Narrating the Palimpsestic Spaces of Post-Conflict Cities

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19 November 2015
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Abstract
The term ‘palimpsest,’ referring to medieval manuscripts that have been multiply erased and inscribed with the overlapping texts of successive scribes, has become a potent metaphor for describing the city, both the physical urban form as well as memories and experiences of everyday urban life. This metaphor has particular purchase in contexts of conflict, where histories of struggle leave visible traces of violence on the urban fabric. The palimpsest offers a way of thinking not only about urban transformation, where new and repurposed structures overlay and exist alongside the old, but also changes in how the city is experienced, or how life stories are written upon and rewrite existing spaces. This paper focuses on the latter. Though the palimpsest metaphor has long been used to describe material transformations of the urban, the question that this paper raises is: how can the notion of the palimpsest inform methodological approaches to researching the way that the city is lived and seen? Combining narrative and visual methods in the form of collaborative place-based storytelling can be a useful technique for exploring and analyzing how the palimpsestic spaces of the city are experienced. Collaborative digital storytelling, in which a storyteller and editor co-produced a story by combining images, narration, and sound, provides a method that emphasizes the kind of poly-vocality and multi-temporality that the term palimpsest implies. Moreover, such an approach, rather than producing a closed reading of a place, gestures at places as open to different future readings and inscriptions. This is particularly significant in post-conflict cities where the official history of past events, popular memories of violence, and questions over the future direction of the country are all highly contested. To illustrate these points, this paper draws upon research conducted with young people in Beirut, Lebanon as part of a wider, comparative study about how youth experience citizenship and belonging in divided societies.

Key Words: memory; inter-generationality; creative methods; storytelling; Lebanon
Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world's debris.


Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences.

Lynch (1960) *The Image of the City*, p. 1

Introduction

Referring to medieval manuscripts that have been multiply erased and inscribed with overlapping texts, the palimpsest has become a potent metaphor for describing both the physical urban form as well experiences of urban life. The term has been used to refer to the city and to memory, hinting at the inseparable entanglement of physical and mental space. It is a useful metaphor for visualizing how new urban forms and new ways of life are inscribed upon existing spaces and habits. In the context of ‘post-conflict’ cities, where histories of violence leave visible traces on the urban fabric and where there are often concerted rebuilding efforts in the wake of war, the intermingling of historic ruin and recent reconstruction provides a stark illustration of this concept. In addition to the physical rebuilding efforts that cities may undergo after prolonged conflict, countries emerging from violence are often also engaged in the task of building new forms of living together that strive toward a common future while still dealing with the painful legacy of the past. Young people are typically the target of such social rebuilding efforts. Although the history that young people learn at school may present a more palatable version of the past emphasizing national unity rather than historical violence (e.g. Ommering, 2011), young people's physical surroundings still bear traces of violence and betray histories of strife not easily concealed. Likewise, though young people may be taught about the importance of dialogue, understanding and reconciliation in formal and informal education, traumatic memories of past violence may continue to haunt young people's families and communities.

How do people coming of age in a city scarred by past conflict or war—war that they may not have experienced first-hand—experience the city, and how do they make sense of the entangled temporalities embedded in the urban landscape? Moreover, how might people imagine and create new forms of belonging and new ways of living in the city that strive toward alternative futures constructed in the present? In seeking to understand how young people and others make sense of these temporal urban entanglements, that is, how they experience life in a post-conflict city, this paper argues that the palimpsest not only provides a useful metaphor for conceptualizing the physical transformations that post-conflict cities undergo, but also a methodological approach useful for understanding how such changes are lived and experienced.

Specifically, this paper seeks to demonstrate that, in researching the palimpsestic places and entangled temporalities of post-conflict cities, collaborative place-based digital storytelling
can be a valuable technique for triangulating between history, memory, and the material traces of the past embedded in everyday surroundings. Digital storytelling combines narrative and visual elements in a way that lends itself to the kind of poly-vocality and multi-temporality that the term palimpsest implies. Although narrative and visual methods are often approached in a way that presumes individual authorship, the palimpsestic approach described in this paper instead sees storytelling as a social and spatial practice in which the city as palimpsest reveals itself in the many memories and stories that shape our understanding of particular places. As Darcy (2009, p. 105) contends, digital storytelling is ‘purposely different’ from the ‘testimonial performances’ that are often deployed in situations of past and ongoing violence, including legal testimony and the medicalized language of trauma. Place-based stories are told in ways that situate individuals in their broader social environments and temporal contexts, and seek to make sense of events through a range of affective registers. Moreover, stories are never told in isolation. They are told to and produce particular audiences and must make use of existing narratives to be understood. In this way stories mediate between disembodied social memory and de-socialized individual narratives on one hand, and the supposedly fixed objectivity of official versions of history on the other.

Collaborative digital storytelling in particular can be an effective technique for visualizing how stories can be at once deeply personal but also inherently social. Digital stories combine multiple elements including personal photos, archival images, music, atmospheric sound, and voice to produce a single video story. As such, intimate family portraits, news clippings, as well as photos and sounds from particular places come together through the storytelling process. In the palimpsestic method described in this paper, an additional element is added in the form of peer and inter-generational interviews. In this more relational approach, the storytelling process begins with the act of listening in the form of an interview. The interviewer and storyteller then work together to produce a coherent verbal and visual narrative. Finally, the stories can then be viewed by others and can potentially reach multiple audiences via online video sharing services. Conceived in this way the digital story is not a technique for eliciting individual testimony, but a method by which the individual is located in relation to a wider spatial-temporal context, potentially opening up new relations and new ways of seeing the world. By capturing and weaving together different visual and aural elements of the city to create place-based digital stories, the stories can be used as a tool for understanding and interrogating how the city is experienced palimpsestically.

This paper will first introduce the concept of the palimpsest and why it is a helpful device for theorizing the overlapping temporalities embedded in cities, particularly those marked by violence and conflict. This includes a consideration of how the concept of the palimpsest can apply to both physical transformations of urban form, as well as social transformations of urban
life. From here this paper will demonstrate the use of collaborative digital storytelling and how this technique can be useful for understanding how everyday experiences are shaped by and shape the palimpsestic spaces of the city. As an illustration, this paper draws upon research with young people in Beirut, Lebanon as part of a larger research project examining youth experiences of citizenship and belonging in divided societies. In Beirut, the project research team has worked with young people to produce digital stories using interviews, sounds, photos of everyday spaces, and other images, which we have then embedded in an interactive digital story-map of the city. This paper demonstrates how the process of producing these digital stories serves as a way to read the post-conflict city palimpsestically, thus allowing us to re-imagine and engage with the city in different ways.

**Urban and Mental Palimpsests**

The notion of the palimpsest offers a powerful way of imagining how contemporary life stories overwrite surfaces upon which partially visible traces of the past, including past violence, appear (Rushdy, 2001). Literary scholars Launchbury and Levey (2014, p. 1) observe that ‘[a]s a figure to represent multi-layered configurations of meaning, the palimpsest has become increasingly prominent in reflections upon the urban; [sic] particularly, though not exceptionally, in contexts which bear the scars of violence, civil war, dictatorship or colonialism.’ However, the metaphor of the city as palimpsest has a long career that extends beyond these contexts of conflict. As Kuberski (1992) notes, around the same time that cities like Paris, London, New York, and Berlin were first beginning to go underground with their municipal tramways, ancient and seemingly mythical cities like Troy, Nineveh, Babylon, and Knossos were being unearthed for the first time. The discoveries by famed archaeologists such as Sir Arthur Evans, Robert Koldewey, and Heinrich Schliemann had a profound effect on modernist urban literature and popular perceptions of modern urban life as being built on top of and within the ruins of the past (Lehan, 1998, Kuberski, 1992, Elber-Aviram, 2013). In this way, the metaphor is useful not only for describing the uneven process of urban transformation, but also for understanding how people experience and make sense of such transformation in daily life. But what exactly is meant by the term palimpsest and where does it come from?

The New Oxford American Dictionary (McKean, 2005) defines palimpsest as ‘[a] manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain.’ It comes from the Greek *palin* meaning ‘again’ and *psestos* meaning to scrape raw or rub smooth. Given the relative scarcity of writing surfaces in the Middle Ages, scribes would wash papyrus, scrape parchment with pumice, or apply chemical agents to vellum in order to erase an original text (Crang, 1996, Dillon, 2005, Palimpsest, 2015). However, the process was often incomplete, and faintly visible traces of text would sometimes remain. In the case of iron-based ink, erased writing could later re-appear in rusty red through
the process of oxidization over time. Thus, despite attempts to erase past inscriptions, writing would remain or even reappear to produce a poli-vocal, multiply-layered text of heterogeneous origins.

It is important to emphasize that the erasure that occurs in the production of the palimpsest is not an accidental covering of lines of text but an ‘un-writing’ that itself becomes a layer of the text as part of a dialect with previous utterances (Galpin, 1998). This is what Dillon (2014, p. 2) refers to as a ‘productive violence’ when she describes ‘the involvement, entanglement, interruption, and inhibition’ of different texts upon one another in a palimpsest. This recalls Kristeva’s (1980, p. 36) notion of ‘intertextuality’ as a ‘productivity’ in which ‘within the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another’. In this way, the palimpsest not only challenges notions of individual authorship but also temporal notions of causality, fixity and linearity. The contemporary intermingling of texts from different eras in the past combined with the possibility of other texts being erased or written in the future presents an entangled, non-linear notion of time (Dillon, 2014, p. 37).

Dillon (2005) takes this analytical purchase of the palimpsest metaphor further by distinguishing between two different adjectival forms of the word, and thus two different modes of analysis: palimpsestic and palimpsestuous. The term palimpsestic describes ‘the process of layering that produces a palimpsest,’ while palimpsestuous instead refers to ‘the structure with which one is presented as a result of that process, and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script’ (Dillon 2005, p. 254). A palimpsestic reading would ‘unravel and destroy’ the palimpsest by separating and re-ordering the tangled text. It is a linear and horizontal reading. In contrast, a palimpsestuous approach, akin to Foucauldian archaeology, ‘seeks to trace the incestuous and encrypted texts that constitute the palimpsest’s fabric.’ She continues: ‘Since those texts bear no necessary relation to each other, palimpsestuous reading is an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none; hence the appropriateness of its epithet’s phonetic similarity to the incestuous.’ Or as Philpotts (2014, p. 52) puts it in his study of the multiple temporalities of ruins in former East Germany, palimpsestic spaces specifically seek to: ‘stabilize and disambiguate different temporal layers’ as opposed to a ‘more inventive’ process of seeking out ‘new relations between the non-synchronous layers.’

Hakim Bey (1996) celebrates this juxtapositional productivity of the palimpsest. With the palimpsest, Bey (1996) observes, ‘the connections between layers are not sequential in time’ but rather ‘juxtapositional in space.’ As he explains: ‘Letters of layer B might blot out letter in layer A,

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1 This seeking out of new relations between different temporal layers is what distinguishes this notion of the palimpsest from similar, but ultimately different, Derridean concepts such as trace. By ‘trace’ Derrida (1997 [1974]) refers to the self-effacing non-presence that accompanies any sign (the abnormality tethered in meaning to every normality). In contrast, the notion of the palimpsest emphasizes the active but incomplete process of erasure that can give rise to multiple meanings, configurations, and possibilities.
or vice versa, or might leave blank areas with no markings at all, but we cannot say that layer A ‘developed’ into layer B (we’re not even sure which came first.) In this way, Bey argues, the palimpsest lends itself to a kind of juxtapositional way of seeing that creatively combines different elements, in contrast with what he characterizes as more linear ideological thinking. Similarly, Crang (1996) argues that the notion of the palimpsest offers a way of seeing the city through its palimpsestic visual portrayals. Rather than viewing images as primary sources of information in themselves, Crang (1996, p. 429) suggests that ‘montages and juxtaposition of pictures’ can be used to ‘highlight the relations between [different] ways of seeing.’ Moreover, such montages can become a way of ‘reconstructing the past and mapping out relations to it’ (Crang, 1996, p. 447). As such, both the physically layered spaces, gaps, and juxtapositions that haphazardly emerge within the urban form, as well as the overlapping accumulation of urban images and ways of seeing the city, can be combined in ways that seek to repurpose and re-imagine urban space.

Here we arrive at a notion of the palimpsest that suggests a poli-vocality of overlapping texts, images, and spaces, as well as different ways of seeing and knowing. As Pleßke (2014, p. 325) puts it ‘While the palimpsest serves as a metaphor for urban heterogeneity as well as the socio-cultural process of change, it also stresses the transformations of mentality.’ In this way, ‘Palimpsestic imprints are not only historical and geographical’ they are also ‘cultural and social’ including changes to ‘urban-specific dispositions of thinking, imagining, feeling and acting.’ Here both city and city-dwellers become sites for the ‘accumulation of traces of past action,’ to borrow Crang’s phrasing (1996, p. 432). Like the palimpsestic city, the self is continuously formed, inscribed and re-inscribed with memories and experiences that take on a certain consistency in the form of habit (Sullivan, 2001). The question thus arises, how do we attune ourselves methodologically to this palimpsestic understanding of the city and life the city? As the following sections demonstrate, collaborative and place-based digital storytelling is a technique that avails itself to a palimpsestic approach that emphasizes the multiple and entangled temporalities of city and self. With digital stories, individual memories interweave with broader social and historical narratives and likewise combine personal and archival images from different time periods. In collaborative, place-based digital storytelling the palimpsestic nature of the city is explored through the many layers of memory that come to constitute particular places. The temporal and visual juxtapositions and the dialectic interplay between experience and memory, story and history, that digital storytelling enables allows for new ways of seeing and understanding the city.

**Digital Storytelling in Beirut: A Palimpsestic Approach**

As part of a wider study on young people’s experiences of citizenship and belonging in divided societies, the authors conducted participatory research with youth-centred civil society and community-based organisations in Beirut, Lebanon, and with young people themselves from
different parts of the city. During the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), Beirut was divided by a line of demarcation called the Green Line, separating the mainly Muslim (including Palestinian) factions in West Beirut from the predominantly Christian militias of East Beirut. Though hostilities formally ceased with the signing of the Taif Accords in 1989, the power-sharing arrangement the accords institutionalized has allowed for persistent political polarization and a precarious security situation punctuated by bouts of violence. Nevertheless, for young people born after 1989, the violence of the Civil War years remains a second-hand memory (Larkin 2012). Young people in Lebanon today experience the war through the personal memories, stories, and silences that are transferred from one generation to the next, as well as the material traces and lasting political effects the war left behind.

Since the end of the Civil War, Beirut has experienced dramatic urban redevelopment, including the rapid transformations of parts of the city that were severely damaged by the fighting. Fuelled by Lebanese expatriate investment and Gulf-financed real estate development, some of the areas most affected by the war have undergone complete transformations (see Khalaf and Khoury, 1993). The former Green Line has become the primary target of urban renewal by Solidere, a controversial real estate venture that has transformed the central business district from dereliction to high-end residential and commercial properties. Here, crumbling Ottoman-era mansions and early 20th century villas abut Dubai-style towers, while bombed-out icons like the 1960s modernist egg building or the infamous Holiday Inn from the early 1970s stand as cruel reminders of the failed ambitions of previous eras. The result is an urban landscape of blunt temporal juxtaposition.

In order to understand how young people and others make meaning out of this multiply inscribed and erased urban landscape, we turned to the combined use of narrative and visual methods in the form of digital storytelling. The term digital storytelling has come to refer to a wide array of digital narratives including hypertext/interactive fiction and narrative-based computer games (Klaebe et al 2007). Typically, though, the term refers to short 3-5 minute digital videos that combine still images with autobiographical voice-over narration and that are produced using consumer-grade cameras, computers, and non-linear editing software (Meadows 2003). Dana Atchley, Joe Lambert, and Nina Mullen are credited with establishing digital storytelling as a distinct and recognizable medium, albeit one with roots in community theatre, grassroots media, and the oral history tradition. Aiming to empower ordinary people to tell their stories, they founded the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California in the early 1990s (Lambert 2013). In 2001, digital storytelling was introduced to British audiences by the BBC’s

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2 For historical, political and sociological analyses of the causes and consequences of the Lebanese civil war consult Picard (2002), Hanf (1993) and Johnson (2002) respectively. For a more journalistic account of the war see Fisk (1990).
3 On the spatial politics of memory in Lebanon see also Haugbolle (2009), Volk (2010), and Hayak (2014).
Capturing Wales project, and later the Telling Lives programme in England, spearheaded by journalist and academic Daniel Meadows, who had participated in a CDS training (Meadows 2003). Building upon a BBC radio-documentary tradition of ‘listening to the voice of the people’ stemming back to the interwar and immediate post-war period, the Capturing Wales project was as much concerned with building regional and community identity as telling individual stories. Digital storytelling was seen as a way for ‘communities and individuals to assert their identity and escape the confines of dominant images generated by mass media’ (Meadows 2003, p. 193). With the increasing availability of low-cost digital cameras, laptops and editing software, applications of digital storytelling have proliferated around the world and have been used in a wide range of projects ranging from literacy education and youth empowerment to international development (Davis 2005; Lambert 2013).

From a research perspective, digital storytelling has mainly been of interest for its pedagogical potential in education and public health practice, and for its power to ‘give voice’ to young people and communities (e.g. Hull and Katz 2006; Gubrium 2009). In this, digital storytelling is similar to participatory photography techniques like photovoice, which encourages ordinary people to represent community needs, assets, or other issues in pictures that are then collectively arranged to tell a particular narrative (Strack et al., 2014, Wang et al., 2004). The community-based ethic latent in digital storytelling has also led to its uptake by public historians as part of a broader turn toward digital humanities (e.g. Klaebe 2007). However, researchers in cultural studies have recently begun to consider the tensions surrounding the twin aims of the digital story ‘movement,’ namely encouraging self-representation and creating affective publics (Poletti 2011). To be an effective ‘social communication’ tool that can transform everyday experience into ‘shared public culture,’ as Burgess (2006, p. 9) puts it, digital storytellers are often encouraged to conform to a fairly formalized format and to draw creatively from a deep emotional well. However, in producing moving life-narratives, Thumim (2009) and Poletti (2011) contend, digital storytelling may not be all that remarkable. Instead, the technique may be viewed alongside other examples of ‘coaxed life narratives’ (Smith and Watson 2001) that have become commonplace practices of contemporary citizenship, including the narrative acts of filling out medical questionnaires, applying for social services, or interviewing for a job. As Poletti (2011, p. 76) argues, putting digital stories into the context of other institutionally coaxed narratives ‘requires us to consider how individual digital stories are situated intertextually within an individual’s practice of speaking autobiographically,’ that is, how ‘inter textual relationships are formed between autobiographical acts.’ A palimpsestic approach to digital storytelling acknowledges and seeks to interrogate this intertextuality and the ways in which life stories unfold within the spaces of other narratives and utterances.
Uneasiness about overly prescriptive or pedagogical applications of digital storytelling may account for the relative sparsity of its use as a qualitative research tool, along with general suspicions about claims to accessing ‘authentic’ voice. Indeed, we share this concern with regard to visual and narrative methods more broadly and in research with young people in particular. Visual methods are often employed with a certain ethnographic realism in which the camera lens is seen as offering an unadulterated view into the ‘real lives’ of young people (Maclure et al., 2010). Likewise, creative and narrative approaches often position young people as individual agents authoring their own life stories and aspirational narratives (Myers and Thornham, 2012).

In contrast, similar to other geographers working with narrative methods and storytelling (e.g. Cameron, 2012, Prokkola, 2014), our interest in digital storytelling is as much about the everyday stories, spaces and experiences that this process seeks to elicit, as it is about the various ‘scripts’ through which these everyday experiences become intelligible. In such a palimpsestic approach, the process of producing and viewing the digital stories is just as interesting as the stories themselves. That is, how a story gets told and listened to is just as important as what is said. By constructing their digital stories using images and sounds from their everyday environments, as well as archival photographs and other ephemera from other times and places, we emphasize how young people's lives are shaped within, and work to shape, the spaces of the city. In so doing, we challenge the fiction that life stories are authored by a single individual and instead emphasize how stories are not only constructed collaboratively as a transactional process between people and places, but also how stories necessarily draw upon existing narratives, sometimes over-writing and re-writing them in the telling.

In this our approach to digital storytelling draws inspiration from the models established by CDS and the BBC, but also diverges from these approaches in important ways. The goal of our process was not to draw out an individual narrative through deep introspection, but to go out into and explore the city through stories. We were not looking for a single life story but for stories of life in the city. The process we followed emphasizes place-based stories and a collaborative storytelling process between researcher and storyteller. To begin with, members of the research team trained a group of six young people on the principles of storytelling, interviewing, photography, and digital video editing. Using these skills, the youth researchers went out to find stories about particular places in their city as told by its residents. After identifying a person or group of people, sometimes associated with a particular place, the youth researcher would conduct a series of interviews with that person or group in order to construct and refine a place-based narrative. The storyteller would also provide images such as old photos, newspaper clippings, and other documents to help tell the story, while the youth researcher would photograph and capture background sound from the place where the story is set. The youth researchers would then edit the story together using the recorded narrative, atmospheric sounds, music, digital photos, and archival images in order to produce a 3-4 minute digital story.
In bringing together these different visual, aural and temporal elements through the digital editing process, the timeline of the video edit becomes a space where palimpsestic, and perhaps palimpsestuous, narratives can be constructed. In addition to listening to and helping to tell the stories of others, the youth researchers also developed their own narrative expressing their views on and experiences with particular places in Beirut. In this way, all the digital stories that the youth researchers produced are about everyday places or routines and how they are made meaningful through stories and memories.

This collaborative research process presents certain practical and ethical challenges. Questions over authorship and ownership are generally a concern when engaging with participatory visual methods or in collecting oral histories, and digital stories are no exception. The youth researchers who participated in this project were given ethics training and an introduction to ethical issues in participatory and community-based work. The storytellers gave their informed consent to the youth researchers to be interviewed and worked closely with them to develop the narrative and gather images for the digital story. A few storytellers however preferred not to be as deeply involved in the process and asked that the youth researchers develop the story based on the interview on their own. In any case, the youth researchers were diligent in their efforts to capture the voice of the people they were interviewing in co-writing and recording the voice-over narrative. The storytellers viewed various versions of the edited digital story before giving consent for the finished version to be shared publically (with an option to withdraw the story in the future should they wish). Finally, we embedded these digital stories into an online interactive map in order to illustrate how these individual narratives emerge from and interact with each other in the urban environment. In doing so we have drawn from and combined aspects of geo-visualization such as photomapping (e.g. Dennis et al., 2009, Jung, 2014) and critical approaches to qualitative GIS (e.g. Knigge and Cope, 2006, Pavlovskaya, 2006). Placing the stories in the map also serves to open up different parts or unfamiliar aspects of the city to others, outsiders and residents alike.

In producing these digital stories, the research team sought to include stories from their peers as well as from members of older generations in order to gain an understanding of how life in the city has changed over time. Likewise we were conscious of including the voices of men and women equally, as well as having a diverse array of stories from different religious and class backgrounds. However, the research team were wary of reproducing a kind of formalistic parity that would reify sectarian difference. The youth researchers themselves come from different class, educational, religious and national backgrounds, and live in different parts of the city. The young people were recruited with the help of a youth-led organisation based in Beirut that seeks to build cross-community dialogue and advocates for greater access to urban public space. This
Palimpsestic Narratives

Following the process described above, the participating young researchers collectively produced about 25 digital stories that together make up a single digital-story map of Beirut. Many of these stories make explicit reference to temporal layering and spatial juxtaposition in the urban landscape in ways that evoke notions of urban palimpsests. Some of the digital-stories offer what could be termed palimpsestic narratives of urban change. These stories seek to make sense of the rapidly changing urban landscape by ordering the successive layers of history along a post-conflict telos, with the narrative either unfolding toward a care-free future characterized by vibrant diversity or toward an inevitable loss of a nostalgic past. Other stories, however, take a more palimpsestuous approach, rearranging and juxtaposing different voices, images, and temporal layers of the city in order to open up and advocate for new spaces and modes of belonging. In some of these stories, specific palimpsestuous spaces are valorised as places where new forms of being and belonging can be created. In other stories, memories, images, and everyday experiences told by multiple voices are rearranged to highlight the interstitial spaces of being and belonging that exist today and that point to alternative ways of living in the city. Beyond what the stories themselves say about different ways of relating to the city, the young researchers who participated in this process reported a transformation in their own relation to the city, its past, its various neighbourhoods, and the different people who live there as a result of this research. The process of seeking out different voices, different stories, and different images of Beirut from different times and bringing them together to tell cohesive narratives provided a new juxtapositional way of seeing the city. What follows is a discussion of these three palimpsestic moments emerging from the digital-stories—palimpsestic narratives, palimpsestuous places, and palimpsestuous spatial stories—as well as a discussion of the youth researchers’ own experiences of collecting and retelling these stories.

In the context of post-civil war destruction and the more recent redevelopment of parts of Beirut, the digital stories produced by youth portray a keen awareness of places as temporally layered, contingent, and contested. Some of these stories seek to chart the changing shape of particular neighbourhoods or areas in the city. These stories take images and memories of the past and weave them together with voices, sounds, and pictures from the present in order to make sense of contemporary Beirut in terms of where the city has been and where it is headed. These palimpsestic narratives make reference to city’s violent past, as well as more fondly remembered pre-war days of Beirut as the ‘Paris of the Mediterranean.’ One such story, centres

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4 This digital story-map, and the stories mentioned below, can be accessed at:
on the area of Ain el Rammaneh, a predominantly Christian area of Beirut that was the setting for a series of armed clashes between Phalangist and Palestinian fighters culminating in the infamous ‘Bus Massacre’ of April 1975, regarded as the incident that sparked the Civil War. For the story, one of the youth researchers interviewed a friend who wanted to share both her mother’s memories of the infamous events that took place in Ain el Rammaneh as well as her own experience of this place (field notes 19 June 2015). In the story, a young woman’s voice recounts memories of the Ain el Rammaneh bus incident, illustrated with news clippings of the event. The narrator then declares:

This is my mother’s story of the war. My story says that when the war ended in 1991, Ain el Rammaneh was reconstructed. And it once again became a site of joy and happiness. It was transformed from a line of demarcation into an area with a very open heart.

Today, the narrator continues, the area ‘gathers Lebanese people from various regions, sects, and political parties’ and has become a ‘model of coexistence.’ The history of what happened in Ain el Rammaneh overshadows the place itself and the daily routines and interactions that take place there today (field notes 19 and 22 June 2015). This story seeks to rectify this by writing a new story on top of the old in a way that does not erase but seeks to redefine the history of this place. In so doing, however, the story reproduces a particular pre/post-Civil War timeline. In this story, the war is an aberration. It is a disruption in Beirut’s otherwise continuous historical timeline stretching from a cosmopolitan past to a future of coexistence.

Although many stories reproduce similar progressive teleological narratives, others present a less enthusiastic view of the Beirut that is being built in the wake of conflict. Many stories evoke a sense of loss and dissatisfaction with the changes that Beirut is experiencing. Indeed, some of the youth researchers who participated in this project appeared to be searching for an alternative to the present state of Beirut by seeking out stories from the city’s romantic past (field notes 10 May 2015). An illustrative example of this comes from an auto-biographical story by a pharmacy student from the Tariq el-Jldeh area of Beirut. His story, called ‘The Old Style’, is about two old homes that belong to the young man’s family. One home is a three-storey, multi-family dwelling, where his grandmother, his uncle, and his family live. The narrator tells us that he especially loves spending time in his grandmother’s apartment because it preserves ‘the old style’ with its old furniture, photos, and wall-paper. The other house is the old family home, which is ‘sacred’ to the young man. Although the uninhabited structure is in a state of disrepair, he still has great affection for its traditional tiles, high ceilings, and grand balconies. He had hoped to tend to the house’s beautiful but overgrown garden, however his family are planning to sell the home to a real estate developer who will knock it down and put up an apartment block, a move that the young man strongly opposes. The rest of the story—told through images of street-scapes, traditional cafés, faded building facades, and old men playing
backgammon—expresses a sense of sadness at the gradually fading character of his neighbourhood, which he equates with the gradual loss of ‘our identity.’

Figure 1: Screenshot from ‘The Old Style.’

While ‘The Old Style’ story mourns the loss of a Beirut identity due to the erosion of urban character by the effects of time, war, and post-war redevelopment, the Ain el Rammaneh story celebrates Beirut’s renewed sense of cosmopolitanism symbolized in its reconstruction. Nevertheless, both stories share a concern with the present and future of the city in relation to its past. These stories share a common palimpsestic narrative that views the present through Beirut’s romanticized past. However, as the next section shows, if the urban landscape is subject to erasure and amnesia, it is also open to strategic remembering as part of an effort to repurpose particular places.

Palimpsestuous places and stories

The sense of urban erasure described above is present in many stories. However not all the stories reproduce narrative tropes of nostalgic loss or hopeful progress. Some instead focus on how particular places have changed over time and how memories of the past may serve as inspiration for how they can be reimagined today. These stories draw upon the past in order to seek out new ways of viewing the city in the present. They do this by valorising particular palimpsestuous spaces and through the production of palimpsestuous digital narratives. For example, one story tells the recent history of ‘Beit Waraq’ (Paper House), an artist’s collective and non-governmental organisation located in an historic home in the once ruined and now long-since restored area of Ras el Nabaa. Chosen as the space for this collective because of its ‘authentic’ feel, the old house previously belonged to the local mukhtar, a neighbourhood leader
who would attend to public matters and resolve disputes from his garden office. Today this space takes on a different function but continues to serve as a semi-public space where members of the community gather. The collective’s goal is to ‘promote a way of thinking’ that is open to cultural exchange. One way of promoting this is by regularly hosting a ‘diwan,’ described in the story as a kind of community pot-luck. Originally the word *diwan* comes from Persian meaning archive, document, or document house (a meaning similar to *Beit Waraq*), but the term has been variously used to refer to collections of poetry, a government registry or council, as well as the cushioned seats that would line such offices. In the Eastern Mediterranean, *diwan* typically refers to a sitting room in a section of the home that is open to receive guests, removed from the more private inner-areas of the house. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the *diwan* became an important cultural space in Beirut as a site where literary salons and political discussions were organised, often by women. In this space, these governmental and cultural shades of meaning overlap in this colourfully painted old home. Part-collective and part-NGO, this organisation dedicated to transforming this lower income area through culture is at once a harbinger of gentrification, but also a bulwark against unchecked real-estate development that threatens old homes like this. They retain a ‘sentimental attachment’ to the house, as the story tells us, even as the house itself is used for activities geared toward social transformation. The story about the house serves to highlight and valorise the micro-spaces that appear in the margins between different spatial erasures and inscriptions, where new forms of being and relating are imagined.

Another story about a larger but similarly marginal space seeks to find possibility in the present despite the threat of erasure, and it does so by bringing together multiple sites and perspectives into a single palimpsestuous story. The story, called ‘The Horsh,’ takes the viewer on a ride through the city toward Horsh Beirut (also called Horsh as-Snobar or Horsh al-Eid), a 75-acre urban park and pine forest in the centre of the city. Situated along the old demarcation line of the civil war and bordering the southern Beirut suburbs, the park has been largely off-limits to residents for decades due to concerns about security and maintenance. In the story, the narrator passes by the old French and Ottoman homes on his way to the Horsh, ‘yeah, we had them here,’ he tells us. However, these traces of the past are under threat of destruction by the ‘yellow locusts,’ that is, the bulldozers that demolish old houses to make way for new apartments. The story then takes us along the Fouad Chehab highway, across the former demarcation line ‘still marked by bullet holes’, where we find a construction site, and another form of destruction. A few months ago, we are told, it was an archaeological site. ‘What was there?’ the narrator asks rhetorically. ‘A Roman bath, or a mosque?’ The only answer given is the sound of the ‘bulldozers and cement mixers,’ burying what was there for the last time. Finally, we arrive at the Horsh. The whir and buzz of metal locusts gradually gives way to the serene sounds of birds chirping. The space remains a sanctuary, untouched by the ‘wave of change’ that is sweeping the city. In spaces around the Horsh, small, everyday routines make up a way of life that would disappear should
they too be erased. Routines like morning coffees and afternoon walks, gossip and card games, basketball and family gatherings, courtship and play would all ‘disappear’ should the areas around the Horsh be taken away. In his mention of children from different backgrounds who gather in the Horsh to play, the narrator seems less concerned with the loss of the past, or the building of a particular vision of the future, as he is in preserving and fostering small spaces of conviviality right now. The story does not gesture at a nostalgic past nor does it embrace a particularly hopeful view of progress. Rather, it looks at the present as pregnant with possibilities, a present under threat of erasure but upon which alternative futures could be written.

Figure 2: Screenshot of ‘The Horsh.’

Another story takes a similar approach, drawing together multiple voices and experiences to tell a palimpsestuous story of a single place. However, the place described in ‘Van No. 4’ is not a static site. Rather, the story describes the space that is produced within a shared taxi van as it travels along its circuitous route through the city. As the story explains, Van number 4 connects residents of the lower-income area of Dahia in South Beirut with the upscale Hamra area near the American University of Beirut. The van’s route travels roughly along the old ‘Green Line’ that once divided East and West Beirut. In its winding path the van erases the old demarcation line and draws together a collage of various neighbourhoods as it picks up passengers from different class and religious backgrounds. ‘It’s a community in the heart of a bus,’ as one passenger describes it. The bus brings people together in a special way because all the passengers ‘speak the same language’ and everyone shares a common experience, as one of the van drivers puts it. The space inside the bus provides a unique way of seeing the city through its many juxtapositions.
It is this juxtapositional way of seeing the city and its various temporal layers that this place-based, collaborative digital-storytelling process enables. Many of the youth researches who participated in this project reported undergoing a transformation in their relation to the city, its past, and its residents (field notes 31 May, 29 June, and 18 August 2015). One participant noted that getting to know ‘Old Beirut,’ by wandering through the older neighbourhoods and talking to older residents, allowed him to see the contemporary city in ‘relative terms,’ enabling a comparison between past and present that brings to light what is being lost with the changes taking place in the city. In particular he talked about how the narrow streets and balconies of ‘Old Beirut’ allow for a particular pace and style of life that encourages interaction, in contrast with the highways and towers he says typifies ‘New Beirut.’ However, in general, he said that this place-based, collaborative story-telling helped him understand how particular places can be important to individuals, because they feature in their daily routines and are connected to personal memories, while at the same time being important to society as containers of shared experiences among different people (field notes 31 May 2015).

For some of the youth, the project inspired them to travel outside their comfort zones to find these interesting places and meet the different people who gather there. One of the young women in the project found herself visiting and chatting to people in spaces that are typically the preserve of older males, such as traditional coffee shops, while another youth researcher used the project to visit a Palestinian refugee camp for the first time (field notes 10 May 2015). Others did not venture out much beyond their families and neighbourhoods, but for a young Palestinian woman, even exploring her own neighbourhood was a new experience. The woman describes her family as ‘beitouti’ or homey, and said that, as Palestinians, she and her family had always shied away from public activities that could be seen as political. The project inspired her to go and talk...
to people in the neighbourhood, to learn their history and see how they think, and to eventually explore other parts of the city (field notes 14 September 2015). Her neighbourhood, Tariq el Jdideh, is seen by some as being intentionally marginalized due to the presence of Palestinians and its proximity to the refugee camps, and is often seen as belonging exclusively to a particular party and sect and thus dangerous and off-limits to outsiders. During a public viewing of these stories, some of the reactions suggested that these stories serve as a vehicle for challenging such stereotypes, breaking down barriers between neighbourhoods, and highlighting the many similarities between people and places in different parts of the city (field notes 20 June 2015).

Many of the youth researchers were taken by how open and enthusiastic people were about sharing their stories. As one youth researcher put it, people in her neighbourhood have a lot of stories to share and a lot to say but ‘we do not want to talk about sorrow…we want to talk about the relationship to the area.’ In this way the digital stories also became a way of drawing attention to all the other stories about particular places in Beirut besides just memories of the war.

**Digital Storytelling: A Palimpsestuous Method?**

Capturing the complex temporality in the situated messiness of everyday life in a city still emerging from decades of conflict is a methodological challenge. As attested to above, digital storytelling can be useful for producing and exploring individual narratives that unfold within and intersect with the multiple, layered temporalities embedded in urban space. As Darcy (2009, p. 105) suggests, digital storytelling highlights a ‘dialectic approach to storytelling that engages processes of remembering, meaning making and the re-constituting of lived experiences.’ The collaborative place-based approach to digital storytelling—which combines peer and intergenerational interviewing, digital montage, and mapping—is useful for several reasons. Firstly, stories play an important if ambivalent role in mediating between history and memory. If big-H history is the much-contested official version of past events accompanied by the promise of future progress, memory in post-conflict situations often finds its strongest expression in the language of trauma, a repetitive reliving of past injury. Stories rely upon personal and subjective memories, but also rely upon overarching tropes and narrative arcs to be told, even if only to subvert them. They are also necessarily situated in specific times and spaces, produced out of situated occurrences of people and things. In this way, stories can be useful in steering between decontextualized memory and the fraught fixity of history.

This brings us to digital storytelling as a spatial practice. De Certeau (1984, p. 108) talks about stories as being belonging in ‘secluded places in neighborhoods, families or individuals.’ These stories, he warns, can become dispersed in the ‘anti-museum’ of non-localizable memory. Transforming these memories into digital stories that can then be located on a digital map reterritorializes them, making them meaningful to wider audiences without losing the specificity of place. The stories personalize individual experiences of the city without losing site of historical
context and spatial difference. In this way they stories stand in contrast with spectacular portrayals of violence or ruin that come to stand in for and thus homogenise particular places marked by conflict. Mapping the stories—referring to both to their final representation on the digital story-map and also, and most especially, the process of going out and finding the stories and finding out where they took place—is an important step in reconstructing the dispersed spatial archive of memory (Crang 1996). Likewise, the spatial and palimpsestic nature of these stories helps us appreciate how, contra Hirsch (2008), memory, both the traumatic and mundane, can be transmitted passively through landscape, actively forgotten and erased, as well as actively received and re-imagined. As Pleßke (2014) writes, 'The palimpsest stresses the possibility of uncovering illimitable, unexpected inscriptions of past, present, and future within the urban texture.' The digital stories, and the story-map they collectively produce, embrace this polyvocality, while leaving room for successive layers of stories to be added. Huyssen (2003, p. 5) observes that, while the canon of history may be under duress, 'the seduction of the archive and its trove of stories of human achievement and suffering has never been greater.' Perhaps in the creation of such an archive in the form of a map of stories we have succumbed to this seduction. However, if history decomposes into images and not into narratives, as Benjamin asserts (Buck-Morris 1991, p. 220), perhaps these images can be reclaimed and reassembled to form palimpsestuous montages that bring to light forgotten pasts and gesture at alternative futures.
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