

A Confined Youth? Lived Space and Shifting Boundaries in Beirut

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This article questions spatial experiences among students in Beirut. It mobilizes collaborative map interviews to explore the ways young people experiment with space and the social boundaries it incorporates. I argue that their perception of their lived space underlines a crucial shift: whereas their parents experimented the city in terms of sectarian and political divisions, my interlocutors have integrated

these boundaries not as ideological but as the result of daily practices of segregation born during the Lebanese wars (1975-1990). This evolution reveals renewed understandings of the Lebanese complex landscape and contributes to delineate youth as a social shifter.

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Stepping into the streets of Beirut exposes Henri Lefebvre's ideas that "space is political and ideological" (Lefebvre 31). The urban fabric of the Lebanese capital still bears the marks of the violent conflicts that once ravaged the country (1975-1990) and displays countless evidences of its persistent social and political fractures. Flags, graffiti and posters fill the space with ideologies and symbolically prolong the physical divisions that characterized the city during the war (Haugbolle 161). Contemporary Beirut remains a polycentric city in which territories are subjected to powerful identity claims. Having inherited this space molded from past confrontations, when the *Green Line* separated what was referred to as the *West*, mostly populated by Muslims, and the *East*, predominantly Christian, young Beirutis born in postwar Lebanon have, in their daily activities, "to get along in a network of already established forces and representations" (De Certeau 18). In this article, I intend to explore how the youth living in Beirut manage this spatial-temporal heritage. More precisely, I aim at investigating how the memory of the war as well as the practices it inspires inform the ways young people experiment with space and the social boundaries it incorporates. How do today's youth live and make sense of these inherited spatial divisions, and to

what extent are these experiences constitutive of what could be identified as a generation?

While the questions of territoriality and wartime memory have been the focus of many academic works, which have especially insisted on the strength of socio-political territories (e.g. Deeb; Harb) and the difficulties of the country to deal with its troubled past (Haugbolle; Makarem), the position of the youth in regard to this double heritage has received insufficient attention. The Lebanese youth have remarkably remained for the most part ignored compared to other Arab countries, with the notable exception of studies concerned with the prominent issue of migration (Kasparian). Yet, in a post-conflict society such as Lebanon, the significance of youth is crucial to understanding how the notion of generation matters in the reproduction of past boundaries and how the youth could locate themselves in territories marked by violent legacies. Positioning this article at the intersection between the questions of memory, spatiality and youth, I propose to shift the attention to the experiences and imagination of space among Beirut's youth. Starting from an empirical case study grounded in young people's imaginaries, it becomes possible to revisit the question of the spatial and temporal boundaries from below

and to critically engage with the notion of youth and generation from the case of contemporary Lebanon.

Mapping Students' *Lived Space*

Before considering how the young people I met experiment with space, I deem it important to introduce my methods and data collection techniques in more detail. The past decade has seen a developing attraction for collaborative research (Rappaport 1), which "*deliberately and explicitly* emphasizes collaboration [...]" (Lassiter 15). Following this growing interest, this article relies on collaborative interviews conducted among students of the American University of Beirut. (AUB) Fieldwork took place during the spring of 2016 as part of a French-Lebanese research program on the role of universities in the production of space in Beirut. Within this project, I started from Henri Lefebvre's notion of *lived space* (Lefebvre 33), which is born from the conception of space as both physically experienced (*real space*) and mentally constructed (*imagined space*), invested with symbolism and meaning. After exchanges with my French and Lebanese colleagues, I designed collaborative map-elicited interviews to investigate how students experiment with lived space, i.e. both the materiality of space and its imagination. Individually,

participants were asked to mark with a pen places or areas that bear special meanings in their life on three successive maps at different scales: the first map representing their campus, the second the city of Beirut, and the third Lebanon. In doing so, my intention was to play on spatial scales to locate at once daily routines as well as the imagination and memory embedded in these spatial frameworks. Using this technique, I collected thirteen interviews lasting between one and a half and two and a half hours, complemented with ethnographic material gathered during previous fieldwork among Lebanese students. Participants, recruited with the assistance of AUB professors, were aged between 21 and 27, with one exception of an older, thirty-four-year-old student. They were in majority women (nine vs. four men). These volunteers were studying at the graduate and postgraduate levels, either in the department of Architecture and Urbanism or in the department of Sociology. Four of them were beneficiaries of full scholarships, covering the integrality of their tuition fees. The result is that despite the heavily elitist nature of the AUB, not all the participants belong to upper-class families. These young people, whose names and other identifying details have been modified, agreed to share aspects of their daily routine, memories

and experiences of space. The significance of the selection was then discussed from the commentaries of the participants, in collaboration with me. Adopting a micro-sociological approach, I used these

interpersonal situations as a strategy through which broader social forces, properties, and processes can be understood as constituted in practice (Fine and Fields 131).

Accordingly, the stories presented in this article were not highlighted because they would be statistically representative. Rather, they were selected because of their capacity to illuminate dynamics I observed during the fieldwork years and in my dialogue with the participants. They uncover not only personal but also social imaginaries and collective memories, which, according to Maurice Halbwachs, always “unfold within a spatial framework” (6). More specifically, I analyzed my material using the concept of navigation as a theoretical underpinning. The notion of *navigating* lies “at the intersection of urban and youth studies” (Hecking 57) and highlights the ways

people make sense of and work their way through diverse urban environments, often in context of deep poli-

tical, economic and social inequality (McFarlane and Anjaria 6).

I argue that ways young people reflect on their relation to space underline a shift in the experience of Beirut’s fragmented reality: whereas their parents firstly conceived of the city in terms of its sectarian and political divisions, my interlocutors have integrated these boundaries not as ideological but as the result of daily practices of avoidance of the Other born during the war and its immediate aftermaths. In the next sections of this article, I lay out this central argument in the following manner: First, I describe how their ways of navigating the urban space underline a sense of territorial restriction, articulated around an insider/outsider trope. Then, I describe how this confinement can be traced back to daily practices of segregation born during as well as immediately after the 1975-1990 wars. I make a case that, contrary to the war generations, these limitations are practical in nature rather than ideological, which opens the way toward renewed narratives on coexistence and innovative strategies of bypassing confinement. Finally, I conclude that these experiences of Beirut’s urban space index shifting relationships within Lebanese society and delineate the youth as a specific, relational category.

Recounting Navigation Practices

In our conversations, Beirut was depicted as a demanding city, difficult to domesticate. *Chaotic*, *vertical* or even *overgrown* were the words put forward by most participants to describe the metropolis. In the maps they drew, three images predominate: first, the depiction of routes describing their ability to move across the city; second, the delimitation of specific areas, conveying the idea of territories, i.e. spaces identified as familiar or, on the contrary, alien; third, the descriptions of boundaries and fault-lines, which are not only acknowledged but also frequently confronted and transgressed. All three features materialize these young people’s sense of navigating Beirut’s urban terrain. A master’s student in sociology, Maya, 34, organizes her experiment with Beirut’s space according to three major areas, each of which relates to a specific life sphere: first, her family house and its neighborhood of Badaro², a residential area marking the frontier between the municipality of Beirut and its southern suburb as well as between Christian districts of Furn al-Chebbak or Ayn al-Rummaneh and Shia inhabited regions; second, the location of her studies, i.e. the AUB and its adjacent district of Hamra in West Beirut, where she has been renting a flat for the last year; third, the region of Sin

el-Fil, a Christian populated suburb in the eastern margins of the city, where she works as an English teacher. She explains:

My space is first where my family is, that is the district of Badaro and Furn al-Chebbak. That's where I was first introduced to Beirut [after moving from Nigeria where she was born]. [...] Then I went to AUB and my space became Badaro and Hamra. And now, I have added Sin el-Fil for work. [...] I negotiate between these three spaces, work, family and studies. [...] I usually spend the weekend at my family house and stay at my apartment during the week, but if I have to work in Sin el-Fil, then I would probably go back to the family house as it makes it much easier to reach my workplace. Traffic makes me negotiate between the three spaces (Interview with Maya).

The ability to circulate in the city is a key component of students' lived space. Practical questions play a prominent part, mostly because contemporary Beirut suffers from severe traffic congestion, complicated by persistent security threats. More symbolically, the issue of navigation also relates to the transitions in between familiar spaces and different life spheres. Circulating between moments and places,

the young participants expose the existence of distinct territories as the daily routes and familiar places they drew on the maps underline *a contrario* the existence of alien spaces in the city, depicted as *unfamiliar* (Interview with Maya) or revealed by the repeatedly heard sentence "I never go there" (e.g. Interview with Nina).

The concept of navigation also resonates with the recurrent distinction made between insiders and outsiders. This opposition surfaces at various levels when it comes to recounting an initiation to a new territory and the rules that organize it, recalling a sense of alienation in an unfamiliar neighborhood, or contemplating the perception of political and sectarian divisions in the city. The story told by Nisrine provides a powerful example of this insiders/outside effect on how space is lived. A fourth-year student in architecture, Nisrine was born in Brazil in a family of the Lebanese diaspora. Because her parents wanted her to study in Lebanon, she moved with her younger sister to Beirut in 2012. She recounts the shock of her arrival as she moved into an apartment situated in the Salim Salam area, at the center of Beirut. She evokes the young men hanging out in front of the buildings, controlling and marking the space of the neighborhood with flags of the political

parties Amal and Hezbollah, two organizations recruiting mostly among Shia Muslims who make up the majority of the population in this area of the city. She also recalls how she had to familiarize herself with this new environment:

I had to adapt to people with different backgrounds. I had to learn the places I could go or not, what kind of clothes I could wear and what I could not. [...] I have been learning the hard way. [...] When I first arrived, I was totally shocked. [...] With all the people looking at you. [...] They know you are not from here. (Interview with Nisrine).

Nisrine confesses having felt depressed and admits that she never settled into the neighborhood, which she now tries to avoid. After a year or so, she moved to another part of the city, closer to AUB, where she feels much better due to a lower density of the urban landscape and a greater diversity in the population, making her feel *less different* (Interview with Nisrine). According to her, she discovered the daily manifestations of sectarianism with equal astonishment and disbelief (Interview with Nisrine). Another key element in her feeling of alienation was her difficulty in mastering Arabic, a language

she had not spoken at home before arriving in Beirut.

Experiences of the distinction between insiders and outsiders also emerge from the stories of students' integration into the surroundings of the AUB, and more precisely the neighborhood of Hamra, historically identified with the Arab left and the cosmopolitan lifestyle in the Lebanese capital (Davie 4). "Hamra is a very exclusive neighborhood, and a specific group of people there has a tendency to bully the newcomers arriving from outside" said one of the participants (Interview with Nina). Clara, a master's student in sociology, similarly highlights the elitism she encountered in Hamra but also explains how she was able to negotiate her position in this environment:

My family originates from Corniche al-Mazraa in Beirut. [...] I only went there two or three times in my whole life. [...] But there are not many people who actually are originating from the city. Sentimentally, I am very attached to Beirut. So I like to brag a little bit about it [...]. That way, I can justify my attachment to the city with roots. (Interview with Clara).

Family origins hence provide a powerful symbolic resource for claiming a status of insider within a given territory. It confirms

the strength of the heritage of localism and kinship as a key storyline in the definition of one's positioning, understood as the dynamic and relational identification in social interaction (Davies and Harré 44). In this context, the question of borders between territories logically relates to the issue of political and sectarian demarcations and their resulting tensions. Nora, a fourth-year student whose father is an officer in the Lebanese Army, describes her neighborhood as follows:

I don't like my neighborhood because problems always break out there. [...] For instance in the street fighting of May 7, 2008. [...] My school was also politically identified with one party [the Future Movement of the Sunni leader Saad Hariri] but it is located in a district affiliated with a rival group [namely the Amal Movement]. [...] There were always troubles between young men from the neighborhood and some of my schoolmates. (Interview with Nora).

The ways research participants navigate the city acknowledge social and political fractures. The narrative of their spatial understanding along the insiders/outsiders trope unsurprisingly reveals how crucial the question of territoriality remains in contemporary Beirut. Beyond these expe-

riences looms also the heritage of the violent past of the Lebanese capital.

Revisiting Boundaries

Visions of political and sectarian territories remain ultimately inseparable from the memory of the Lebanese wars (1975-1990). Wartime distinction between *sharqiyya* (East) and *gharbiyya* (West) remains a pivotal element in the imagination of Beirut's space:

I am aware that my spaces are split between the East/West divide [...] as well as built around upper-middle-class milieus. [...] They felt like separated areas not because I was aware of it but because I became aware of it through what people said. [...] I was not aware of it until I was accepted to join the AUB. [...] All I knew was Badaro and my school. [...] It was a postwar reality. Mum was scared. We lived a confined life. [...] It's strange because we are a Muslim family and we were living in a Christian district. (Interview with Maya).

Maya's reflections suggest how the memory of the divide is passed on in interactions, mainly through a sectarian framing. Yet, she questions this sectarian view and notes that, during the wars, a *safe space* was primarily a confined, local space,

where people knew their neighbors and could be equally identified. During the conflict, fear spurred a separation that was a question of localism rather than purely sectarian. Despite their brutal attempts, militia organizations never achieved the construction of homogenized communal territories that they were seeking to create (Picard). Hinting at an intergenerational gap, Maya acknowledges the fact that, for her, the reason for this confinement remained vague. Only crossing the border revealed its existence. This lack of substance frequently surfaced in the words of her fellow students. For instance, Clara elucidates:

For us, separation was just a fact [...]. My father used to work for Tele Liban, in the West. So, we were not necessarily living a confined life, but that [West Beirut] was something I did not know. For us, it was a practical difference, unlike my mother's family. They were engaged during the war [in the Christian Lebanese Forces militia] and had to leave Lebanon. When I see them, I am exposed to their stories and visions. They still live on war mythologies like Phoenicia and these kinds of very stupid things. (Interview with Clara).

The young woman, who confessed earlier in the interview that she had refrained from crossing the former Green Line for years, explains that she changed her attitude when she grew older and started to question "the prejudices [she] was taught, especially about the war" (Interview with Clara). This is in contrast to her exiled relatives, whose last memories of Beirut remain embedded in the reminiscence of the wars. For them, the temporality of conflict seems to have solidified in their imagination of the city. On the contrary, among young people like Clara, if the spatial practices of the immediate postwar period have perpetuated, they have been partly emptied of their ideological foundations. The border remains in young people's imagination, but seems to only work at a practical level, maintained by the habits of a confined life born during and after the wars. Localism, as the young people I met experienced it, was not fueled by ideological, negative perceptions of the Other. Originally imposed by the eruption of violence, confinement then habitualized through socialization and spatial practices. The more practical nature of boundaries makes their crossing more probable and hence paves the way toward renewed narratives on coexistence, as the following story recounted by Nina illustrates:

The place I am living in [Kesrouan] is the opposite of the area where my boyfriend lives. I am now telling in terms of religion or sect. [...] But now [that I visited the area] I am thinking if these two places are different just because I know they are different. And maybe they are not that different after all. (Interview with Nina).

While the description of the two spaces as *opposite* hints at the persistent power of sectarian imaginaries, the end of the account testifies of the possibility of questioning stereotypes. For young people like Nina originating from Christian families, studying at the AUB in the predominantly Muslim West Beirut opens up lived space to territories that have long remained distant and fearsome. Life on the campus, as well as time spent with classmates from various origins or in the cafés and restaurants in Hamra all contribute to daily practices of coexistence making up what Asef Bayat calls "everyday cosmopolitanism" (Bayat 10). These practices challenge inherited representations and fears, all the more readily since they have lost parts of their substance with the return to civil peace. Borders are not exclusively sites of separation, but also of passage and transgression. Youthful spaces are materialized in the city through the emergence of vibrant territories dedicated to arts, cul-

ture and nightlife, whose rapid circulation between various areas of the capital reflects a desire for renewal and for a radical redefinition of urban spaces, partially emancipated from the pressure of social control:

There is a circulation of hangout places [for the youth]. Before [in the early 2000s] it used to be in Monot Street [in East Beirut, near the Jesuit University], then it was Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhail [two Christian populated neighborhoods in East Beirut] and now in Badaro [a mixed, formerly residential district], Qarantina and the River [both situated in the Eastern limit of the municipality, between the harbor and the Armenian district of Bourj Hammoud]. They opened bars, art centers [...]. It [...] brings 'civil life' [i.e. non-sectarian] (Interview with Lisa).

I love [nightlife districts of] Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhail because you can be there with your friends, you can be with your lover, you can kiss or wear clothes that are not [appropriate]. In other neighborhood like Tareq al-Jadideh [a residential Sunni populated area known as conservative][...]they have their own codes and you cannot do whatever you would like to (Interview with Mona).

Youth territories hint at a desire for reformulating social norms and reinventing coexistence in a public space freed from inherited representations of the Other. As Haidar, a master's student in architecture who grew up in a Shia family of the southern suburb of Beirut like Mona, explains:

[Space and sectarian identity] still affect us, in a way, but not as much as it used to be. Because for us, the younger generation, it is not like for the older ones. The borders between areas are not that strong. Especially for us who are born after the war [...]. The younger generation is more easy-going with people from different areas. (Interview with Haidar).

Haidar claims that this changing attitude toward sectarian boundaries and otherness results from a generational gap in the classical sense put forward by Mannheim, i.e. fueled by the alteration of experiences and historical contexts. I think however that this generational claim has to be understood as performative. Proclaiming this shift contributes to delineating youth as a relational category defined by opposition to the war (and immediate postwar) generations in "a shifting and contested historical and social arena" (Durham 593). To declare to be a youth is to position one-

self in regard to the legacy of the past and state not only age differences but also claims for rights, agency and authority. As such, youth appears as "a social shifter": "when invoked, youth indexes sets of social relationships that are dynamic and constructed in the invocation" (Durham 589). With their pens and their words, the young people I met pinpointed spots, places and areas that not only represent spaces, but also assert powerful dynamics of change. Presented with the map of the city, Gloria, 25, a master's student in architecture who grew up in Jounieh, immediately gave a hint how she learned to navigate through and around the fears populating the narratives of the elders:

During and right after the war, East and West Beirut were divided. My parents used to think that the West was dangerous. [...] They were always scared of West Beirut. [...] Even, according to my father, all Beirut is unsafe. Even now, when I come home late, I don't tell them that I was there [...]. (Interview with Gloria).

She concretely located the time and space of her realization of this weighty heritage by marking the road intersection where a decisive argument erupted with her fiancé. From the evocation of this intimate

episode unfolds the narration of what she perceives as a struggle between the old and the new. The time and space of the incident has become the symbol of a turning point in her life and experience of the city. Following this line of thought, she distinguishes her old habits centered around the conservative environment of her hometown from her present eagerness to discover Beirut and feel the energy of its youth, presented as secular, cosmopolitan and willing to emancipate from the taboos of Lebanese society, particularly regarding sexuality (Interview with Gloria). Her words describe how she now challenges the practices of avoidance adopted by her parents, as well as the sectarian and patriarchal structures in which she grew up, by deliberately spending time in the Western part of the city and socializing in cafés and restaurants renowned for their cosmopolitan and liberal ambiance. However, her call for emancipation and gender equality bears limitations, exposing the complexity of intergenerational navigation:

If it was just for me, I would not follow the rules of the Lebanese society [...] especially for girls because you cannot make your own decisions [...]. [For example] I would not get married. [...] But at the same time [...] I really want my parents to approve me. [...] So it

is conflicting. [...] [But] 10 years ago, no one would have dared to say such things like having relations before marriage. Now women ask why is that men can do things women are not allowed to do? (Interview with Gloria).

Some among the research participants have gone further in their denunciation: Lisa, a fourth-year student in architecture, decided to confront the sectarian divides in her university by joining AUB's secular club and took an active part in the civil campaign "Beirut Madinati", which challenged the power of traditional sectarian political forces during the 2015 municipal elections (Interview with Lisa). Her classmate Tareq lives an even more radical rupture. Our map-elicited conversation details how he has learned to discover the sites of gay Beirut and decided to frontally defy the prejudices of his society by exposing his own homosexuality both in his family and publicly with his fellow students as well as through his engagement in the Lebanese LGBT movement *Helem* (Interview with Tareq).

Conclusions: Youth as Shifting Social Relationships

In this article, my intention is not to claim that social and political boundaries are disaggregating in contemporary

Lebanon, but rather to underline some dynamics of change at work among young people through the study of their lived space. If the practices and imaginations of space collected during this project remain imprinted by the memory of the 1975-1990 wars, they nonetheless expose a clear inflection. Contrary to their parents, whose vision of the city was directly affected by violence, the students I met have experienced spatial fragmentation as the result of daily routines. Accordingly, their ways of making sense of boundaries are radically different. As a postwar generation, they inherited the consequences of forced segregation without, however, having a direct knowledge of its origins. Consequently, while their visions are not free of prejudices and identity assignments, they have lost parts of their traumatic charges and thus seem more prone to engage in renewed experiment with alterity.

Even more fundamentally, designating themselves as young, the research participants were able to take their distance from this war heritage and claim a renovated understanding of space and social relationships. Discovering and uncovering Beirut becomes for these young people part of a more general calling for emancipating the country from sectarianism, corrupted practices of power and patriarchal

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authorities, in particular regarding gender equality and sexuality. Invoking youth is a political act, asserting a shift from previous norms and practices and specifically the heritage of the wars. In that sense, youth's lived spaces reveal a generational change toward a transformed comprehension of political and social pluralism as well as new forms of engaging with it. As such, the stories of the students I met are stories of agency, part of the daily efforts coming from the margins celebrated by Asef Bayat, which "instigate change, rather than waiting for a savior or resorting to violence" (26). This willingness to get rid of the legacy of conflict, fears and confinement to explore new possibilities is encapsulated in the words of Lisa, who concluded our conversation as follows:

I would like to be there when time of change eventually comes in Beirut [...] and participate in this transformation toward a secularized life [...]. Beirut is an opportunity! (Interview with Lisa).

Notes

¹ Materials used for the purpose of this article have been collected during a fieldwork trip funded by Campus France as part of a wider CEDRE project entitled: "Les Universités, acteurs de la production urbaine à Beyrouth" (2015-2016).

² In this article, I use the most common Lebanese spelling for the names of organizations or places, which might differ from the conventional English transliteration from Standard Arabic.

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