

## Disrupting dismemory: the memoir of Jean Said Makdisi

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## Disrupting dismemory: the memoir of Jean Said Makdisi

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### Abstract

The interdisciplinary field of memory studies has tended in recent years to diverge into two directions: on the one hand, the study of memorials, monuments, rituals and commemorations, adapting theories of space, construed through notions of »collective memory« and »affective memory«; and on the other hand, a psychoanalytic model of translation between »traumatic memory« and narrative memory«, dominated by an approach to the value of narrative as cure. While these approaches often cross over into each other, generating compelling insights, they tend to be informed by what we could call a *presentist* approach to memory. This tends to position the present, however embattled, as a potentially stabilising recovery of the past. Having learned and adapted much from both approaches, I nevertheless regard my work with memory as a slight departure. Preoccupied with works of cultural production, mainly film and literature, arising out of the sixteen-year civil war in Lebanon, I am concerned more with a *fragmenting force of memory* situated as an irresolvable, irreconcilable, productive tension *between* what comes to be re-covered as present and past, i.e., neither from the vantage point of »the« present nor from that of »the« past. My current research develops and applies this notion of memory.

### Keywords

fragmenting force of memory; presentist; dismemory; civil war; amnesty; amnesia; reconciliation; remains; dis-inhabiting.

### Introduction

The following paper consists of an edited version of a larger essay on Jean Makdisi's *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir*, written during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), and published in 1990, almost on the eve of the war's formal resolution. Makdisi was born in Jerusalem, a few years before the creation of Israel and the concomitant loss of the Palestinian homeland. As part of the Palestinian exodus, she subsequently settled with her family in Cairo, where she grew up. She later lived in North America, and then moved to Beirut in 1972, where she had a teaching post at one of the universities.

As part of our research on memory in cultural production arising out of the civil war and its uncertain aftermath, my paper here on Makdisi's memoir relates to the recently awarded ZMO project *Transforming Memories: Cultural Production and Personal/Public Memory in Lebanon and Morocco*,<sup>1</sup> in collaboration with UMAM Documentation and Research, in Lebanon. Before going on to provide some theoretical signposts for my paper, I want to give an indication of the context in which Makdisi's memoir is embedded, a context that is also embodied by the style of her composition.

The civil war – or series of wars, battles, kidnappings, massacres and assassinations that took place between 1975 and 1990 – has given rise to a prodigious amount of cultural work in Lebanon. This is evident in fictional and autobiographical prose, feature and documentary film and video, photography, installation and sculpture, and to a lesser extent theatre and performance. A recent

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte\\_2008/Transforming\\_Memories.html](http://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte_2008/Transforming_Memories.html). In its present form this paper benefits from initial feedback from Sonja Hegasy and Kai Kresse, and I look forward to further comments and suggestions.

spate of fiction and film situating the civil war suggests an open, simmering wound that has not been adequately represented, nurtured and cared for by the Lebanese state and political elite. And yet it is remarkable that much of this cultural production is highly experimental, rarely presented in straightforward realist guise, but somehow always keen to foreground the conventions of form, to render the work and its subjective impulses as process rather than a finished, self-contained form of representation.

While there are to be sure interesting and compelling works produced with more straightforward narrative styles and forms of presentation, for the moment my research is preoccupied with developing a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach to the more experimental forms of cultural production that situate and to some extent work through personal experiences of the war. Significantly, the very style of this work somehow embodies and critically situates, I suggest, a refusal to package and normalise any ideal(ised) understanding of the war. Arguably, this refusal is a condition of the absence of institutional forms of political care and nurture addressing the war, and a search for a corresponding change of formal and informal political culture.

As part of this prodigious output, Makdisi's memoir was not only written and published in the midst of extreme violence and civil strife, but also without any end in sight. Although we may well approach and read her memoir as an artifact of history – whether this be social, cultural, or literary history – her fragmentary, episodic style resists a reading informed by an expectation of beginnings and endings. This is not to dismiss the historiographical or existential value of marking off beginnings and endings, but rather to observe how her discontinuous style emerges from her existential plight and constitutes an approach to make some sense of her experience. The severe contractions of time and space (the evaporation of hope, the restrictions on physical movement) that many endured during the war weave themselves into Makdisi's narrative style.

Employing various forms of composition, Makdisi's nine *fragments* embody various temporal rhythms: chronological notation of significant events; diary-like accounts of immediate experience; a »glossary« of Arabic terms the Beirutis used to describe the significance of their situation, towards naming and coping with the »horror«; an autobiographical »self-portrait« wedged in the middle of the book; a reflective account of the 1992 Israeli invasion; another diary sequence, this time less immediate and punctuated by the inscription of dates; and finally, a peculiar, annotated alphabet in reverse, ending with »Beirut pleads to be redeemed, but not by Another Army.«

More specifically, my paper here is concerned with how Makdisi's memoir can be read as a site for what could be called a *fragmenting force of memory* whose scope and exigency can be contrasted to an official, strategic and reconciliatory production of *dismemory* that works as a political currency of forgetfulness. As a fragmenting force, Makdisi's approach to memory resists a notion of *reconciliation* based on the employment of *amnesty* as a formal production of *amnesia*, in respect to Lebanon's General Amnesty Law of 1991. With the help of the work of Paul Ricoeur, I try to sketch a critical approach to the intertwined, etymologically related terms amnesty and amnesia, unsettling their »pact of secrecy« (Ricoeur). Makdisi's memoir is read as an alternative to this officially sanctioned, though troubled, forgetfulness.

I have mentioned hermeneutics and phenomenology, and have to say that, far from assuming them as definitive intellectual movements and settled conceptual terms of reference, I grapple with them as appropriate research frameworks to situate my subject matter and my approach. Part of this grappling concerns a tension between the particular use-value of concepts and their investment and broader circulation as currencies of intellectual exchange – an irresolvable tension that I feel is well worth hanging on to, if one's research is not to be relieved of the epistemological, ontological and ethical tremors of its own circumstances.

It seems to me that a key term is *appropriate*, as it has a manifold sense of both rendering something adequate or suitable to the terms of its address or its use and of taking something away, as in to steal or borrow. In a certain sense, to critically address, say, a work of literature or film is to appropriate it from the historical context or symbolic network in which it is embedded, in the process rendering it adequate to the force of conceptual understanding. Phenomenologically, it is only through such appropriation that the work can at all be critically approached, rendered a meaningful pursuit. And yet to »bracket off« historical context is not to overlook that context, but rather to render its force available for critical inquiry. Hermeneutically, it is well worth considering that any work of cultural production is already enmeshed in variable, differentiating, subjectifying networks of power, desire, sexuality – social production and exchange more generally – and contributes to the ways by which such networks are constitutively experienced and negotiated. As works of literature and film are already enmeshed in networks and modalities of social exchange, their critical appropriation (I won't say theft) can only be always late, amounting to what Zygmunt Bauman once called a »secondary hermeneutics«.

A central question for my work at the moment is as follows: How does a particular work of cultural production employ memory to destructure both an

historical understanding of self and related modalities of being? In engaging a phenomenological approach to this employment of memory, I am thus not so much interested (at least not as a point of departure) in »how societies remember« (the title of a book by Paul Connerton) – how rites and ritual, commemorations and memorials substantiate embodied, lingering modalities of identification and belonging. I am rather more interested in what writers, filmmakers and artists do with memory, particularly in respect to their works of cultural production that can be situated as remnants, leftovers, undigested remains, of the civil war. If this work cannot be directly regarded as »real environments of memory« (Pierre Nora’s term, which he dismisses out of hand), then it can be addressed as an unravelling of the threads of memory, self and social modality. Although Nora’s work has had some influence on postcolonial studies addressing the politics of memory in respect to monuments and memorials, particularly concerning war, his conceptual scope is too structuralist for my intellectual taste and personal temperament (for Nora, it seems, archives and monuments, not people, remember), while the geographical scope of his work is restricted by its nationalist agenda. This is not to dismiss a critical appreciation of the socialising, incorporating, collectivising force of memory as habituating (the »performance of codes and rules«, Connerton says), but rather to rehabilitate narrative as a site of memory emerging through the *dis-inhabiting* impulses of experimental cultural production.

Memory is the last gasp of life...Here in this sea of despair and waste and sadness that is Beirut, events call up moments that flash out of my past and interpret the present. I am led by them through a corridor of mirrors into which I have wandered, looking for understanding. Impelled by my own private agony as I flail against the overwhelming and pitiless force of things around me, I am brought up short sometimes by the reflection and sometimes by the reality. I cannot always tell which.

Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments*<sup>2</sup>

## I

Jean Said Makdisi’s *Beirut Fragments* is subtitled *A War Memoir* and was published in 1990 on the eve of the formal ending of the civil war in Lebanon. It opens with a chronological table of the main

<sup>2</sup> Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir*. Persea Books, New York, 1990, 97. Hereafter cited as BF.

events – battles between Palestinians and the Kataeb; Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and its eventual siege of Beirut; evacuation of the PLO; Sabra and Shatila massacres; assassinations of prominent figures; battles in eastern and western Beirut (BF, 11-15). Makdisi’s chronology ends in January 1990, with Beirut still in the grip of violence, remnants of the Lebanese army battling with the Lebanese Forces in the east, while the two most prominent Shia movements, Amal and Hezbollah, fight on the western side of the city. In early 1990 the Taif Accord that was to eventually define a political framework for cessation of armed conflict had yet to be finalised and agreed upon by the various militias and parties. The following year, in August 1991, the newly formed Lebanese parliament ushered in by the Accord passed the contentious General Amnesty Law, which effectively worked to suspend any possibility of legal proceedings brought against participants, militia leaders or combatants of the civil war. While the Amnesty Law cannot of course be included in the timeline of Makdisi’s chronology, in retrospect its prescription of historical amnesia can be contrasted to the force and value of memory informing her memoir.

As their phonetic resonance suggests, the terms *amnesty* and *amnesia* have an etymological link, deriving from ancient Greek terms for forgetfulness. Amnesty has come to relate more to a sense of formally granted forgiveness, mostly by the state, as a pardon for past offenses. Curiously, amnesty is practiced as both a form of »governmentality« – as a broad network of political process, an »art of government« encompassing »tactics and techniques«<sup>3</sup> for the production and regulation of political culture – and as an exercise of sovereignty, as when a president of a state grants a pardon with an almost arbitrary wave of a hand. But whether as supreme fiat or an art of government, what is significant about the practice of amnesty is that the forgiveness it grants does not necessarily lead to forgetting, as the very process of identifying and pardoning perpetrators works to maintain both official and popular forms of memory. Conversely, amnesia relates to a loss of memory, an incapacity to remember past events and experiences, an incapacity to situate the present as a vantage point from which to render the past memorable. A colloquial Arabic saying captures this sense of amnesia as incapacity to manage time. The saying describes the loss of consciousness as a »fall into

<sup>3</sup> These are of course Foucault’s terms. See his lecture of February 1, in Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. Picador, New York, 2007. Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality more or less hinges on a distinction from sovereignty, although he recognises that it is not simply a case of historical substitution of one form of government for another.

time« (or a fall into the *clock* or *hour* – both terms having a common Arabic designation), meaning a loss of a capacity to distinguish between a before and an after, the loss of a capacity to maintain self-awareness through reference to time.

But more to the point, when drawn together and situated as political currency, the terms amnesty and amnesia imply a strategic force of what I want to call *dismemory*.<sup>4</sup> Recognising amnesty as a craft of state, Paul Ricoeur for example defines it as »institutional forgetting«. He writes that the »proximity...between amnesty and amnesia signals the existence of a secret pact with the denial of memory«. <sup>5</sup> In Lebanon this secret pact is peculiar in that the Amnesty Law does not provide any avenue to specifically identify and name those who are to receive the benefit of political pardon and forgiveness. Consequently, the all too generalizing scope of the Amnesty Law structures an economy of manifold amnesia that productively works to situate events, experiences, actions and incidents of the civil war beyond any formal means of redress or accountability.

For my purposes I want to approach the link between amnesty and amnesia as a constitutive pact designed not so much as a »denial of memory«, but more for the production of *dismemory*, structuring a formal politics of deliberate, convenient forgetfulness. And this relates not merely to a particular way of situating the past, but more significantly in respect to stabilising the present as a vantage point through and from which to disremember the past. Looked at this way, it thus becomes possible to think of amnesia as not only an incapacity to remember, but also as a strategy of *dismemory* – a strategy to preserve and prevent the present from exposing itself to the past. It further becomes possible to consider the relationship between present and past as not merely an exigency of present concerns to interpretively position the value and significance of past events and experiences, but also in terms of how the past *remains* an indistinct force that may well work to disrupt such strategies invested in preserving the present from exposing itself to the past.

Ricoeur goes on to say that »the aim of amnesty is the reconciliation of enemy citizens, civil peace«. <sup>6</sup> His notion here of reconciliation suggests that amnesty is concerned not so much with a juridical processing of particular instances of criminality, as with the constitution of a citizenry and commitment to the rehabilitation of communal, civic and political order. Truth and reconciliation com-

missions can be regarded as an art of government that »has the population as its target«. <sup>7</sup> From an anthropological point of view they can also be regarded as a rite or ritual toward the purification of community, interrupting a cycle of violence based on vengeance and revenge. Although he doesn't address institutionalised processes of truth and reconciliation, this is a compelling argument by René Girard, who makes the interesting observation that non-judicial »curative procedures« are designed not merely to identify perpetrators, but to placate victims, »since it is the latter who pose the most immediate threat«. <sup>8</sup> Taking myth and Greek tragedy as examples, Girard argues that curative processes work to transform »reciprocal violence« into »unanimous violence«, stabilised through the symbolic production of a »surrogate victim«. This victim is rendered both profane and sacred – profane, because the victim is regarded as a polluting substance that must be expelled if the community is to purify itself and regain symbolic unity; sacred, because through this process it comes to be endowed with the symbolic force of a saviour: »From the purely religious point of view,« Girard observes, »the surrogate victim – or, more simply, the final victim – inevitably appears as a being who submits to violence without provoking a reprisal; a supernatural being who sows violence to reap peace; a mysterious savior who visits affliction on mankind in order subsequently to restore it to good health«. <sup>9</sup> As both poison and remedy, we could say, the surrogate victim works as a sort of »pharmakon« <sup>10</sup> – a necessary ambivalence (undecidable as either perpetrator or victim, but somehow reconciling this opposition) or supplement that serves to maintain both the viability of a symbolic border between inside and outside, the pure and the polluted, and its transgression, a porous leaking and absorption.

While this, to be sure, requires a nuanced appreciation of particular circumstances in which *victimhood* (without which the very process of truth and reconciliation makes no sense) gains significance and symbolic value as political currency, with the wave of a hand Lebanon's General Amnesty Law sidesteps the issue of victims and victimhood altogether. As Nizah Saghie, a civil rights activist, argued at a conference in Beirut in 2005 on transitional justice and post-conflict strategies in Leba-

<sup>4</sup> I am inspired here by Toni Morrison's term »disremembered«, in her novel *Beloved*. Vintage, London, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006, 453.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *op. cit.*, 108.

<sup>8</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1979, 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 86. No doubt Girard's universalising scheme requires much unpacking.

<sup>10</sup> See Jacques Derrida, »Plato's Pharmacy«. In his *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981. As Derrida observes, »The character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat«, 130.

non, »the victim was repeatedly marginalized and responsibilities for the violence were overlooked by amnesty laws after the war«.<sup>11</sup> Designed in the main to allow militia and party leaders to maintain political privileges, the Amnesty Law did not arise out of any curative process, such as a truth and reconciliation commission. It rather incorporates a form of reconciliation produced more through an arbitrary exercise of sovereignty, designed to rehabilitate not so much a diffuse and differentiated political culture, as the discrete privileges of a political elite. As Makdisi, in another context, wryly says, »Yesterday's hero has become today's villain, and yesterday's villain, today's martyr« (BR, 31). The point is that Lebanon's political and public cultures have not had the benefit of any adequate means through which to expose the present to the past. To borrow Foucault's terms, in Lebanon there hasn't been much art of government concerning remembrance of the civil war. According to the terms of the Amnesty Law, everyone and no one are equally guilty and equally innocent – except for those supplementary figures of ambivalence that work to render the difference between polluted and pure, profane and sacred, manageable as absolute, reconciliatory terms of reference.

Makdisi's approach to memory, I want to suggest, resists a notion of reconciliation based on the employment of amnesty as a formal production of amnesia. This is because her memoir is not only concerned with memory of the civil war, with a chapter of Lebanese history that is formally disremembered, »quarantined«,<sup>12</sup> but also works to fashion a particular approach to the force of memory as *residue* or *remainder*. This manifold, many-sided remainder circling through Lebanon's various publics and communities,<sup>13</sup> as well as forms of cultural production, is precisely what the political expediency of the Amnesty Law cannot formally admit, based as it is on a strategy to maintain a semblance of reconciliation at all costs – a reconciliation encompassing a *fall into time* as a form of political currency. Where the logic of the Amnesty Law effectively closes off the present from expo-

sure to the past, the fragmentary, paratactic force of Makdisi's memoir works to render the present open to the past, situates the present in a way that it can receive the address of residues and remainders that may well work to destabilise the present as an investment in dismemory secured through the political currency of reconciliation.

### Dispossessing Memory

It is customary to speak of memory as an intentional capacity, or else as a possession. The past answers, fits and measures up to, what we set out in the present to remember, to recollect. Grammatically, one is mostly constrained to speak of memory in terms of a personal or possessive pronoun, as in »my memories«, »a group's or nation's memory«, »her memory«. Over and against this possessive register, Proust in his novel *Remembrance of Things Past* gave much attention to how the body carries memory in ways that are less than voluntary. Hence his distinction between *memoire volontaire* and *memoire involontaire*, best described by his famous, much-quoted example of the *petite madeleine*. One of the main themes of Proust's novel is precisely a working through of the will to possession, as the young Marcel first strives to capture and possess his love object, Albertine, or else control the way others regard him. Part of this critique is to appreciate how one is not always in possession of oneself, affected as one is by an »interior monologue«, »the internal dialogue of memories and the incessant verbiage of sleep«,<sup>14</sup> a phrase that could well have been written by Freud.

Although Proust, especially in the early parts of his novel, tends to focus his deliberations through a subjectivist lens,<sup>15</sup> his insights, like much of European realism, lend themselves to a sociological understanding of the ways by which customs, habits and performance locate and enable capacities for social exchange (such as Marcel's attempts to enter and participate in high society, which necessitates a capacity to demonstrate appropriate forms of corporal and verbal etiquette). Proust's notion of *memoire involontaire*, or what has also been termed »affective memory«, provides a sense of how one is possessed by the inchoate reverberation of residues and remainders, how it is more a question of how one is re-membered or dis-membered by the gathering/scattering, integrating or disintegrating force of memory. Again, within a sociological framework of inquiry, what Paul Con-

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Raed El Rafei, »Lebanon's post-conflict strategies debated«, *Daily Star*, December 5, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> This is Michael Humphrey's term, who observes that »In postwar Lebanon the past was also quarantined...« See his *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation: From Terror to Trauma*. Routledge, London, 2002, 122. We could also say that the Amnesty Law works not only to quarantine the past, but more significantly *the present*. This »quarantining« informs history textbooks used in Lebanon's public schools, which still make no reference to the civil war. See Hassan M. Fattah, »Lebanon's history textbooks sidestep its civil war«, *International Herald Tribune*, January 10, 2007. As Fattah observes, »History seems to simply come to a halt in the early 1970s...«

<sup>13</sup> What has otherwise been called »memory cultures«. See Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: Volume 2*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Penguin Books, London, 1981, 1014.

<sup>15</sup> For example: »Even when one is no longer attached to things, it's still something to have been attached to them; because it was always for reasons which other people didn't grasp. The memory of those feelings is something that's to be found *only in ourselves*; we must go back into ourselves to look at it.« Ibid, 729, my emphasis.

nerton calls »social habit-memory« (a notion that can be traced back to the work of Bergson and that Connerton distinguishes from Halbwachs' more cognitive notion of »memory frameworks«) works to locate or incorporate bodies within specific modalities or patterns of social viability, the »performance of codes and rules«.16 In fact it could be said that Proust's insights straddle psychological and sociological approaches to the ways specific modalities of socialisation work as forms of personal subjectification, both constraining and enabling certain capacities for social exchange, certain frameworks or patterns structuring and informing the social viability of self-constitution.

A recent work that accomplishes this straddling of disciplines in respect to memory studies is Jeffrey Prager's insightful monograph *Presenting the Past*, subtitled *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering*. Drawing on a particular case history of one of his patients, Prager manages to demonstrate how memory, rather than merely a representation of the past, is corporally »embodied« as lingering sensation, mediated through modalities of socialisation and personal experience, ultimately »embedded« (rendered personally significant) through established frameworks of narration and identification, viewed through a lens of present concerns and exigencies. And yet for my purposes his otherwise important distinction between »embeddedness« and »embodiment« remains too *presentist*. Both notions tend to position the present as a stabilising point of departure for a »re-invention of the past«:

Whereas considering memory's embeddedness encourages us to pay attention to the influence of the present on the recovery of the past, considering memory's embodiedness directs our attention to the ways in which feeling states and bodily desires, inherited from the past but prevailing in the present, can rewrite the past in the service of the present.<sup>17</sup>

While I don't want to altogether deny the value and perhaps exigency of this presentist outlook,<sup>18</sup> for the approach I want to take towards Makdisi's

16 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, 36.

17 Jeffrey Prager, *Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1998, 83.

18 Especially concerning the need to work through personal trauma, and the way in which this working through (*durcharbeiten*, an important term for Freud), as Prager compellingly shows, appropriates (in both senses of the term: takes and renders personally relevant) socially constituting »frames of meaning« or »frames of experience« circulating through public cultures.

memoir, Prager tends to underestimate how in re-collecting past events and experiences the present itself undergoes a process of collection, or what we could call a *gathering*. This gathering implicates, or enfolds, and does not quite dispel the force of scattering, as aspects of the past flash up and question how the present is held together: how, in Makdisi's words, »events call up moments that flash out of my past and interpret the present«. This flashing up of the past as an interpretation of the present works to question the tacit strategy of dismemory encompassed by the manufactured proximity of amnesty and amnesia.

### Excavating the Present

We could say that the present is not only interpreted, but comes to be *interrupted*, in the etymological sense of *breaking apart*, as well as in a detemporalised bracketing from past and future, of putting the present into relief from any Panglossian teleology. To interrupt suggests a rift, a rupture, so that the semblance of reconciliation is shattered, broken apart. A documentary film by Akram Zaatari wonderfully demonstrates this breaking apart by exposing the various rifts, strategies and misgivings haunting the post-civil war present of Lebanon. First shown in 2004, *In This House* is about the digging of a garden in 2002 to retrieve a letter that a former fighter, now journalist, had buried at a house twelve years earlier, at the end of the civil war. The fighter and his group had occupied the abandoned house for about six years. Before withdrawing he felt compelled to write a letter to the owners explaining why he and his companions had occupied the house and how they took care not to damage or destroy it. Much of Zaatari's documentary focuses on the digging of the garden to find the letter, with a split screen whose other side presents an interview with the former fighter, explaining his motives in writing and burying the letter.

Zaatari himself has described this digging as an »excavation«,<sup>19</sup> in both metaphorical and literal terms of association. The final word of the film, as the letter is retrieved, is a brief comment by a boy, who says an exasperated, long-winded »baaaaaa!«, in this context meaning »is that all?!« The comment says something about the expectations of those involved in the incident, and how expectations played a role in the eventual significance of the letter. Both the digging and the *filming* of the digging attracted the attention of the army, police, and intelligence all of whom expect that something important would be revealed, something that should be controlled, perhaps even better kept buried, concealed and undocumented. Uncanni-

19 Interview with Laura Ghaninejad and Jeremy Gravayat. <http://www.derives.tv/spip.php?article493>.

ly, these people become participants in Zaatari's film, even though they remain unidentified. But the point I want to make is that, through the film, the shifting, filtering significance of the letter, we could say, comes to be *transposed from memory of an event to an event of memory*. What comes to be excavated is not merely something of the past, but precisely the present. And not only is the present excavated and prised open, interpreted by the inchoate past, it is also interrupted. This is to say that the semblance of reconciliation is shattered and broken apart, as those institutions – the army, the police, the intelligence agency – that serve vested interests in maintaining the semblance of reconciliation are constrained to expose themselves.

### Memory Dwelling

To speak of memory as a gathering and scattering, in terms of the shifting, filtering, transposing force of its eventuating significance, is to suggest how its vagrant residues and remainders come to *initiate* a capacity to critically, reflexively,  *dwell in the present*. This sense of dwelling in the present can be conceptualised by noting how memory sustains not merely bodily performance enacted through rites and rituals, but also residues whose significance for an understanding of self and circumstance come into view through efforts to situate and make a deconstructing sense of the present, not merely the past. Residues can be defined as remainders, as refuse and waste whose filtering renders possible the construction and maintenance of self-understanding through time. In the process, time itself comes *to be* (from a phenomenological point of view: comes into Being as a constitutive or productive modality of subjectivity), ordered through the anachronic labour of narrative to structure relationships between past, present and future. In a related sense – one that emerges from and informs the structure of Makdisi's fragmenting approach to memory – to dwell in the present also involves a capacity to listen to the inchoate past, in a way that self-understanding becomes contingent on how the inchoate past emerges and comes to address the present as a questioning of motivations and expectations. This more reflexive occupation of dwelling, then, is initiated, as I have said, through a transposition of memory as memory of an event to the event of memory. As the etymology of the term *inchoate* suggests, aspects of the past come into view as a *beginning*, an *initiation* of both past and self into a present broken apart, that is to say *destructured*, by the fragmenting force of memory.

The concept of gathering brings into proximity past and present, aspects of which come into view as the eventuating significance of memory. But as a gathering, this proximity *implicates* or *enfolds* an irrecoverable gap, one that has the potential to question how past and present are gathered and

rendered coherent. In his essay »Building, Dwelling, Thinking« Heidegger speaks of a bridge over a river as a construction that »gathers« (*versammelt*) and »initiates« (*geleiten*, which more literally means *escort* or *accompany*, with the connotation of *safeguarding*). The building of a bridge becomes a »dwelling« because it initiates or escorts proximity: a bridge »does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream...With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighbourhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream.«<sup>20</sup> This gathering, as I have said, presupposes and does not quite cancel out the force of scattering. Once we approach reconciliation as one particular form of gathering – the Amnesty Law's tacit memorialisation of dismemory – we approach the possibility of »unlearning«, »destructuring« (Heidegger's terms) or disinhabiting incorporated presuppositions (Connerton's or Bergson's »habit-memory«<sup>21</sup>), rendering them available for critical practice through the consequent emergence of their *scattering*, through the excavation, the breaking apart of the present.

But how can we talk or think of memory as dwelling? How can dwelling be thought as a site for this disinhabiting altercation between gathering and scattering? How does dwelling structure and inform memory? Or, we can also ask, how does memory provoke and destructure dwelling? Such questions presuppose an intimation that memory and dwelling are not of the same category – the former mostly attuned to and structured by the capacity of narrative to process time, the latter by space and landscape. And yet to approach memory as dwelling may well allow us to think through the intersection of time and space, in respect to how we come to be carried by imaginative and symbolic associations that somehow always constrain and guide the terms by which we develop capacities to gather ourselves towards self-constitution and social viability. This capacity must learn to process time and space, both of which are to be inhabited, and which come to inhabit selfhood in the throes of its coming into being. Rites, rituals, memorials and commemorations no doubt play a major role in

**20** Martin Heidegger, »Building, Dwelling, Thinking«. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. In Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*. Edited by David Farrell Krell. Routledge, London, 2011, 248.

**21** For an informative discussion of »habit memory« and »collective memory«, in respect to Connerton, Bergson, and Halbwachs, see Anne Whitehead, *Memory*. Routledge, London, 2009, especially chapter 4. It should be clear that I am more interested in a concept of memory as critical, transformative practice – as disinhabiting, rather than habituating.

rendering memory personally and socially constitutive through the intersection of space and time. But I want to suggest that it is through the practice of storytelling, of telling and hearing stories, that memory-dwelling emerges as a site for the gathering and exchange of self in both personal and social registers. Situating memory by means of an emphasis on narrative challenges Nora's influential proposition that »There are lieux de memoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de memoire, real environments of memory«<sup>22</sup> – a claim that dismisses the hermeneutical scope of the informal circulation of stories, »real environments of memory«, as community, cultural and popular networks of memory.

Again, Heidegger's work is instructive. Although in his essay on dwelling he does not broach the theme of memory, it was not very far from his thoughts. In the same years – 1951-1952 – he lectured on the theme of thinking, where he described memory (*Gedächtnis*) as »the gathering of thought«.<sup>23</sup> It is a gathering because it is a »thinking back«, a »thinking back to what is to be thought«. This sense of gathering, similar to his notion of a bridge as that which constitutes an initiation into proximity through dwelling, encompasses both possessive and dispossessive registers. Thus, as Heidegger asks, »to what« is memory the gathering of thought? And answers: »To what holds us, in that we give it thought precisely because it *remains* what must be thought about. What is thought is the gift given in thinking back...«<sup>24</sup> Just as one gathers, we could say, one is also gathered. Thinking back calls upon or collects what gives itself to thought, as well as a giving of oneself *in the present* to what *remains* to be thought, what provokes the temporal structure of thought, »the time in which we are an uninterpreted sign«. In the words of Hölderlin that Heidegger quotes, »We are a sign that is not read...« Memory thus has transitive or transpositional force, perhaps in distinction to remembrance, which connotes a more static analytic. But more than this, it is related to a thinking that *gives itself* to a remainder, to that which comes to be »thought-provoking«, so that memory comes to surprise us, provokes us into scattering, provoking us to re-collect shards of experience and bring us to the point where we may *begin* to understand how such remainders *have worked to make sense of us*, in the process transforming them into signs that can be read. As a gathering of thought, as a fragmenting force – as an initiating, critical capacity to embark on a gathering

22 Pierre Nora, »Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*«. Representations, 26, Spring 1989, 7.

23 »What calls for Thinking«. In Krell, op cit, 261. In the English language one often says »I gather« as a substitute for »I think.«

24 Ibid, my emphasis.

of thought – memory does not relate to continuity, to preservation, to reconciliation, but rather to a rift, an opening whereby one's assumption of self and circumstance, one's habituation, is disrupted, is provoked into the possibility of interpretation.

I couldn't help reading Heidegger's/Hölderlin's »uninterpreted« as *uninterrupted*, so as to suggest a sense of memory as an occasion in which temporality would be provoked into an awareness of finitude – less a possessive thought or an activity of securing continuity, or else marking out a teleological structure of discontinuity, than being induced to have to negotiate contingency. In other words, with Makdisi, dwelling provokes memory into a telling of interruptions, of that which fails to readily fit habitual, reconciliatory schemes of self- and other-understanding. In this sense memory clears the way by which one may give oneself to that which remains to be heard, that which remains to be told – the inchoate, stammering, provocative sounds of a telling or saying that has the potential to corrupt the strategic pact of reconciliation. The past emerges in the present, as the present is constrained to listen to what the past has to say, as the trace of an implacable, stuttering remainder constrains the present into a scattering, into »unconcealment« (a translation of Heidegger's preferred term for *alētheia*, truth) into a semblance or a showing of truth. Conversely, reconciliation construed through the pact of amnesty and amnesia constitutes a rather opportunistic form of dwelling, a bridge that initiates a caricature of past and present, whereby both are suitably quarantined.

## II

How can I write about Beirut? How can I collect it all into one volume: the years of pain; of watching a world collapse while trying to stave off that collapse; the layers of memories and hopes, of tragedy and even sometimes comedy, of violence and kindness, of courage and fear? (BF, 19)

What calls on Makdisi to write her memoir, these intense fragments collected and transposed as bits and pieces of a self and city undergoing and somehow enduring their disintegration? How, in answering this call, is she led through the rubble and ruins of self and city towards a gathering of herself, her circumstances, her present – giving herself to an emerging past addressing her, interpreting her, interrupting and goading or prompting her capacity for an understanding of self and circumstance? How do the utterly chaotic incidents of the war induce her to give herself over to a labour of memory that works towards the possibility of initiating her grasp of self and circumstance? We can also ask, in terms of the non-reconciliatory, fragmenting momentum of her memoir, how does

memory become a site in which the irrecoverable gap between past and present comes to render the writing of her memoir possible? Both past and present call on Makdisi, asking her for care, for nurture, for remembrance, before they slip into the folds of dismemory. How, in composing her memoir, does she manage to develop a relationship of care to those residues and remainders that come to take form as an event of memory, emerging through their eventuating significance? And further, how is the composition of her memoir, the seemingly smooth flow of words, able to provide a semblance of the chaos, desperation and trauma in which her fragments are immersed?

The extreme, traumatic circumstances in which Makdisi gives herself to memory, which she defines as »the last gasp of life«, impel her to spend her shattered time and space writing a memoir. Until the last couple of decades, which in some places has seen a veritable explosion of »self-representational texts«,<sup>25</sup> the writing of memoirs has tended to be regarded as an exercise of mature age, when mortality comes into view and more pressingly becomes an undeniable aspect of one's self-understanding, one's outlook. As the present can no longer be grasped through the for(e)getting of mortality, as the capacity to imagine a future is more acutely constrained to entertain finitude, the past emerges as a malleable texture that can serve one's orientation, one's capacity to gather and hold oneself together, to dwell in the present. Old age also involves a contracting corporal experience of space, as physical limitations tend to minimise and slow down movement. The house becomes almost the limit of one's physical universe.

To stay in tune with Makdisi's memoir necessitates a move from the Schwarzwald (the Black forest, Heidegger's abode) to Beirut, turning Heidegger's notion of gathering around so that the »initiation« brought into being as dwelling is set against *the destruction* of a bridge - not the *constructive* implication of proximity but its *destructive* implication.<sup>26</sup> If, in Heidegger's terms, dwelling involves a gathering of self and the natural and built physical environment toward a productive modality of habitat, toward neighbourhood, then what becomes of dwelling when this habitat and neighbourhood are violently destroyed? And not only in terms of sudden, one-off destruction, as in an earthquake, but as an almost daily, impending occurrence? Paradoxically, if we turn Heidegger around, his insights become even more, not less, compelling, precisely because »dwelling« and »gathering« become more

palpable in extreme circumstances, such as those in Beirut during the civil war. The sudden physical disappearance of a landmark, or its sudden physical appearance as an abject pile of concrete and metal rubble, taunts one's imaginative and symbolic awareness of the space around them, one's »haptic sense« of the physical environment.<sup>27</sup>

In the words of Bloom and Moore this haptic sense is interactive and constitutive:

The interplay between the world of our bodies and the world of our dwelling places is always in flux. We make places that are an expression of our haptic experiences even as these experiences are generated by the places we have already created. Whether we are conscious or innocent of this process, our bodies and our movements are in constant dialogue with our buildings.<sup>28</sup>

The shapes and contours of buildings inform not merely the functional relevance and aesthetic appeal of their facades, entries and passages, but also the apparently vacant space surrounding them. We could say that this vacant space, this *remainder*, comes into being as a setting into relief by the contours of buildings. The haptic sense, similar to Heidegger's notion of dwelling, involves an »emotional spatiality«, embodied memories of the past, a »body image« traversing past and present spatial experience.<sup>29</sup>

Just inside eastern Beirut, on the border of what used to be called the »green line«, stands a bombed-out, half-destroyed yellow building whose remaining facade is dotted with bullet holes. It stands on a prominent corner, in between Sodeco - the shopping, cinema and business complex built soon after the civil war - and Monot, the trendy nightclub street that descends down towards Martyrs Square and Gemmayze. In recent years there has been a campaign to save the house from demolition, to situate it as a monument to the civil war. As Mona Hallak, an architect who campaigned to save the building from developers, engaging the local government to acquire it as public property, says: »We have been going into public amnesia since the civil war and anything that prevents that has to be preserved.«<sup>30</sup> Now called Beit al-Madina, house of the city, or Beit Beirut, the building is to be turned into a museum, with sniper bunkers, the dental clinic of a former resident and artifacts from the war presented as exhibitions. A project

25 I borrow the observation and term from Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2001. Gilmore describes this prodigious output as a »memoir boom«.

26 Although the Schwarzwald was not spared the ravages of the Second World War.

27 See K. Bloom and C. Moore, *Body, Memory, Architecture*. Yale University Press, New York, 1977.

28 Ibid, 57.

29 Ibid, 46.

30 Quoted in »New Beirut museum will teach lessons of the Civil War«. In *The Daily Star*, October 18, 2008.

consultant describes the museum as a »memorial«, though dedicated more to encouraging the present to take an interest in the past as an eventual site of dialogue and discussion. As the consultant says, the house won't be »a space dedicated to the dead, but a memorial to exchange and debates on history«. <sup>31</sup> This interesting comment suggests, much like Makdisi's approach to memory, that neither past nor present are to be preserved, quarantined, placed within the airless confines of a glass cabinet, but rather cared for and nurtured as sites in which both past and present emerge through their eventuating significance. In respect to haptic experience, or dwelling, where the building once informed a contraction of time and space, it now comes to initiate an expansion of time and space. Its remaining facade gains a capacity to initiate a more critical dwelling in the present.

Makdisi's haptic sense of Beirut remains convulsed in violence – not only divided between east and west, but also experienced in the throes of daily destruction, as a »crumbling reality« (BF, 22). Unpredictable and violent urban warfare initiates an experience of space and time as severe contraction – time contracted to the immediate present, space contracted to the house and the immediate neighbourhood – both contracted to almost bare necessity. The western side of Beirut where Makdisi resides is rent by competing local militias and regional forces, intent on mutilating and consecrating the urban landscape. Refugees from the south crowd into west Beirut, occupying abandoned buildings, or else constructing ramshackle shelters. These physical and demographic changes bring about »a shifting landscape of memories and sorrow« (BF, 77).

And yet this initiation into contraction and mutilation has somehow to be processed and integrated, by drawing imaginary »maps« that can keep up with the disintegrating topography:

We noticed these physical changes around us long before we noticed the changes within ourselves. We had to draw up a new map of our world, and we had no instruments to assist us except our wits and our senses. And our lives often depended on the accuracy of our construction, so it was a serious business, drawing up this map (BF, 77).

Mapping is not only a topographical quest to keep up with the »shifting landscape«, but is also punctuated by the intersection of memory and location – a street corner, a house, a road, all mar-

king sites of violence: kidnappings or killings of neighbours, barricades, bombed-out buildings, as well as the piles of garbage lying in the streets. For Makdisi such locations become »landmarks«, significant as sites of memory – if we understand »landmarks« or »sites« not so much in Nora's structuralist sense of an impersonal, formalised archive or monument (memory, he claims, is »no longer a social practice«<sup>32</sup>), but rather in Heidegger's phenomenological sense (a thinking back to what interrupts the present and gives itself to thought) of what we have called a *memory-dwelling*. In such terms, the irrecoverable gap between past and present initiates the capacity of narrative to work as a gathering of both self and city – again, if we approach narrative in terms of Heidegger's sense of a *bridge*, bringing past and present into proximity. The significance of such landmarks and their subjectifying implications coming into being through destruction concern not only memory of the fate of particular friends or neighbourly acquaintances, but also concerning Makdisi's capacity to maintain some sort of correspondence between physical changes to the urban landscape and changes within herself: »Each of these physical landmarks, and so many others like them, are milestones in my inner journey of pain. Memories wash over the map, and layers of time alter its shadings« (BF, 78).

Imaginary maps not only work to stitch together a disintegrating urban landscape, providing some form of orientation, but also work to stitch together the self. This stitching together has to employ a labour of narrative to bridge space and time, as an incessant initiation of correspondence or non-correspondence between self and circumstance. Finding herself »lying at the heart of Beirut, foundering in the foundering heart«, Makdisi's very capacity to say »I« comes to be contingent on how she can employ narrative to negotiate a gathering/scattering of self, ultimately projected into the future as an expectation of death: »As I do stand a good chance of dying in this dangerous city, metaphor modulates into possible literalness. The muddled past, present, and future become all tied up together« (BF, 95). To untie this »muddle« necessitates an untying of self. Her ability to say »I« comes to be contingent on her capacity to project herself into the past, or to become acquainted with how the past projects her into the present.

Makdisi's labour has its precedents with Penelope and Shahrazad. Penelope, staying up at night to unweave what she had woven during the day, negotiating herself between her desire for the desire of her many suitors and an implacable law that demands she quarantine her desire until the return of Odysseus. Shahrazad, spinning out story after story every night so as to act on both her fate and the nar-

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Chirine Laoud, »Beirut landmark to be restored as Beit Beirut museum«. In *Ya Libnan*, February 22, 2011. <http://www.yalibnan.com/2011/02/22/beirut-landmark-to-be-restored-as-beit-beirut-museum/>

<sup>32</sup> Op. cit, 14.

rative of her fate. Makdisi's labour of weaving, her »mapping«, stitching together time and space, is incessantly unwoven by the disintegrating city. In respect to the capacity of her labour of narrative to somehow simulate an inescapable trauma that resists the terms of its representation, Makdisi's weaving of self and circumstance is continually faced with its impossibility, its unweaving. As Gilmore says: »Insofar as trauma can be defined as that which breaks the frame, rebuilding a frame to contain it is as fraught with difficulty as it is necessary.«<sup>33</sup>

In a short essay, »The Memory of the City«, Elias Khoury ponders how memory can be viable in a city ravaged by urban warfare. His musings are also directed to the vacuous rebuilding of the city centre, which Khoury describes as »an empty space, a placeless space, a hole in memory«. <sup>34</sup> Once a popular, *shaaby* area for local markets, trade, entertainment, transport and social exchange, post-war planning and rebuilding of the centre of Beirut has transformed it into an exclusive shopping, cafe, restaurant, residential and business location. Arguably, the experience of space brought into being by the reconstruction involves a more privatised, commercialised form of social interaction (suggested by the absence of any public benches, particularly around the Place de l'Etoile). The haptic sense initiated by the reconstruction tends to discourage any public concern with the immediate past, encouraging rather a gathering and bridging, a modality of social *compartment* (etymologically, bring together and collect), informing and informed by what has been termed »the current hyperamnesia vogue«. <sup>35</sup> In the midst of this »frightening architectural amnesia«, Khoury argues, which barely conceals the systematic destruction of the city, »the only place left for memory is literature«. As he goes on to say: »Where an architect works to establish differences, organize relationships, and define limits, a writer works to tear down these limits, to transcend definitions, to open spaces onto one another«. <sup>36</sup>

What is relevant for my reading of Makdisi's memoir is how Khoury situates the exercise of narrative as bridging (again, in Heidegger's sense of bringing into proximity) space and memory so as to wrest present and past from the expediency of dismemory, or else a form of memory devoted more to the preservation of an archaic past (such as the excavation, preservation and celebration of ancient ruins surrounding the city centre). In the con-

text of urban destruction and post-war dismemory or hyperamnesia, literature for Khoury is charged with an urgency beyond any tendentious collusion of politics and aesthetics. Writing, he says, »became a necessary means of survival. Naming the horror was a way to protect oneself from it« (ibid, 138). In his creative work Khoury's »city« and »memory« carry the semiotic burden of physical and civil destruction, rupture and disintegration, as well as a commitment not to patch them up with formulaic notions of reconciliation that serve to assimilate both present and past to an uncritical form of forgetfulness. With Makdisi, before city and self are patched up through reconstruction, it is well worth pondering how what she calls »the burden of memory« (BF, 102) presents an opportunity to give oneself to the tremor of the yawning gap that reverberates between present and past. While this gap is always under threat of closure by the expediency of reconciliation, Makdisi's approach to memory dazzles us because it does not imagine that narrative closure can once and for all be defeated, but only deferred, or delayed, much like Penelope's deferral of acting on her desire, or Shahrazad's wily deferral of her death, her creative deferral of narrative closure.

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**33** *The Limits of Autobiography*, 31.

**34** Elias Khoury, »The Memory of the City«. Translated by Jean Stein. *Grand Street*, No 4. Autumn, 1995, 139.

**35** J. Hanssen and D. Genberg, »Beirut in Memoriam: A Kaleidoscopic Space Out of Focus«. In: A. Neuwirth and A. Pflitsch (eds.), *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies*. Ergon-Verlag, Beirut/Würzburg, 2001, 245.

**36** *Memory of the City*, 139.