative in dress and habit than I would be in Beirut. "Usama doesn't shake hands," he said. "So remember to put your hand over your heart, and cover your tattoo."

to Tripoli.

Beddawi is markedly different than Bourj al-Barajneh. The open streets of the camp are easy to walk; though unpaved, many are wide enough so that a car might comfortably navigate them (indeed, the camp boasts a gas station just inside its perimeter). Foot and motor traffic do not compete for space to the same degree that they do in Bourj al-Barajneh, and the web of electrical wires is a little less tightly woven, a little less precarious than it is down in the capital. There is more room to move around, and thus to view the camp's buildings and walls. As such, the camp has better conditions for its unusual number of artists to execute pieces in public. The atmosphere is also more amenable to those who wish to photograph the many murals adorning its streets.

Although the recent violence in Tripoli had crept up to the camp's threshold, its location quite apart from the city center meant that it was a bit more sheltered than a more urban camp like Bourj al-Barajneh would be.<sup>132</sup>

Usama met us at the gas station, and led us to the school's main office. Children were in the middle of recess, playing football (soccer) and standing around in groups, talking in the rather large play yard adjacent to the school. In the office, the headmistress offered us coffee, cookies, and juice boxes from the school's cafeteria while we waited for our next contact, an artist Usama had asked to show us around the camp. Soon, Nizar

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<sup>132</sup> During my first visit to Beddawi, Nizar Abu Ayed, our guide made clear (echoing Usama), that, with the exception of one or two streets where certain groups' headquarters were located, it was fine to photograph whatever pieces of art we found intriguing. This proved true on both visits to the camp, except for one incident. My friend was busy photographing a large mural along the main street, when two men approached me and asked where I was from. "Min Amreeka," I answered. *From America*. For a moment, they both glanced at Nizar, who was standing near me, and silently turned to continue down the street, speaking heatedly as they walked away, glancing back at us. Whatever their feelings about my answer and my presence in the camp – suspicion, annoyance – Nizar did not mention the incident, and I decided not to ask about it further.

Abu Ayed entered the room. In his late 30s, Nizar is a lifelong resident of the camp, and one of the foremost Palestinian artists in Lebanon. As such, he was able to give us a walk through of the camp that highlighted some of its most important works and familiarized us with its streets. He also graciously introduced us to several of the camp's preeminent artists, from three generations. He spent nearly 11 hours walking us through the camp, an especially generous act considering, as we found out later in the day, that part of his house had burned down the night before. The fire was accidental, he said, but of course took much effort and time to extinguish. The fire trucks had only arrived at the end of the night, after several friends and neighbors had worked for hours lugging buckets of water to Nizar's home. As in all camps, local resources in the surrounding municipalities are not allocated to Palestinians, making them especially vulnerable to accidents that, elsewhere, might be more easily avoided, more expediently resolved.

As such, community within the space of the camp incurs the utmost importance, something that is reflected by the fact that, though some residents have had the opportunity to live elsewhere, they have chosen not to leave. Nizar is one of those people. An accomplished muralist and one of the seven heads of the Palestinian Union of Plastic Arts, Nizar has been more visible to outsiders than many other Palestinian painters. Some French artists with whom he showed his work abroad encouraged him to leave Lebanon to practice his craft in France. They would find housing for him, and pull together as much money as would be necessary to secure his green card. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, Nizar concedes, but he could not do it: "Take me to my village [in Palestine] or let me stay here as a refugee. I need the same faces, the same places."

Indeed, it seems these faces and places allow Nizar, as so many other Palestinian

refugees, to keep the dream of return alive, and also to cultivate a sense of home in the space of exile. To leave the camp, even for better opportunities, would be to forsake one's identity and community. Though to be sure this community is fundamentally spatially uprooted, its identity at least in part based on a primal loss of place, its artists have found strategies with which to harness the lore of the past to encourage and inspire in the present, with a view towards imagining a more hopeful future. The camp has become a sort of proxy Palestine where, despite grim conditions, the archive of images serves as a visual history through which people come to understand their past and anticipate their future.

Nizar first led us to what appeared to be a large recreational hall. At the door, a young man wearing flip-flops and carrying a Kalashnikov rifle greeted us. Nizar asked him permission to show us the artwork inside the building. After giving us the once over, the man obliged. Inside, groups of boys and girls threw balls back and forth, laughing and joking with one another. The hall, Nizar said, was really a multi-purpose room: though primarily a political office for a militia group with a major presence in the camp, it also serves as a security checkpoint, as well as a cultural venue. In its capacity as a cultural venue, it hosts activities like those organized by Right to Play, in which the children were participating.<sup>133</sup> In the spirit of the hall's various uses, Nizar had created a large mural (8 meters x 2 meters) to represent and celebrate the myriad ways in which individuals might work in service of Palestine. The mural curves around, reading right to left, the older buildings on the right representing refugee camps across the region. In the

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<sup>133</sup> Right to Play is an international organization that, according to its website, uses “play to educate and empower children and youth to overcome the effects of poverty, conflict and disease in disadvantaged communities.” See [www.righttoplay.com](http://www.righttoplay.com)

foreground, we see a diverse cross-section of generations, professions, classes, and genders. A young girl picks olives from a large olive tree, placing them in bags that lay already full at her feet. A young man in a business suit speaks with a woman who is using a mortar and pestle to grind garlic. An older man in traditional dress hugs a young girl. At the front of this procession of people, standing firmly between the face of a commando wrapped in a kūfiyyah and a waving Palestinian flag, a woman looks into the future, a basket of bread in one arm and a Kalashnikov gripped firmly in the other. The mural, for Nizar, represents solidarity amongst Palestinians; importantly, the commando does not bear the insignia of any particular militia, but rather signifies that all parties are working for the same goals. The diversity of identities follows behind in the service of these goals, “each one [doing] his [sic] national role from his position,” Nizar says.



Figure 24 Nizar's mural, Beddawi Camp.



In this context, the woman at the front is especially interesting. Women in the region, says Nizar, are obliged to serve men in many ways, and to tend to the home, which sometimes keeps them out of the center of politics, and of the resistance. The figure of the woman celebrates the radical choice women make in joining the resistance, and their special ability to be active both in the home and in the mission of reclaiming the homeland.

Another mural occupies the wall just next to Nizar's piece. The work was done by Samir, a Palestinian from the West Bank who now lives in Lebanon. In the mural, two children, a boy and a girl, sit on a lush green hill amidst flowers and beneath an olive tree, looking down on a sunny Jerusalem, in the center of which sits the Al-Aqsa mosque.<sup>134</sup> The boy holds a Palestinian national flag, and the girl carries a rock in her hand, both symbols of Palestinian identity. Although we see them from behind, the children appear to be gazing on paradise, the promise of return that will be accomplished if they stay true to the cause and take up the tools of the resistance. This ancient city is their future promise. The piece gains more poignancy when it is considered in light of the artist's history, as narrated by Nizar. Samir, he says, was wounded by illegal cluster bombs in the West Bank, allegedly placed by Israeli forces. He lost an arm, and still carries shrapnel in his leg. But more than the physical wounds of occupation, he also lost family: both an aunt and a brother were killed.

Work in the streets outside the center echoes the trope of the al Aqsa mosque.

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<sup>134</sup> Located in Jerusalem, the al-Aqsa mosque (*al-Masjid al-Aqṣā*) is the third holiest site in Islam. With the Dome of the Rock, it is the holiest site in Judaism. Given its significance and placement, the mosque is a heavily contentious site in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For a timeline of the mosque's history, along with pictures, visit <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/04/timeline-al-aqsa-mosque-2014413111757867796.html>

One mural is particularly striking, covering the better part of a five-story building at the edge of a parking lot. This mural, which Nizar worked on with collaborators, brings together several icons of the Palestinian resistance: the Palestinian flag, a map of Palestine (“The *old* map,” Nizar reminds me, meaning the borders as they stood before the *Nakba* and the creation of the state of Israel), the al Aqsa mosque, and a commando, who is dressed in a *kūfiyyah* and carries stones. According to Nizar, these stones are proxy weapons for a whole cache of other arms: rifles, bombs, etc. So armed, the commando stands in front of Jerusalem, ready to defend the city, which Nizar sketched out from photographs of old buildings. The city is not only something to dream about, as it was in the previous painting, but rather something to defend in the present. By including the mosque, and the buildings next to a map which clearly marks out the locations of old Palestinian cities, the painting brings back into focus the real *placeness* of Palestine, drawing parallels between past, present, and future. Those borders, it suggests, can still be found. The space of the homeland itself can still be delineated; indeed, the great marker of the capital still stands and must be defended, both in its own time and space, and in the liminal state of exile.

Unlike murals created for inside spaces, which are by and large composed solely of images, the work on the street often includes inspirational messages to accompany the bright colors and icons of the Palestinian visual lexicon. As in Bourj al-Barajneh, the camp’s textures inspire artists in their work. As artist Yusuf Shams remarked, “When I see the broken walls in the camps, I remember the damage done in Palestine.” A wall covered in panels of murals composed by several local artists includes the phrase “Palestine will remain free from the river to the sea,” a slogan likewise found in Bourj al-

Barajneh. Again the space of the nation is represented as it once appeared on maps - from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean.<sup>135</sup> Vibrant images meant to both commemorate Palestine and plan a way forward mark the wall next to the Arabic script. Nizar and other local artists painted these panels. They include typical imagery - keys, the Palestinian flag, processions of people walking towards the homeland, and the al Aqsa mosque. The project began in 2007 just before the Nahr al Bared camp fighting that displaced an estimated 27,000 refugees, many of whom ended up staying for a time in Beddawi, doubling its population.<sup>136</sup> The events prompted the artists to halt their work, as there were simply too many people in the streets for them to have the space to continue. In subsequent years, the seasons had washed away some of the paint, which Nizar says was cheap and had already passed its expiration date anyway. Lacking the funds for supplies with which to touch up the murals, the artists have simply had to watch them fade.

As in Bourj al-Barajneh and elsewhere, the lack of funding to purchase basic supplies remains a problem for artists in Beddawi. All the artists I met in Beddawi spoke of the same problem. Tania Naboulsi, a talented artist in her late 20s, has worked on

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<sup>135</sup> Palestine's borders have obviously significantly shifted throughout history. The phrase "from the river to the sea" (min al-nahr ila al-bahr) refers to ancient (Byzantine) coordinates that marked out the boundaries of Palaestina Prima from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

<sup>136</sup> The fighting in Nahr al Bared came on the heels of Lebanese Internal Security Forces' (ISF) pursuit of suspected bank robbers belonging to Fatah al-Islam in Tripoli. After a standoff between the suspects and security forces, Fatah members living in Nahr al Bared responded by attacking Lebanese army soldiers at checkpoint. In turn, the army shelled the camp, which saw fighting over the next three months and precipitated a mass exodus of the camp's residents to Beddawi and other areas. In addition to the mass displacement, the fighting destroyed around 95% of the camp's buildings and the majority of its infrastructure, making recovery exceedingly difficult. For more information, please visit UNRWA's Nahr al Bared page at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/features/nahr-el-bared-refugee-camp>. Independent media collective a-Films has also produced a short documentary on the crisis. It can be viewed at <http://electronicintifada.net/content/documentary-nahr-al-bared-checkpoints-and-more/8729>. See also Ramadan 2010.

public art in the camp for several years, transitioning from drawing with pen on paper, to creating full murals that cover the camp's walls. She has painted in Beirut and in other camps, such as Bourj al-Shamali, but her work is primarily located in Beddawi, her home camp. Tania is one of the few female street artists in Lebanon, and is well known in the Palestinian community both for her bold designs and her determination. She was born with a congenital condition involving her hips and legs, the severity of which would seem to hinder her ability to reach high enough to execute her work. She uses arm crutches daily to walk through the camp, and only needs a little help getting up ladders while painting.<sup>137</sup> Otherwise, she says, the only thing that really limits her work is the lack of supplies.

Other obstacles include how artists committed to furthering what they understand as the "Palestinian cause" - realizing the right of return to their homeland in the future, and keeping the hope of this possibility alive in the present - must negotiate the discourses of institutions that do and do not support them, especially UNRWA. Tania was once a student at the school, in the "Remedial" program. She noted the irony of denying Palestinian students their own history, and even geography, in school.

Indeed, even the spaces allocated specifically to UNRWA are often policed. While the community believes that the walls of the camp belong to everyone, Nizar and Tania still had to ask UNRWA permission to paint their four-panel collaborative project, as the wall they wanted to use marked one of the borders of the UNRWA school and

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<sup>137</sup> Accommodations for those with different abilities are incredibly limited in Lebanon. In the camps, which have their own doctors but even less access to critical resources, the condition is markedly worse. Tania has had to travel far to get treatment for her hips. Last year, she journeyed to Syria, in the middle of the country's civil war, to have surgery, from which she is still recovering.

offices. Other spaces belonging to the organization, including play areas, sometimes include public art, or rather organization-approved graphics that approximate it.



Figure 25 Playground, Beddawi Camp.

A UNRWA-organized painting event, for example, brought in painters to decorate a playground. The painters' work hovers in bright colors, reading "Respect, Equality, Freedom, Friendship, Solidarity" in both Arabic and English.<sup>138</sup> Decorative images float around the words: flowers, butterflies, birds, and stars. The cheeriness and incitement to embrace these values rings hollow when one notices the refuse that rims the playground,

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<sup>138</sup> These values mirror almost exactly those endorsed by the Preamble to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. For further information: <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>. Interestingly, this particular convention emphasizes the importance of maintaining the rights of children to the public good (public health, public order, public safety).

which is truly more of a disused lot. Indeed, this space – adorned with positive messages and yet strewn with the camp’s detritus, the evidence of neglect – suggests a keen dissonance: while UNRWA preaches to Beddawi’s residents the benefits of embracing and believing in such values, camp has no basic resources with which to keep public spaces clean and safe. The values espoused by a piece like the one found on the playground resonate for camp residents, but only insofar as they practice them within their community. That is, while the community may internally abide by these values, the playground demonstrates in a single space why residents have no reason to believe such values will be actually enacted by entities originating outside the camp.

In light of institutional absences - UNRWA funds and Palestinian history - Tania believes that this public art truly matters. She feels that her art is a duty, an obligation she has for her community. “It is Palestine’s right that her people remember her and always try to go back to her,” she says. “You always feel that you’re not doing enough, that you need to do more.”

Although such work may not be supported through larger institutions, members of the camp have set up their own internal networks to support and expand it. Within the camp community permission to paint is usually easily secured, and camp residents often celebrate the marriage of both beauty and politics. Some artists, like Nizar, are “sponsored” by locals. A shopkeeper named Hassan financially contributes as often as he is able so that Nizar can purchase paints and other materials with which to paint the camp. Likewise, Tania has been commissioned to paint houses in the camp. As in Nizar’s case, residents sponsored this project, to both brighten up the space, and to reaffirm their support for the community. In her commissioned work, Tania often weaves

together vines of flowers and other decorative tropes with Palestinian imagery – the keys and flags that proliferate in more explicitly political work. Artists in the camp thus deploy the symbols of the homeland not only as a way to commemorate its loss, or to champion the resistance, but also as a way of tending to the space of the camp. In this way, the narratives passed down through generations find their echoes in the street as members of the public commission work with their limited funds to keep the space of the camp bright, and teeming with messages of resistance and hope.

Tania also gave the example of the camp's cultural club, the membership of which includes a range of members from different generations. The club offers classes for children to learn about Palestinian history and geography, as well as tutoring services, and computer classes for residents. It has also marked the camp with its own art, including a piece featuring the Al Aqsa mosque, under which is inscribed "Revolution, the Path of the Free (Palestinian Cultural Center)." The streets include other forms of community-generated images in support of the resistance, as well. Hardly any street is empty of glossy posters bearing the likenesses of martyrs, *shaheed*. These men and their sacrifices to the community here in exile, and in Palestine, are commemorated in groups of several photographs, reminders that the resistance persists, and of the lives that continue to be lost in the name of the cause.

Sometimes smaller, less formal scrawl appears seemingly out of nowhere, and often in provocative places. On one wall, the camp's cultural club has recreated a work by one of the foremost artists representing Palestinian identity. Famed Palestinian artist Naji al-Ali's piece depicts the figure of a man whose opportunity to declare the existence of his country and community (Falesteen baladna, *Palestine is our country*) has been

taken away from him in increments – first his ability to write it, then his ability to speak it, and finally, in death, his ability to think it. Behind his prone corpse, two children write this same phrase, continuing the legacy of all those who have died without being able to lay claim to their country. One of these is Handala, a name that means “bitterness,” al-Ali’s signature character. Handala is 10 year-old refugee child, the same age as al-Ali when he was exiled from Palestine. Al-Ali was quite clear that Handala would not start growing until he (Handala) returned to his homeland. Until that day, Handala is the ubiquitous symbol of the suspended time-space inhabited by Palestinian refugees, who are bereft of their homeland and a safe home in exile. If some of the larger works in the camp traverse lines of memory and space, this piece trespasses poignant narrative lines. That is, its location on the side of the UNRWA school grounds renders it not only part of a larger discourse on issues of historical erasure and loss of homeland, but also a commentary on the terribly ironic foreclosure of these topics by the very institution that was meant at its inception to care for and support the Palestinian refugee community.





Figure 26 Re-creation of piece by Palestinian artist Naji al-Ali. The text reads: "Palestine is our country."

### **Insiders/Outsiders: Fracturing Home and Belonging**

Walking under Bourj al-Barajneh's humming net of electrical wire with Firas, I commented on how it connected the entire camp. Rarely was a clear view of the sky to be had, so tall had the buildings grown, and so thick the wire web. "I think it's beautiful," he said. "You get used to it. It makes me feel at home." For Firas, who is Palestinian but lives outside the camp with his mother in the neighborhood of Tariq al Jadeedeh, such spatial markings - not only icons and public art, but the very placeness of the camp - represent a comfort that eludes him in the streets of Beirut.

Firas is aware of the dangerous stereotypes about Palestinians that circulate through the larger Lebanese public sphere - every time a Palestinian gets arrested, he says, the outside world generalizes about *all* Palestinians. He has been harassed himself several times in Beirut. Once, when running an errand at the General Security office, a

Lebanese policeman frisked him. The officer found a C-4 notebook, and a glasses case, and Firas showed him his ID. In response, the officer said, “Oh, you’re Palestinian. You want to send us all to death.” Yet despite facing harassment numerous times in Beirut, Firas embraces his identity by defiantly signifying it in different ways. When he is out in the city, he wears sweatshirts and t-shirts with “Palestine” or “Palestinian” printed on the front. He has participated in Land Day in the south of Lebanon.<sup>139</sup> He talks openly about returning to Palestine and the coming struggle.

For Firas, like many Palestinians in exile, the homeland has not been lost. To illustrate this, he made a distinction between my identity and his own. His family has moved from camp to camp over generations, but originally came from a village called Safad. When I asked him if this is where he traces his origins back to, he answered:

No. We don’t trace it ‘back.’ We never lost it. It’s ours. These concepts are mistaken. ‘Tracing’ your origin...you do this when you don’t know where you come from. Like you. Scandinavian Viking mother and a dark-haired Phoenician father. What do *you* do? You have to trace things back. But when your family has the keys to your home, the papers that say the house is ours, you have not lost it.

This sense of exile as a temporary situation means that the camp, too, is but a temporary resting place before the return to Palestine, a mere reflection of what is waiting back home. Firas lived in several camps as a child, and although he considers himself to be lucky to be able to live outside – where water, electricity, and other basic necessities are more easily accessible – he says he would like to live in Bourj al-Barajneh, where he

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<sup>139</sup> Land Day (*yom al ard*) takes place every March 30 to commemorate the mass action taken by the Palestinian minority in Israel in 1976, when Israel threatened to take over a significant portion of Arab-owned land in the Galilee. The resulting clashes between Palestinian protestors and Israeli police saw six Palestinians killed, and hundreds wounded or imprisoned. In Lebanon, people from all over the world come to stand with Palestinians in south Lebanon, often at Beaufort Castle, which overlooks Occupied Palestine.

has several friends. Moving through the camp, he feels more at ease than he does walking through Beirut. Whereas he has a deep need to watch himself, police himself, at every turn in Beirut, in the camp, he feels safe in within the camp's boundaries. This is partly because of the iconography marking the space, texts which one would never see outside of the camp walls:

You can't write this stuff just anywhere [out in Beirut]. You read it and it makes you feel comfortable, at home....The camp is where you're warm and safe. These are your people, you know they'll protect you. They'll take you in. You can go to them if you need to. You're not a stranger anymore when you walk into the camp.

For others outside the camp, the space resonates with other sorts of longing. At his cousin's wedding, Amir introduced me to Said, a member of his party who lives in Palestine. Said and several other delegates were in Beirut to bring money and supplies to Bourj al-Barajneh from their associates in Palestine. That evening, as the celebration continued at a small nightclub in west Beirut, Said and I talked about his work in Palestine and in the camp. Apart from the satisfaction he felt in delivering much-needed aid, Said also talked about the significance of the refugee camps to Palestinians who still live in the homeland:

It's important for us to see this, to see how they live here. Where I [live] in Palestine [in Ramallah], things are okay.<sup>140</sup> There's still a lot of bad things happening, but here, wow, it's much worse from where I live. People [Palestinians] are really suffering in Lebanon, in the camps. It's good for us to see this. It's part of our history. It reminds us there's so much work, you know, so much work to do.

Rather than a temporary home base, a liminal space between past and future, for those who live *in Palestine*, the camps represent a fracturing: of the Palestinian

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<sup>140</sup> Ramallah is the State of Palestine's de facto capital.

homeland, the historical record, the Palestinian people. The violence and disenfranchisement that so color the daily lives of Palestinian refugees remind those who still live in the homeland that the struggle extends far beyond the boundaries of the occupied territories, that there are others for whom the idea of return feels much further away.

Interestingly, people like Firas and Said occupy a liminal position within the camps' own liminality. What I mean is that, although they identify as Palestinian, their presence in the camp as non-residents is often considered with a fair amount of caution. This dynamic became apparent, as many revelations do during fieldwork, when I made a particular faux pas: walking through Bourj al-Barajneh alone with Firas. I was interested to see what he saw as we walked, how he made sense of the camp as someone who identified with the community but lived outside. He had spoken so lovingly of the space and the people, calling the camp "home" and offering to show me what he found beautiful about it. Walking through, he greeted a few people he knew, bought a can of soda from a local *dakaneh*, and pointed out some of the public art on the camp's walls. "They're motivating," he said. "The remind the camp of what is back in Palestine, and that we must fight for it." At one point, he stopped in front of a poster commemorating a martyr. "Wow. I knew this guy when we were kids. I had no idea he had died."

Before leaving the camp, we stopped in to Abu Amir's falafel shop to say hello and buy a meal, and he recounted our visit to his son later that day. When I next saw Amir, he said, "My dad told me you stopped by the shop with Firas." I affirmed that we had, noting that Amir did not seem happy about this. He paused, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You should have told me first. Firas does not belong to the camp."

Nizar had similar feelings about Amir's friend Mohamed, who had moved out of Gaza and was spending long stretches of time living in Bourj al-Barajneh. Mohamed's style is a fantastical combination of mural and throw-up graffiti. He works only with spray paint, covering entire walls in the matter of an hour or two with the likenesses of Palestinian heroes and figureheads. He began painting in the camp in summer and autumn 2012, while staying with Amir. One night, at the end of a dinner party, Mohamed produced a can of black spraypaint, and with Amir's permission executed a quick but charming Handala, the cartoon child that has long been an icon of Palestinian identity. Soon, the large blank wall of the house's upper patio was covered in Palestinian slogans and quick-draw spray paint sketches. Amir's residence, marked outside with the visual trappings of Muslim respectability, shortly became a collection of revolutionary symbols on the inside. Inside the front door, for example, which runs along the back wall of Abu Amir's falafel shop to a set of stairs running up to the family's residence, Mohamed has written "Revolution Until Victory" in huge letters. A box of multi-colored spray paint cans seems to permanently lie at the foot of this invocation.

Indeed, Mohamed has made good use of them to create his pop art representations of Palestinian leaders. Yasser Arafat grins in black and white out of a neon lime green background on a wall near the front of the camp. Two other leaders pop from a wall painted red across from the mosque. However, although Mohamed painted in Bourj al-Barajneh without incident, his portrait of Yasser Arafat in Beddawi drew a measure of discontent from other artists in the camp. While Mohamed had been invited by a community member to paint in Bourj al Barahjneh, he had not been offered the same invitation in Beddawi. I had the sense that Nizar felt Mohamed had taken liberties by

coming to the camp and painting it uninvited. Even local artists ask permission, he said. And besides, “Mohamed is not from here. He is from Gaza, so this art is not for the community.”

Thus, even though Palestinians and Palestinian refugees may feel at home in the camp, and though the camp ties itself in many ways to the homeland, the residents of that space do not always consider these insider-outsiders as *belonging* to the camp. We see in moments like this another casualty of occupation in the fracturing of Palestinian identity and solidarity, not only along the predictable faultlines of party or militia group, but also along subtler or less expected lines: native/refugee, resident/non-resident.

These faultlines complicate the narratives Palestinian identity – so often constructed around mutual loss and the experience of exile – deployed by NGOs and scholars alike. As this chapter shows, too, the visual lexicon of Palestinian identity can be deployed not only towards rights claims under the auspices of international NGO work, which roots Palestinian subjects staunchly within the context of their shared trauma, but also towards the work of making home in exile. Further, the myriad ways that Palestinian refugees experience and make home in their camps, through embodied practices (painting, walking, surveilling), reveals both ties to the past and present concerns that vary from one camp – and indeed from one individual – to another.

## **Conclusion: Reflections and Anticipation**

Much of the extant literature on Lebanon addresses the political and social problems of amnesia in “postwar” Beirut. Yet very little work exists that suggests the *possibilities* inherent in Beirutis’ recognition of this common frustration, especially vis a vis the Lebanese state. Indeed, despite differences that cut along the lines of ethnoreligious identity and generation, Lebanese communities are simultaneously split and linked by the suffering and injustices they continue to endure under the memory erasure that was institutionalized in the Lebanese state’s “postwar” amnesty policies. Without transparency, known militia leaders and war criminals remain in the highest seats of power; families live with the emotional fallout of not knowing what happened to their loved ones during and after the war; and people rely on received communal histories for their understanding of their country, and their fellow countrymen. Thus in many ways the landscape of the capital and the nation continue to be spatially and ideologically divided along sectarian lines. These divisions have lately been exacerbated by the fighting in neighboring Syria, which has crossed the border into Lebanon and shows little sign of abating.

In the first part of the dissertation, I drew on memory studies, cultural geography, and performance studies as a framework to introduce the idea of “re-membering.” I situated my research and the cultural productions I address within a continuum of Lebanese contemporary urban memory work in Beirut, and the scholarship written about it. My study sought to show that the real power of these expressive practices derives

from how they quite literally reclaim space where Beirutis may share their war trauma, may organize themselves into new political and social constellations around this trauma, and may begin the difficult and important work of “imagining otherwise.” Over the course of the three main chapters, I illustrated my theoretical framework through ethnographic research that looked at distinct case studies: a walking tour, a protest and sit-in encampment, and street art across the city and in the Palestinian camps. The data I have collected in the field through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, along with the media texts I analyze, showed that the fault lines that led to the civil war, and which were reinforced in the “postwar” period, do still exist. Yet despite the persistence of these divisions, current cultural and activist work, like that exemplified by my case studies, demonstrate a shifting geographic imaginary pointing towards the possibility of intercommunal reconciliation and healing at the level of everyday life.

In what follows, I outline the dissertation’s overall contributions, discuss some of its limitations, and suggest where this work may travel to next.

### **Project Contributions**

*Literature on Lebanon* has long centered its arguments around the interplay between identity, memory, and the city. A wealth of work exists on the “postwar” city, memory texts and practices, and a range of ethnoreligious identities. However, work on the “postwar” city, especially as pertains to its reconstruction, most often focuses on Solidère (e.g., Makdisi 2006, Fawaz and Ghandour, Khalaf 2006) or situates its critical inquiry amongst particular neighborhoods or communities (e.g., Sawalha 2010, Deeb and Harb 2013). Identities as they appear in much of this research are often constructed



around categories like ethnoreligious community/class (Deeb 2006, Deeb and Harb 2013) or generation (Larkin 2010, Deeb and Harb 2013). Research on memory texts and practices, even when it accounts for collaborative work between different groups, tends to focus on elite memory makers (Haugbølle 2010, Salem 2003, Volk 2010).

While clearly this dissertation is inspired by such work, and takes up its central concerns, I am interested in looking at the connections *between* the memories of different generations and identities as these get articulated in the space of the city. As such, this dissertation pays special attention to the *micropractices* that might bridge these groups. By focusing on the (literally) pedestrian movements and spaces of everyday life, the dissertation moves away from the grand narratives (e.g., about identity, citizenship, class, gender, etc.) through which the Middle East and North Africa frequently get produced. The study attempts a more holistic reading of the city in part by assembling a theoretical framework through which to understand the cultural politics of urban practice in Beirut, and it is to these realms of inquiry that I hope this dissertation contributes.

Since Pierre Nora's seminal text *Realms of Memory*, in which the author describes and works through the difficulties in reconciling discourses of memory and history, *memory studies* as a field has become increasingly open to how memory and history inform each other, rather than the ways they compete with one another. However, as Maurantonio and Park point out in their forthcoming volume, *Communicating Memory and History* (2016), the field of *communication studies* might offer a different lens for, among other things, understanding how the myths informing both memory and history

circulate.<sup>141</sup> Certainly this dissertation contributes to the marriage of memory studies and communication studies by focusing on a particular case/space, “postwar” Beirut, where the absence of a shared historical narrative and the proliferation of discrete myth-based communities bear at least part of the responsibility for continued cycles of violence.

Indeed, how memory gets communicated has real implications on people’s material lives, not least of all the material conditions of the spaces where they live. Other fields (particularly anthropology, as seen in the oft-cited volume *The Anthropology of Space and Place*) have taken seriously people’s relationships to space and the ways in which they *make* it. But while communication research has long emphasized the important relationship between processes of communication and context/setting, as Carragee (2007) notes, rarely has it given much attention to the connection between the public sphere and *public space*, which the recent sub-field of *urban communication* tries to do.

The general premise of this dissertation rests on precisely the intersections and divisions between public space and the public sphere(s). The physical environment of Beirut has in many ways stultified interaction between different communities, leading to a proliferation of smaller public spheres, but fracturing an overall sense of community or nationhood. I began this dissertation by discussing the concept of the public sphere in Lebanon, and then suggested that the ways that people use the built environment – their practices and performances in public spaces – are the exact sites/events we should look to if we are to understand both long-held divisions and the possibility of new publics that

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<sup>141</sup> An edited version of Chapter 2 will appear in this volume, which is the result of an International Communication Association (ICA) pre-conference called “Making Sense of Memory and History” (Seattle, May 2014).

disrupt the status quo. But this study does not only contribute to the growing field of urban communication. It also challenges the Western notions and understandings of the public sphere that form the basis of urban communication studies. Further, it focuses on the *in-between* spaces rather than the reified categories of “public space” or “place” writ large. In so doing, it allows for an assessment of communicative shifts and flows in urban space, and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of a city as a text that is always *in process*, rather than made up of a series of enclaves or neighborhoods.

Public space has also long played a central role in the *performance studies* literature, especially in relation to site-specific performance, wherein the place provides both stage and raw material for the performance. If contemporary performance studies deprivileged traditional sites of performance (the theater, the concert hall, etc.) and knowledge (the archive, the museum, the library), current work in performance studies is pushing the space of performance even further, not only out into public space, but *through public space*, into the in-between spaces where this dissertation finds its richest material. In the May 2015 issue of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Bertie Ferdman draws attention to the “urban dramaturgies” – performance *in and of* cities – endemic to practices like walking tours, which lace through the cityscape, both reading it and writing it. These “vanishing *mise-en-scene*” reveal the contours of the city in which they are performed. As Ferdman writes, “What city is either desired or produced through these dramaturgies? What communities, regardless of geographical specificity, are present or silenced?” (Ferdman 2015, 19). These performances and practices serve as entry points for tracing out the epistemological threads linking together Beirut’s many communities. Then again, as much as they uncover connection, they simultaneously

point out the absences and exclusions with which Beirutis – and indeed all Lebanese – must reckon if the cycles of violence are to be broken. The performances and practices described in this dissertation might well be theorized as just such dramaturgies, adding a different regional focus to conversations around performance in the city.

Though this constellation shifts through the chapters, as I employ theoretical lenses ranging from tourist studies to public art, the main fields of inquiry – communication studies, memory studies, literature on space and place, and performance studies – inform the overall framework of the dissertation. I see the project as contributing to them, and they in turn contribute to the literature on Lebanon, helping to rupture old discourses of division and violence. In light of its concerns about different modes and sites through which shared memory is uncovered, staged, and communicated, the dissertation, too, is a sort of archive that records the important memory work being done in Lebanon at the current moment. Even if the practices themselves are ephemeral, perhaps these pages will serve to preserve them.

### **Project Limitations**

As with many ethnographic studies, this project took shape while I was on the ground in Beirut, and in the times in-between, when I was home in San Diego and had time to reflect on what I had observed in the field. Although I entered Beirut with another, potentially more well-defined project in mind, my interactions with people on the ground led me away from my original plan. I found myself intrigued instead by what felt like a burgeoning cultural politics that married concerns about space and memory

(the usual concerns of work on Lebanon) to observable practices and performance *across the city's many communities*.

The objects of this research were, like the researcher, caught between places. Or rather, these practices and performances traveled the spaces of the city, sometimes disappearing as quickly as they had appeared. Their observation and analysis thus depended heavily upon conversations with people who could contextualize them for me. As such, my initial – and often sustained – contact was frequently with the individuals related to each cause/case who were most visible, namely the organizers or leaders of various events. In a way, then, I ended up relying upon the very elitism that, as I stated in this dissertation's introduction, I wished to complicate. Many of these contacts represented various tenors of privilege. Some were in Lebanon by choice, as international NGO workers. Many local contacts enjoyed a certain amount of *wāṣṭa*, and thus were comfortable speaking quite plainly about their lives in Beirut.

Most often I found contact information for these people online, either on websites or on Facebook. Because they often had reason to communicate trans-nationally, they frequently wrote posts in French or English, making it easier for me to communicate with them. Although social media – indeed, the Internet in general – present yet more public spaces in which to explore the formation of coalitions and communities, I do not expand upon this in the dissertation. Earlier drafts of the case studies, especially Chapter 2 on the missing and disappeared, included some analysis of online interactions and exchanges. In the interest of maintaining focus on the city itself, these sections fell out in the final draft. I will likely return to online spaces in future work, especially as I start to consider

the production of transnational spaces of memory across the latest waves of the Levantine diaspora.

Certainly these issues in the dissertation bring up questions of visibility and narrative. That is, while the dissertation focuses on the practices and performances that fill the void of an overarching historical narrative, these practices and performances also have their own authors and directors. Even as the activities recorded in the case studies show a proliferation of local work writing “history from below,” this history, too, takes shape under the supervision of particular sorts of people. I encountered many instances where elite cultural actors, especially NGO workers, policed the narratives of local people. These elites argue that their control of narrative and performance is for the benefit of local participants and communities. While examples of this dynamic were too sensitive to include in this dissertation, I look forward to analyzing them more critically in future work.

## **Future Work**

### *Citizenship and Activism in “Postwar” Lebanon*

Though conceptions of citizenship implicitly run through this dissertation, re-framing the project around questions of nationhood and possibilities for political participation could be a fruitful route in future work. As indicated in the introduction, in Lebanon, as in many countries in the MENA region, sub-state loyalties largely matter more than national fealty. Lebanon’s various *asabiyat* are maintained through the circulation of communal myth and narrative. They also serve as the conduits for individual rights handed down by the state. In an earlier draft of this dissertation, I

included work by Suad Joseph on Lebanon's *political familism*, which refers to how citizens use family connections and institutions to activate their demands, and how the state in turn uses these same practices as moral grounds for governance (Joseph 2011). Building off of the NGO material included in Chapter 2, I see potential for research on the (mis)alignment of cosmopolitan rights claims with local practice and priorities. Certainly my experience with NGO elites in Lebanon allowed me at least a cursory view of the power differentials at play in activist work in the region, especially in relation to how the absence of historical narrative gets filled – by whom, with what stories, etc. An examination of local modes of political practice that focuses more explicitly on the establishment of political visibility vis a vis the state would allow me to engage transnational human rights discourses, and to critically link the Lebanese case to other contexts wherein people in failing or failed states seek to assert their rights and demands.

### Memory Work Beyond Lebanon

Continuing with transnational concerns, my work might also expand to include how memory gets communicated beyond Lebanon. Here I would be interested in engaging diaspora and transnational studies to examine how ethnoreligious identities are re-framed and reconstructed in the diaspora, through the circulation of myth and narrative. What does it mean to be “Lebanese” outside of Lebanon? What narratives of nationhood or community get circulated, and how are they deployed? How do communities – religious organizations, cultural clubs, and families, for example – use memories of Lebanon to construct a sense of belonging? While I would continue seeking out spaces where people share their memories, this project would take me from the in-

between spaces of the streets, to perhaps more easily observable spaces, wherein the communication of memory and the construction of identity might be more readily observed. This work would benefit from a consideration of “scale”: observing and comparing memory work in and between both public (social media, religious organizations, cultural/university clubs) and private spaces (the home) would give me a sense of the personal, cultural, and political forces at work in how members of the Lebanese – indeed, the larger Levantine – diaspora understand themselves in connection to Lebanon, their adopted countries, and different Levantine identities in those adopted countries, and between generations within the family unit. This sort of project might also consider questions of identity in relation to divergent notions of citizenship and belonging between the diasporic community and the adopted country. Questions of this nature have become increasingly important over the last decade, especially in Europe, as hundreds of thousands of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, have moved north. Apart from the obvious human rights concerns playing out with macabre frequency as migrants make often unsanctioned journeys – the presence of predatory middlemen, the danger inherent to the journey, and the sometimes hostile policing of migrants by would-be adopted nations, for example – migrants who are granted residency must deal with learning the ins and outs of a new society, face stereotypes that are being mobilized to close borders by an increasingly conservative political class, and figure out how to negotiate different identities in the face of assimilationist state programs.

*Global Youth Cultures in Context and Circulation*



As mentioned in Chapter 3, the recent shifting ethnoscaples precipitated by war in the MENA region have signaled an increased interest in the region's youth on the part of Western media outlets and humanitarian organizations. Lebanese youth have participated in a range of political and cultural activities with European youth groups. Tajaddod Youth, the youth wing of the Democratic Renewal Movement in Lebanon, has partnered with Radikal Ungdom in Denmark, for example, on events that address problems of media and memory in Lebanon, as well as immigration to northern Europe.<sup>142</sup> Some of the Lebanese street writers, too, have worked internationally. Phat2, for instance, participated in a competition staged by a Danish NGO, and won a trip to Copenhagen for his street art where he met and tagged with Danish artists.<sup>143</sup> Other youth have traveled abroad for reasons of simple survival: several friends have immigrated to Germany and Scandinavia in an attempt to flee violence in Syria. There, they wait in detention centers for news about their residency applications, their lives hanging in the balance. Conversely, European youth are getting radicalized via the Internet, and moving the opposite direction. A project about the spatial movements of MENA region youth would look to public sites of "cross-contamination" – the internet, universities, youth clubs, urban spaces, refugee centers – to examine the ideological shifts attendant to such movements. These ideologies are always in flux, but this is especially true now, as

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<sup>142</sup> In May 2012, Radikal Ungdom and Tajaddod Youth put together an exhibition called *Un Autre Memoire (Another Memory)* in Beirut. In a warehouse in Beirut's Sin el Fil district, the groups put up front pages of two main Lebanese newspapers – al Nahr and al Safir – for each major event during the civil war. The idea was to get Lebanese to see how partisan their media were, and to confront the past from others' perspectives. They were encouraged to write their responses to and memories of these events on Post-It notes, which they then placed alongside the newspaper prints.

<sup>143</sup> Here I betray an interest in Denmark. As I have spent a good deal of time there, and will be relocating to Odense in the coming academic year, I hope to turn my current work on/in the Middle East into future projects that will resonate with people in my own adopted home.

immigrant youth in Europe must reckon with nativist movements in their adopted countries. How are they negotiating the expectations of their families, and the cultures in which they live? How do they articulate their desires? Where do they find solidarity? How do they cope with xenophobia? Implicit in these questions are issues of generation, class, and gender. Tracing these youthscape brings the important cultural and political work of young people to the fore, rather than placing it in relation to dominant values and practices.

Alternatively, I might return to Lebanon to research the local youth-run activist groups cropping up to address social issues in the country. While youth have been active with international NGOs like ACT for the Disappeared, new homegrown collectives are starting to take shape around a political cosmopolitanism (Jabri 2007) that challenges liberal Western notions of care, and instead mobilizes overlapping solidarities based on reciprocity between individuals (Gould 2007). Most recently, several youth organizations (including the aptly titled You Stink movement) took to the streets, violently clashing with Lebanese police over the issue of Lebanon's waste. When protestors living near the Naameh landfill closed the road to the dump, Beirut's local waste collection company Sukleen stopped collecting trash, which then accumulated in the streets, decomposing in the summer heat. Other groups include feminist collective Nasawiya, which works for gender justice in Lebanon, and CitiAct, which conducts outreach in high-risk areas to promote inter-communal tolerance.

### **Final Thoughts**

Throughout this dissertation, I have mentioned the chaos of Syria's civil war, and gestured towards its effects on Lebanon. Fighting between pro- and anti-Assad camps has continued to erupt in Tripoli, in Lebanon's north. Hizballah, long allied with Iran and Syria's regime, has been openly fighting in the war, bringing its martyrs back across the eastern border. Refugees of the conflict live in squalor throughout Lebanon. Most recently, the so-called Islamic State has made advances into Lebanese territory. It announced its presence in Lebanon first by flying its black flags openly at political rallies. Now, those same black flags can be spotted throughout Beirut, and ISIS operatives in Lebanon have claimed space for themselves in areas like Ain El Helwe Palestinian Camp in Lebanon's south, a pit stop for jihadists on their way to, or back from, fighting in Syria and Iraq. The region's boundaries – physical and ideological – are once again in flux, a new “geography of fear” inscribing itself throughout Lebanon and stretching north, east, and south.

So much of this change involves claims to history and shared memory. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS fighters bulldoze the desert boundaries of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, erasing the historical borders that made the modern Middle East. They stake their claim on ancient history as well by smashing relics in museums, as though through the violent obliteration of cultural artifacts they could start time anew. The Syrian regime, too, has indiscriminately destroyed ancient cities and holy sites in its war against its own people. More tragically than all this, of course, is how everyday people bear – physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually – the brunt of claims to space and to memory.

Lebanon's political parties have lately also undertaken another sort of erasure in Beirut. Several months ago, they agreed to white wash the walls of their neighborhoods, burying under paint the symbols of their communities, and the conversations that archive each neighborhood's opinions and desires. Meant to decrease the chance of conflict between communities, the blank walls also suggest the liminal space Lebanese occupy, as they decide how and where to make space for themselves.

Lebanese of all identities and communities feel the consequences of this new order of things. In my circle of family and friends, some have considered leaving, and others already have. They find safety far from home, at universities abroad. They take jobs in Dubai. They bide their time in European refugee centers, waiting for the letter that guarantees them a future away from a homeland that no longer resembles home. They mourn family and friends lost in the shifting tides, the absences that will never be filled. They speak of how history repeats itself, and when will this end?

And then some of them stay. While staying is often the only option, their possible routes curtailed by accidents of birth, for others still, staying is a radical act of defiance. For many, it is both of these things.

If they leave, to what Lebanon will they return? If they stay, what Lebanon will they make?

This dissertation began with poetry. And so too should it close.

I have a seat in the abandoned theater  
 in Beirut. I might forget, and I might recall  
 the final act without longing ... not because of anything  
 other than that the play was not written  
 skillfully ...  
 Chaos  
 as in the war days of those in despair, and an autobiography  
 of the spectators' impulse. The actors were tearing up their scripts  
 and searching for the author among us, we the witnesses  
 sitting in our seats  
 I tell my neighbor the artist: Don't draw your weapon,  
 and wait, unless you're the author!  
 —No  
 Then he asks me: And you are you the author?  
 —No  
 So we sit scared. I say: Be a neutral  
 hero to escape from an obvious fate  
 He says: No hero dies revered in the second  
 scene. I will wait for the rest. Maybe I would  
 revise one of the acts. And maybe I would mend  
 what the iron has done to my brothers  
 So I say: It is you then?  
 He responds: You and I are two masked authors and two masked  
 witnesses  
 I say: How is this my concern? I'm a spectator  
 He says: No spectators at chasm's door ... and no  
 one is neutral here. And you must choose  
 your part in the end  
 So I say: I'm missing the beginning, what's the beginning?

- Mahmoud Darwish, "I Have a Seat in the Abandoned Theater"

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