

## Narrating Palimpsestic Spaces

### Abstract

The term 'palimpsest' refers to medieval manuscripts that have been multiply erased and inscribed with the overlapping texts of successive scribes. More recently and amongst academics, the term has become a metaphor for describing the city, including both the physical urban form as well as memories and experiences of everyday urban life. The palimpsest offers a way of thinking not only about urban transformation, where new and repurposed structures 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 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 how the city is lived and seen? Collaborative, digital storytelling that combines images, narration, and sound can provide a method that emphasizes the poli-vocality and multi-temporality that the term palimpsest implies. A palimpsestic approach to digital storytelling, as a visual and narrative method, gestures at places as open to future readings and inscriptions. This is relevant to all cities, but perhaps most obviously in cities where historical narratives, memories of violence, and questions over the future political direction of the country in which the city is located 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 study about how youth experience citizenship and belonging in divided societies.

**Key Words:** memory; youth; storytelling; palimpsest; place; Beirut

Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world's debris.

de Certeau (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 107

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**

The term ‘palimpsest’ refers to medieval manuscripts that have been erased and inscribed with overlapping texts. Geographers and literary scholars alike have taken to using the term “palimpsest” as a metaphor describing both the physical urban form as well as experiences and memories of urban life. Gesturing at the inseparability of physical and mental space, Freud evoked the palimpsest in describing the accumulated layers of history that make up both the physical and mental image of the city of Rome (2002 [1929]), as well as the traces of multiply inscribed and forgotten memories imprinted on the subconscious mind (1991 [1925]). We build on this idea, arguing that the palimpsest metaphor is useful for visualizing how new urban forms and ways of life are inscribed upon existing spaces and habits. All cities undergo processes of palimpsestic decay and reconstruction, and, in any city, urban planners promote and protect exemplary forms of “heritage” while neglecting or destroying other urban histories. However, this process of destruction and reconstruction is particularly evident in cities that have experienced war and political violence. Political struggles often result from different experiences and reactions to the physical and mental traces of destruction of areas of the city and the lives that were lived in them. Urban rebuilding efforts may play a part in social healing and “normalization”, but may also represent another act of violent erasure targeting particular memories of a past. As an illustration of the fraught politics of reconstructing and reimagining urban life in the context of past and on-going struggles, this paper examines the views and experiences of young people in Beirut, Lebanon as part of a larger research project examining youth experiences of citizenship and belonging in divided societies.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that, in researching the palimpsestic places and entangled temporalities of cities, collaborative place-based digital storytelling is 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 poli-vocality and multi-temporality that the term palimpsest implies. Although narrative and visual methods often presume 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 language of trauma. Collaborative, place-based stories situate individuals in their broader social environments and temporal contexts, and seek to make sense of events through a range of affective registers. Moreover, such stories are not told in individual isolation. They are told to and produce particular audiences and make use of existing narratives to be understood. As such, 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.

We first elaborate the concept of the palimpsest and why it is a helpful device for theorizing the overlapping temporalities embedded in cities. This includes a consideration of how the concept of the palimpsest applies to both physical changes in urban form and the social relations that condition urban life. From here this paper will demonstrate the use of collaborative digital storytelling with young people in Beirut as a technique for understanding how their everyday experiences are shaped by and shape the palimpsestic spaces of the city. The project research team worked with young people in Beirut to produce digital stories using interviews, sounds, photos, and archival images, which we have then embedded in an interactive online story-map of the city. The process of producing these digital stories serves as a way to read cities palimpsestically, thus allowing multiple engagements with the city, its histories, and its experience and meaning.

### **Urban and Mental Palimpsests**

The notion of the palimpsest helps us visualise how contemporary life stories overwrite surfaces upon which partially visible traces of the past, especially 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 city-as-palimpsest metaphor has a long career extending beyond these contexts of conflict. As Kuberski (1992) notes, around the time that cities like Paris, London, New York, and Berlin were going 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 archaeologists such as Sir Arthur Evans, Robert Koldewey, and Heinrich Schliemann had a profound effect on modernist urban literature and 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 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 *psistos* meaning to scrape. 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 text (Crang, 1996, Dillon, 2005, Palimpsest, 2015). However, the process was often incomplete, and faintly visible traces of text would sometimes remain. Iron-based ink would even later re-appear in rusty red through the process of oxidization over time. Thus, despite attempts to erase past inscriptions, writing would remain or reappear to produce a 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 text but an 'un-writing' that itself becomes a textual layer in dialectic with previous inscriptions (Galpin, 1998). Dillon (2014, p. 2) refers to this 'involvement, entanglement, interruption, and inhibition' of different texts upon one another as a 'productive violence.' The intentional erasure and re-writing of texts enacts a kind of discursive violence against the original

manuscript, but also, unintentionally, gives rise to unexpected configurations of meaning. Such processes of erasure and re-inscription can be seen in acts of intentional urban destruction and the new layers of meaning inscribed upon post-conflict landscapes in the form of reconstruction and commemoration. In this way, palimpsestic texts and spaces not only challenge notions of individual authorship and meaning, but also temporal notions of causality, fixity and linearity. The contemporary intermingling of inscriptions 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 the analytical purchase of the palimpsest 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 Nazi and socialist-era 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 letters in layer A, 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, the palimpsest lends itself to a kind of juxtapositional way of seeing that creatively combines different elements, in contrast with what Bey 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, the physically layered spaces, gaps, and juxtapositions that haphazardly emerge within the urban form, as well as the overlapping accumulation of images and ways of seeing the city, can be combined in ways that seek to 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. 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 consistency in the form of habit (Sullivan, 2001). 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 emphasizing the multiple and entangled temporalities of city and self. With digital stories, individual memories and personal photos interweave with broader social and historical narratives and archival images. 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 study on young people's experiences of citizenship and belonging in divided societies, the research team conducted 18 months of field research with youth organisations and young people in Beirut, Lebanon beginning in January of 2015. The interviews aimed at understanding the various attempts to promote youth citizenship as a way of smoothing over divisions in Lebanon. As we conducted the research, we were struck by how people wished to reach across division, but also about the constrained and bounded knowledge young people had about the city. In seeking a way to engage with youth in ways that were meaningful to them, we developed a collaborative story-telling project that employed young people from one of the organizations with which we conducted ethnographic research. These youth researchers then interviewed other people – some of whom they knew previously and some of whom they met for the first time through the storytelling – and had people tell stories about places that were meaningful to them. Our purpose was to understand how young people in divided cities navigate the histories and spaces of the city as they attempt to forge new ways of being, although it quickly became evident that the method had broader applicability, as we developed an understanding of the palimpsestic and palimpsestuous nature of cities.

In opening up this metaphor and in describing our approach, we operate in the paradoxical zone in which we use stories about place to develop and examine narratives, even though our focus is not primarily about Beirut. Nonetheless, it is necessary to explain a bit about Beirut, since the point of our palimpsest metaphor is that spaces are never built or inscribed *de novo*. The youth researchers learned this, as well. Few of them wanted to talk about the country's civil war, about the wars with Israel, about the ongoing conflicts between sects in the country, or about the conflicts in neighboring Syria that were sending refugees to Beirut. They quickly found, however, that in telling stories about place and experiences in it, they were narrating the spaces of the city palimpsestically. Just as the youth researchers learned about the city, it is also necessary to provide a potted history of Beirut, conflict and division in order to understand the role of the youth and storytelling in the palimpsestic narratives that we describe.

During the wars in Lebanon between 1975-1990 (typically referred to as the Lebanese Civil War), Beirut was divided by a line of demarcation called the Green Line, separating the mainly Muslim (including Palestinian and various secular) factions in West Beirut from the predominantly Christian

militias of East Beirut.<sup>1</sup> 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. Lebanese young people born after 1989 experienced war first hand during the Israeli assaults on the country in 1996 and 2006, fighting between Palestinian Islamists and the Lebanese army in 2007, and street battles between rival political factions in 2008. Yet the 15-year Lebanese Civil War, which holds a central place in Lebanese modern history and politics, looms large as a second-hand memory for youth (Larkin 2012).<sup>2</sup> 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 of the fighting.

Since the end of hostilities, Beirut has experienced dramatic urban redevelopment, including the transformation 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). Solidere, a controversial real estate venture, sought to transform the derelict city centre, formerly divided by the Green Line, into a central business district comprising high-end residential and commercial properties. In other parts of municipal Beirut, crumbling Ottoman-era mansions and early 20<sup>th</sup> century villas abut Dubai-style towers, while bombed out icons like the modernist ‘Egg’ building or the infamous Holiday Inn stand as cruel reminders of the failed ambitions of previous eras. In the past decade, new high end apartment towers and office buildings have been built in al-Dahiyya, a predominately Shia area of the city, which is closely associated in the minds of many with low-incomes and cramped housing. The result is an urban landscape of blunt spatial/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 fiction and narrative-based computer games (Klaebe et al 2007). Typically,

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<sup>1</sup> For historical, political and sociological analyses of the Lebanese civil war consult Picard (2002), Hanf (1993) and  
<sup>2</sup> On the spatial politics of memory in Lebanon see also Haugbolle (2009), Volk (2010), and Hayak (2014).



though, the term refers to 3-5 minute digital videos that combine still images with autobiographical voice-over narration produced using consumer-grade cameras, computers, and non-linear editing software (Meadows 2003). 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 contexts, 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 digital humanities turn (e.g. Klaebe 2007). However, researchers in cultural studies have 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 transforms everyday experience into ‘shared public culture,’ as Burgess (2006, p. 9) puts it, digital storytellers are 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) such as the narrative acts of applying for social services, creating an online dating profile, 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 ‘intertextual 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.

Uneasiness about overly prescriptive or pedagogical applications of digital storytelling may account for its infrequent use as a qualitative research tool, along with general suspicions about claims to accessing ‘authentic’ voice. We share these concerns 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, similar to recent processual approaches to mapping and cartography (Kitchin et al, 2012), 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 images and other ephemera from different 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 individually authored and instead emphasize how stories are constructed collaboratively as a transactional process between people and places, and how stories necessarily draw upon existing narratives, sometimes over-writing and re-writing them in the telling.

This is not to suggest a harmonious, collective process. Indeed, the young people involved in this project received some pushback from their friends, family and colleagues, often around issues relating to how a particular neighborhood or the city itself was being portrayed to outsiders. From the beginning, 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. Specifically, we encouraged the participants to think about and seek out stories and memories about important places in their neighborhoods, places they feel comfortable or at home, as well as places that they want to change, or that feel off-limits to them. We also emphasized stories about movement and mobility through the city, within and across different

neighborhoods. The process we followed thus emphasized the place-based nature of these stories and a collaborative storytelling process between researcher and storyteller.

Members of the research team trained a group of six young people on the principles of storytelling, interviewing, photography, and digital video editing. These 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 and for good governance. The youth researchers who participated in this project represent different class, educational, religious and national backgrounds, and live in different parts of the city. The youth researchers 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. Rather than taking a romantic or depoliticized view of intergenerational contact (e.g. honouring grandparents), we see extrafamilial intergenerational contact as rare and productive moments that potentially widen political imaginations by broadening temporal horizons (Venderbeck 2007). Collectively, we were also conscious of the need to include stories from different religious and class backgrounds, and include the voices of men and women equally. However, we sought to avoid reproducing a kind of formalistic parity that would reify sectarian difference.

Following the initial training, 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 the identified storyteller(s) 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 construct the story using the recorded narrative, atmospheric sounds, music, digital photos, and archival images. The youth researchers were diligent in their efforts to capture the voice of the people they interviewed and the feel of their story as they helped to co-write the voiceover and arrange the accompanying images. 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). The implication of working closely with the people

whose stories were narrated, however, is that the voices of the youth researchers and the storytellers are co-mingled in the actual stories. As part of the process, however, the youth researchers also developed an autobiographical narrative expressing their views and experiences relating to particular places in Beirut.

Finally, we embedded these digital stories into an online interactive map in order to illustrate how these narratives emerge from and interact with the urban environment (Figure 1). 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 a period of one year between 2015 and 2016, at the time of writing, the digital stories from Beirut were viewed over 1,500 times in Lebanon, and over 4,000 times in 50 different countries around the world. They have been shared through social media, and have taken on a life of their own. In contexts of conflict where young people often feel as though they lack safe spaces to give voice to their experiences and only feel safe in public spaces belonging to “their” group (Azmi et al 2013), the process of listening to and sharing stories contributed to the production of such spaces of engagement (a goal of the partner organization on this project.)



Figure 1. A screenshot capturing a portion of the digital story map of Beirut, centered around Horsh Beirut, the Tariq el Jdideh neighborhood, and Chatila Refugee Camp. [Hyperlink]

## Narratives of Place

Following the process described above, the youth researchers produced 26 digital stories that together make up a single **digital-story map of Beirut** [hyperlink].<sup>3</sup> Some of the digital-stories offer what could be termed palimpsestic narratives of urban change. They make sense of the 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 search of new spaces and modes of belonging. In some of these stories, specific palimpsestuous spaces are valorised as places where new forms of belonging can be created. In other stories, memories, images, and everyday experiences told by multiple voices are rearranged to highlight the interstitial spaces of 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 eras, and bringing them together to tell coherent 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 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

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<sup>3</sup> This digital story-map can be accessed at: [...]

the city's violent past, as well as more fondly remembered pre-war days of Beirut's 'Golden Era.' One such story centres on the area of [Ain el Rammaneh](#) [hyperlink], a predominantly Christian area of Beirut that was the setting of an armed clash between Phalangist and Palestinian fighters culminating in the '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 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 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 timeline, in which 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 Beirut's post-war renewal. 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 the city by seeking out stories from the city's romanticised past (field notes 10 May 2015). An illustrative example of this comes from an autobiographical story by a pharmacy student from the Tariq el-Jdideh area of Beirut. His story, called ['The Old Style'](#) [hyperlink], is about two old homes that belong to his family. One home is a three-storey dwelling where his grandmother, his uncle, and his immediate family live. The youth researcher/storyteller explains that he especially loves spending time in his grandmother's apartment

because it preserves ‘the old style’ in its 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 2: Screenshot from ‘The Old Style.’

While ‘The Old Style’ story mourns the loss of a particular (arguably sectarian) 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. Both stories, however, 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 the lens of Beirut’s nostalgic past. However, as the next section shows, if the urban landscape is subject to erasure, amnesia, and nostalgia, it is also open to strategic remembering as part of an effort to repurpose particular places in the present.

### Palimpsestuous places and stories

The sense of erasure described above is present in many stories. However not all the stories reproduce teleological tropes of loss or progress. Some 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 seeing the city in the present. They do this by valorising particular palimpsestuous spaces and through the production of palimpsestuous narratives. For example, one story tells the history of **'Beit Waraq' (Paper House)** [hyperlink], an artist's collective and non-governmental organisation located in an historic home in the once ruined and now restored area of Ras el Nabaa. Chosen for its 'authentic' feel, the old house previously belonged to the local *mukhtar*, an elected neighbourhood leader who would attend to public matters and resolve disputes. 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,' reinterpreted to mean a 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 for receiving guests, removed from the more private inner-areas of the house. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *diwan* became an important cultural space in Beirut where literary salons and political discussions were organised, often by women. In *Beit Waraq*, 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 even as the house itself is used for activities geared toward social transformation. The story about this house serves to highlight and valorise the micro-spaces that appear in the margins between different spatial erasures and inscriptions, where new forms of belonging are imagined.

Another story about a larger but similarly marginal space seeks to find possibility in the present despite threat of erasure, and it does so by bringing together multiple sites and perspectives into a single



palimpsestuous story. The story, called **'The Horsh,'** [hyperlink] takes the viewer on a ride through the city toward Horsh Beirut (also called Horsh as-Sanawbar or Horsh al-Eid), a 75-acre urban park and pine forest. Situated along the old Green Line 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, toward the former demarcation line 'still marked by bullet holes', where we find another 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 whirl and buzz of metal locusts gives way to the 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, 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 there to play, the narrator seems less concerned with the loss of the past, or building 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 3: Screenshot from '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 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 along the old Green Line that once divided East and West Beirut. In its winding path the van erases the line of demarcation and draws together a collage of various neighbourhoods as it picks up students and workers from different 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 a driver puts it. The space inside the bus provides a unique way of seeing the city through its many juxtapositions.



**Figure 2: Screenshot from 'Van No. 4'**

It is this juxtapositional way of seeing the city and its various temporal layers that this place-based, collaborative digital-storytelling process enables. The youth researchers themselves reported considerable changes 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 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. 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 storytelling 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 interesting places and meet different people. One young woman found herself visiting and chatting to people in spaces that are typically reserved for older men, such as traditional coffee shops. 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, 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 dangerous and off-limits to outsiders. During a public viewing of these stories, some of the reactions suggested that these stories could be useful for challenging these stereotypes, breaking down barriers between neighbourhoods, and highlighting the similarities between people in different parts of the city (field notes 20 June 2015).

Indeed, the appealing visual nature of these stories not only open themselves up to visual and narrative analysis, but present opportunities for engagement, discussion, and processes of collective meaning making. Rather than analysing the stories as individual narratives, the stories can be seen as polyvocal constellations of meaning produced not only by the young people and the community members through interviews in particular places, but also others who engage with the stories and storytellers both in person and online. Many of the youth researchers were impressed by how open and enthusiastic most people were in sharing and talking about their stories. As one youth researcher observed, 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 places in Beirut beyond memories of the war. The polyvocality of these stories and the story-map they produce may seem, at first glance, to add to the din of competing political narratives that clutter the already saturated and fractured public sphere in Lebanon. However, in going beyond narratives of heroism and victimization that typify representations of the Civil War, and in interrogating the past in ways that open up possibilities for the future, these stories seek new ways of living and relating to the palimpsestic spaces of the city.

### **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. Digital storytelling can be useful for producing and exploring individual narratives that unfold within and intersect with the multiple, layered temporalities and memories 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 described above is useful for several reasons. Firstly, stories play an important if ambivalent role in mediating between history and memory. 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 spatial practice. De Certeau (1984, p. 108) writes about stories as belonging to ‘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 sight of historical context and spatial difference. In this way they 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 both to their final representation on the digital story-map and also the process of going out and finding stories and exploring places—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 memory, both the traumatic and mundane, can be passively transmitted through landscape, actively forgotten through erasure, as well as collaboratively re-remembered through intergenerational dialogue (Venderbeck 2007). 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 produce, embrace this polyvocality, while leaving room for successive layers of stories to

be added (Graham 2010). 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 more hopeful and peaceful futures.

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