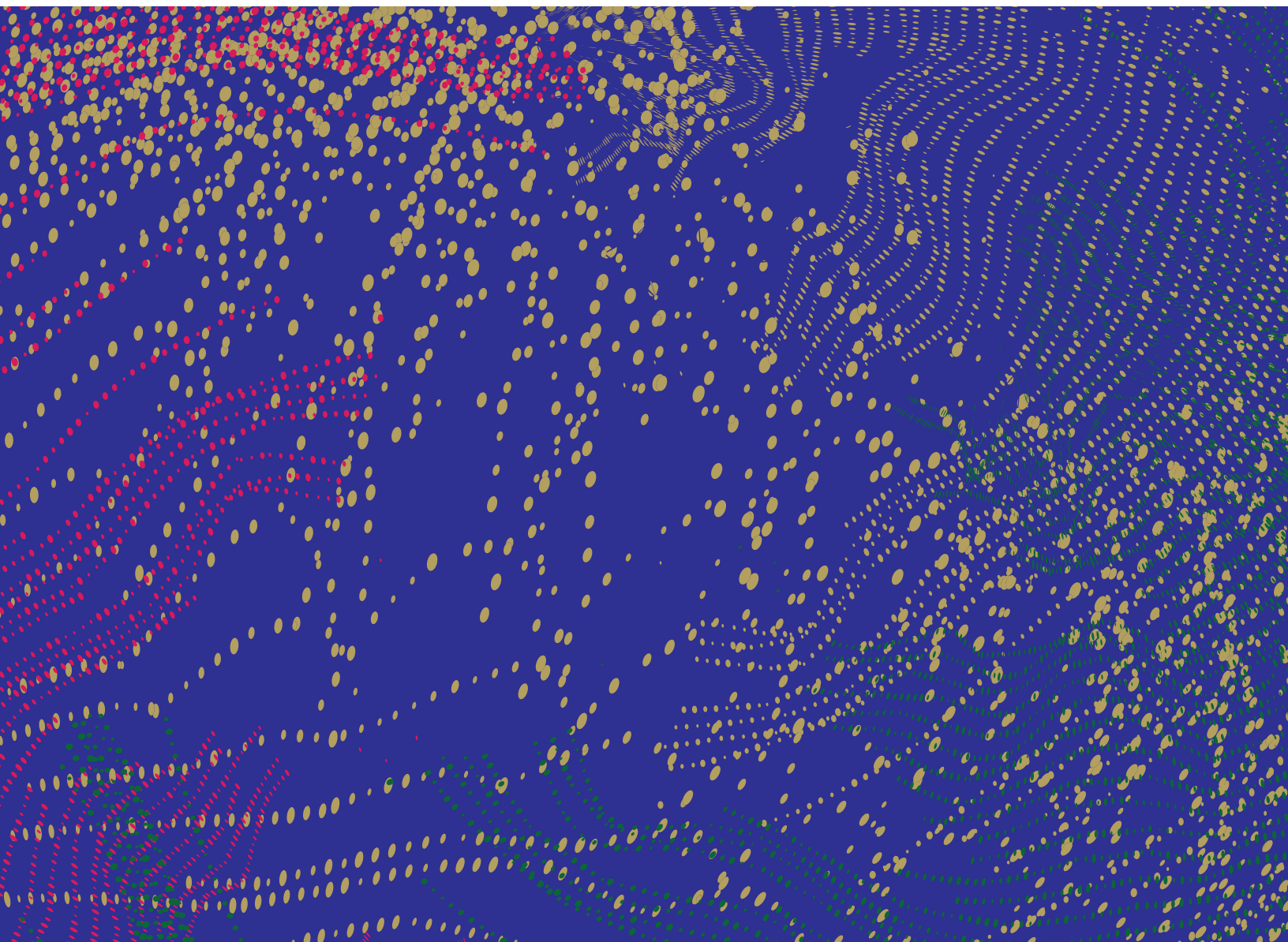The World Humanities Report

Affect, Archives, and Afterlives of the State: Reimagining National Belongings in Lebanon on Instagram

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Affect, Archives, and Afterlives of the State: Reimagining National Belongings in Lebanon on Instagram

Reem Joudi Arab Council for the Social Sciences

> Memory and time, both immaterial, are rivers with no banks and constantly merging. Both escape our will, though we depend on them. Measured but measured by whom or by what?
> —Etel Adnan, *Night*

The aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) was characterized by a state-sponsored amnesia that sought to remove the violent events from public discourse, ensuring their erasure from national history textbooks, television news, and archives. The Taif Agreement and the Amnesty Law established a sectarian ruling system that failed to provide a national framework for closure or resolution; rather, the laws ensured former militiamen's and warlords' transition into government. In this context, the violent and traumatic effects of the civil war on bodies, lives, and livelihoods were only either discussed in private or addressed in cultural productions such as film, art, and photography.[1] This enforced amnesia had the profoundly destabilizing effect of fragmenting the past and interweaving its scattered interpretations into divided, disjointed, and incoherent national belongings.

The unresolved trauma of the civil war and the uncertainty of the future produced the present as a protracted moment of crisis and precarity—called the "suspended now" by Judith Naeff.[2] Lauren Berlant characterizes this lack of resolution as an impasse, "a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward."[3] The impasse is "decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity." The impasse is shaped by the destabilizing effect of neoliberal economic practices

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[1] See Craig Larkin, *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past* (Oxford: Routledge, 2012).

[2] Judith Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut: A City's Suspended Now* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[3] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

and capitalist activity that wear down sociopolitical and economic structures, insofar as daily life becomes precarious. For Berlant, experiencing the present-as-impasse is an affective encounter, mediated through "the breaking up of modernity's secure institutions of intimacy and reciprocity."[4] It is a feeling of loss that is "collective, material, and fantasmic," producing an "affective class," as she calls the precariat. Berlant marks a tension between an affective solidarity that undergirds the precariat's shared experiences and their political imaginaries for a better life.

The feeling of loss permeates postwar Lebanon. On the urban front, the large-scale reconstruction of downtown Beirut—an area significantly damaged by the violent events—was a decidedly neoliberal effort led by former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's company, Solidere. Largely financed by Arab Gulf states' investments, the restoration project transformed the urban heart of the city into a sanitized hub for consumption, tourism, and leisure. It was a vision that rested on nostalgia for the country's 1960s "glory days," when Beirut was nicknamed the "Paris of the Middle East." These nostalgic imaginaries dominated visual and cultural terrains as well. Writing about visuality in the context of postwar Lebanon, Saree Makdisi notes how visitors to modern-day Beirut would rarely find postcards that portray the city in its contemporary state; instead, they would come across images from the 1950s and 1960s. The postcards act as "prosthetic devices" that serve as "substitutes for the practice both of memory and of forgetting, and in so doing they fill in the gap left by the trauma of the war."[5]

Zeina Tarraf discusses the complex relationship between media, memory, and war in postwar Lebanon. Looking at Ziad Doueiry's film *West Beirut* and artistic representations of Fairouz (an iconic Lebanese singer), Tarraf argues that "nostalgia functions as an affective register deeply implicated in the Lebanese postwar ordinary," one that helps shape national publics and illuminates "modes of national belonging . . . as consistently articulated through loss."[6] Thinking through the framework of the impasse and the notion of nostalgia as an affective register, this essay explores how memory and nation are fragmented and reframed through digital media. Without a national archive to preserve memories of the past, how do emergent digital archives on Instagram reimagine modes of national belonging in Lebanon? I offer a contextual reading of two

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[4] Berlant, *Cruel Optimiſm*, 199, 222.

[5] Saree Makdisi, "Beirut, a City without History?," in *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. by Ussama Makdisi and Paul Silverstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 203.

[6] Zeina Tarraf, "(Re)negotiating Belonging: Nostalgia and Popular Culture in Postwar Lebanon," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 41, no. 3 (2020): 365–66.

Instagram accounts—Old Beirut Lebanon and Walls of Thawra (*thawra* means "revolution" in Arabic)—arguing that these pages produce alternative political imaginaries and national belongings through their affective engagements with the past, present, and future. Through a historicized reading of the selected archives, I situate the pages in a broader literature on digital archives in the Arab world following the Arab Spring uprisings and analyze how the circulated images engage with the afterlives of state-making projects in Lebanon.

Framing Nostalgia

Svetlana Boym explores the multifaceted nature of nostalgia through personal memoir and historical analysis. She notes that nostalgia "actually . . . is a yearning for a different time. . . . The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition." Her reflection acknowledges the complexity of nostalgia as a condition that "is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space."[7] The condition is symptomatic of the impasse—suspended in spatial and temporal vectors while blurring the boundaries between them.

Boym highlights two forms of nostalgia: restorative, which looks to construct a unified and uncritical narrative of the past, and reflective, which values "shattered fragments of memory" and seeks to understand the past through a critical lens.[8] This dichotomy is productive in that the two dimensions often work together to shape engagements with the past. This essay is interested in *how* nostalgia is framed and *when* it is mobilized on the Old Beirut Lebanon and Walls of Thawra Instagram accounts. Where Old Beirut Lebanon compiles archival images of Beirut and other Lebanese cities from decades past, Walls of Thawra was created to document the creative, political, and urban changes that shaped Beirut during the uprisings on October 17, 2019. Although they comment on different historical periods, these two accounts exist in the same contemporary moment and across a shared virtual space, complicating our understanding of history as a linear process. I examine their conceptualization of nostalgia, the affective pulls they inspire, and how these dynamics refashion understandings and practices of archiving. Moreover, I look for what alternative futures and possibilities are opened up when we turn to the affective dimension of nostalgia.

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[7]   Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv, xiv.
[8]   Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

With Boym's framework I interlace Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural politics of emotion to unpack the conjunctures and divergences of affect, nostalgia, and digital archives. Ahmed argues that emotions are cultural states through which bodies acquire meaning. The repetition of words, symbols, and signs produce feelings that align some bodies in a community while leaving other bodies marginalized. She notes, "through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies. Emotions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present. The time of emotion is not always about the past, and how it sticks. Emotions also open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others."[9] How are emotions mobilized on Old Beirut Lebanon and Walls of Thawra? What histories do they speak to and against? How can a digital archive influence and be influenced by material conditions? By taking emotions seriously and unpacking what they do in the context of postwar Lebanon's digital media landscape, we can begin to understand how they shape future political imaginaries.

Archives, Instagram, and Uprisings

A discussion of the Lebanese context and the Instagram accounts cannot be removed from the larger context that has shaped the Arab world after 2011. Donatella Della Ratta and her coauthors note that following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, "representation and history acquired a renewed and contested urgency," and the Arab image gained precedence as a contested site through which politics and power relations are negotiated. Digital technologies and infrastructures that allowed "sharing and archiving in an unprecedented fashion" enabled the documentation of the revolutions that unfolded across the region.[10] This political moment was transformative in that the resulting archive was about classification and categorization and about the politics and processes that shaped the archive. Echoing Jacques Derrida, the emergent digital archives created by activists, artists, and Instagram users push us to consider how "life is lived differently as a result of the archive shaping the live events themselve."[11]

9 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 202.

10 Donatella Della Ratta, Kay Dickinson, and Sune Haugbolle, "Introduction," in *The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows*, ed. Donatella Della Ratta, Kay Dickinson, and Sune Haugbolle (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020), 6.

11 David Beer, "Archive Fever Revisited: Algorithmic Archons and the Ordering of Social Media," in *Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Communication*, ed. Leah A. Lievrouw and Brian D. Loader (Oxford: Routledge, 2020), 106.

This process is both material and affective—first, digital platforms operate through a physical infrastructure that houses and transports data, often owned by large corporations that can decide how, when, and to whom these data are sold. Algorithms analyze social media users' preferences, consequently dictating what posts they see and how often they see them. At times, these algorithms decide what posts should be removed. The practice of shadowbanning is one example of the latter process, which "involves the partial censorship of online accounts without the knowledge or consent of the user,"[12] which is considered a form of algorithmic censorship. These material conditions undoubtedly affect how the archive is conceived, what it contains, and what stories or narratives remain marginalized.

David Beer notes that while "the social media archive may have a materiality, in data centers, cabling, and servers," this "materiality no longer limits what is placed within it or how its internal coherence is maintained."[13] There is an affective dimension to how users interact with the online archive and the emotional attachments that are produced through and sometimes in spite of algorithmic considerations. The digital sphere allows for an archive that appears spatially and geographically boundless; one that transcends the limits of physicality and national borders and is able to take on multiple afterlives. The shifting materiality of the social media archive is further unpacked in Lucie Ryzova's discussion on digitization of vintage photographs in Egypt after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. She looks at various Facebook pages that curate and disseminate vintage Egyptian photographs, arguing that "freeing" these photographs from otherwise inaccessible physical archives allows them to become iconic en masse, signifying broader social values. More important, Ryzova notes that the resignification of digitized vintage photographs "has two recent genealogies," which are "the neoliberal rereading of modern Egyptian history in which colonialism becomes recast as a

> Memory and nation are fragmented and reframed through digital media. Without a national archive to preserve memories of the past, how do emergent digital archives on Instagram reimagine modes of national belonging in Lebanon?

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[12] Callie Middlebrook, "The Grey Area: Instagram, Shadowbanning, and the Erasure of Marginalized Communities," February 17, 2020, available at SSRN, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3539721, 1.

[13] Beer, "Archive Fever Revisited," 108.

period of once-had-and-then-lost modernity" and "the difficult and confusing post-revolutionary present in which such 'liberated,' but . . . unstable icons . . . prove at once the necessity of a revolution as well as the reason why it had apparently failed."[14]

Ryzova's aim is not to overstate the importance of Instagram in altering the way people engage with and perceive the past, as these experiences are diverse. Instead, her argument points to people's growing willingness to curate and share personal photographs that would have otherwise remained hidden and to how social media platforms facilitated this process. More important, it highlights how "freeing up" Egyptian vintage photographs on digital platforms catalyzed public discussion and debate around politics, power, and history.

This essay seeks to understand digital archives in Lebanon in the absence of a national effort to engage with the country's recent history and examines how a platform like Instagram can destabilize engagements with the past, stretch understandings of traditional archival practices, and challenge the power dynamics that underpin the archive as a tool for collective memory. My argument is not one of technological determinism, nor do I emphasize the novelty of Instagram's image-sharing infrastructures. The previous discussion of Makdisi's work on postcards illuminates the persistence of media texts and vintage photographs in Lebanon's visual cultural landscape. Instead, I argue that Instagram—given its commercial aspect and its widespread use in the Arab world—reimagines *how* one preserves and engages with memory and the past. The platform, which includes instant posts, stories that disappear after twenty-four hours, and an algorithm that determines what you see according to your engagement, blurs the line between past and present. It renders some pages unseen while promoting others, operating through a logic of commercialization and in the neoliberal structures that frame its operations.

State-Making Projects

The Old Beirut Lebanon Instagram account started in 2017, following the success of its namesake Facebook page that started in 2012. The account curates vintage images and videos from local and international archives such as those of TeleLiban (Lebanon's national television station), Middle East Airlines, renowned

[14] Lucie Ryzova, "Nostalgia for the Modern: Archive Fever in Egypt in the Age of Post-Photography," in *Photographic Archives and the Idea of Nation*, ed. Costanza Caraffa and Tiziana Serena (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 37.

photographers, and fashion magazines. These images are "freed" from their respective sources, making them accessible to a broader public online.

Walls of Thawra was created during the October 2019 uprisings and documents the graffiti that proliferated throughout Beirut. The uprisings represented a mass movement of citizens and residents across Lebanon against the ruling class. Protesters cited corruption, the sectarian power-sharing system, patriarchal structures, and neoliberal policies as key frustrations. Elise Salem notes that "for anyone who experienced the revolution, it was a fearless, creative, peaceful, and diverse phenomenon"[15]—a historical moment charged with hope and uncertainty on what the future could hold. The uprisings were an unprecedented moment of multiple, decentralized movements against the existing ruling elite, and people from different socioeconomic and religious backgrounds reappropriated Beirut's downtown area. Walls of Thawra featured graffiti from the uprisings *as they unfolded*, as if urgently documenting the city's changing sociopolitical and cultural landscape. In the context of Lebanon's "suspended now," Mark Westmoreland argues that the contemporary nature of the photographs makes their effects "ephemeral and fleeting, if not also unpredictable"; as such, they are made with the hope that future generations will make use of this material.[16]

Despite their focus on different time periods, there are several points of connection between Old Beirut Lebanon and Walls of Thawra. First, they both exist in the temporal framework of Lebanon's protracted civil war and thus comment on a shared historical experience. Second, their visual content and respective curatorial choices reimagine the digital archive as accessible and as user-generated. The accounts are public and are assembled through individual efforts to collect, share, and caption the images; more important, they operate on an ad hoc basis rather than using a specific or apparent archival methodology. Third, these archives are affective. They are produced *through* emotional engagement with particular historical moments, and they generate emotional responses when users like, share, or comment on the photographs. Last, Old Beirut Lebanon and Walls of Thawra share a linguistic hybridity. Though image captions are predominantly in English, both accounts often presuppose a familiarity with Lebanon's local dialect, political history, and culture. Sometimes, Arabic and English are used concurrently—whether by encoding Lebanese dialect and common phrases into a mix of numbers and Latin script;

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[15] Elise Salem, "Shaking Things Up in Lebanon: Women, Revolution, and the University," *Al Raida Journal* 44, no. 1 (2020): 93.

[16] Mark R. Westmoreland, "Time Capsules of Catastrophic Times," in *The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows*, ed. Donatella Della Ratta, Kay Dickinson, and Sune Haugbolle (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020), 31.

mixing English and Arabic words and meanings (the name "Walls of *Thawra*" is an example of this); or through using English captions with images depicting Arabic phrases (and vice versa). Although a detailed discussion of language is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to understand that digital platforms especially facilitate such linguistic flexibility.

Old Beirut Lebanon and Walls of Thawra engage with the digital afterlives of neoliberal state-making projects in Lebanon by focusing on two particular moments: the presidency of Fouad Chehab (1958–64)—Beirut's "golden age"—and the postwar reconstruction projects led by Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in the 1990s. Fouad Chehab's presidency was characterized by a "unifying and egalitarian" version of Lebanese nationalism.[17] Chehab reorganized the development of Lebanese capital to curb the chaotic development of the econo-

> This political moment was transformative in that the resulting archive was about classification and categorization and about the politics and processes that shaped the archive.

my under his predecessor, Camille Chamoun, shifting from the productive to the tertiary sector. Moreover, Chehab worked on building infrastructures that improved the socioeconomic distribution of growth in the country, particularly between peripheral regions and central Beirut. Nevertheless, Chehab's policies and his institution of an authoritarian intelligence bureau garnered significant criticism, with opposition leaders likening his statism to Nasserism and communism. Fearing a crisis in governance, Chehab announced that he would not stand for a second term.

Hariri's postwar reconstruction involved two neoliberal developments: the rebuilding of central Beirut and the anchoring of the Lebanese currency to the US dollar. Hannes Baumann argues that these policies were rent-creation mechanisms that resulted in persistent social crisis and slow economic growth. Specifically, he notes that Hariri and the technocrats he worked with "were importing global templates of neoliberal urbanism, currency management and privatization, but regional domestic factors [such as the Syrian occupation of Lebanon] were setting the limits of Lebanese neoliberalism."[18]

[17] Traboulsi, *A Modern History of Lebanon*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 139.
[18] Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 58, 166.

Hauntings and Unravelings

These two historical moments are significant for several reasons, most notably for my purposes, for how they are remembered in the public imagination. For some, Chehab's presidency is considered the strongest example of state building in Lebanon's modern history, an attempt to lay the institutional groundwork to operate and imagine a nation-state. His projects are often favorably compared with postwar governments' corruption and their inability to effect positive change. Alternatively, Hariri's politics are heavily debated in public discourse, made even more salient following his assassination in 2005 and the deep political divides it engendered. Whereas some viewed his neoliberal policies as a valiant effort at rebuilding a war-torn country, others pointed to his corruption, numerous property and land infringements, and aggressive privatization of Lebanon's shores. The debate surrounding Hariri's political and economic policies reemerged during the October 2019 uprisings, with pundits, activists, and members of the public discussing the negative effects of pegging the Lebanese lira to the US dollar. They argued that this policy, coupled with corruption and Hariri's unregulated access to large infrastructure contracts under the Council of Development and Reconstruction, had laid the foundations for the country's financial and economic collapse. Both Chehab's and Hariri's political projects were interrupted, the former by resignation amid rising political tensions and the latter by assassination. The promise of what could have been positions their projects as "a kind of historical alternative that never quite materialized."[19] The important point to consider is not whether these projects would have been successful but how they haunt political imaginaries and permeate visual landscapes.

The visual afterlives of Chehab's and Hariri's projects are forms of haunting. Avery Gordon notes that haunting "raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in linear time, alters the way we normally separate and sequence the past, the present and the future." These "specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view"; thus, they reanimate the past and force us to critically examine how the present unravels.[20] Sara Salem uses Gordon's notion of haunting to present an alternative reading of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, arguing that anticolonial project of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was Egypt's second presi-

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[19] Sara Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 260.

[20] Avery Gordon, "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity," *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011): 2, http://averygordon.net/files/GordonHauntingFuturity.pdf.

dent (1954–70), was the only instance of hegemony in the country's history and that the enduring afterlives of his politics are key to comprehending Egypt's contemporary context. She reads graffitied images of Nasser, which appeared in Egyptian streets and during the 2011 uprisings, through the concept of haunting, which she frames as a "visceral experience, one that destabilizes past, present, and future."[21] Haunting is affective and lived—a condition exacerbated by living through an impasse. It generates an emotional response, demands us to reflect on the present, and asks us to *do* something about it. The political projects haunt our imaginaries and permeate our digital visual landscapes by reproducing images of Beirut's "golden age" in the 1950s and 1960s like in Old Beirut Lebanon or by circulating images that critique the suspended political projects, as is the case of Walls of Thawra.

Old Beirut Lebanon

Old Beirut Lebanon's account represents a reflective nostalgia that connects past with present. It grapples with the trauma of the civil war and the absence of national dialogue surrounding it, attempting to fill the gap with photos that act as "prosthetic devices," similar to the postcards Makdisi discusses. On a deeper level, the images on Old Beirut Lebanon engage with the missed opportunity of Chehab's unfinished political project. This condition can be read through Antonio Gramsci's concept of interregnum, where "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."[22]

The account mostly posts photographs from Lebanon of the 1950s and 1960s: images of downtown Beirut before the civil war, the tramway, green spaces and public coastline that is today unrecognizable due to urbanization and privatization, and photographs of crafts and trades that have died out. They are all affective engagements with loss. They give nuance to the interregnum of the civil war by attaching mythical and nostalgic readings to what existed under Chehab. These engagements harbor a duality of hope and longing, grappling with what could have been had Lebanon not experienced a protracted civil war.

Old Beirut Lebanon destabilizes the linearity of past and present, commenting on contemporary socioeconomic or cultural conditions through images of the past. In the lead-up to the October 2019 uprisings, for example, the curator

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[21] Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt*, 258.
[22] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 275–76.

posted photographs and videos of protests that took place before the civil war. A snowfall in Lebanon was visually discussed through vintage photographs of a 1964 Beirut snowfall, capitalizing on nostalgia's capacity to transport users to another time and place. These posts underscore the critical nature of the digital archive and its non-neutrality, which invites reflection on the relationship and tensions between past and present, as well as the potentialities that exist in the spaces between them. More important, it highlights how affective engagements with the photographs—through comments on how life seemed much better in the "good old days"—mobilize nostalgia as a way to imagine a better future and perhaps are a way to reactivate the unfinished opportunity of Chehab's political project.

Even though the photographs show important political events, videos from political rallies, posters from elections, and images from the civil war, the comments either ignore the political nuances that frame them, openly criticize the dangers of Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system, or dismiss the violence of the civil war. A common reply in the comments is, "May it be remembered but not repeated." Thus, there is a desire to break from the political reality of the present through a perfunctory engagement with the past (through a like or an emoji), a brief discussion of the unwanted effects of sectarian rule, or a projection of utopic imaginaries onto the past as a way to shape alternative narratives.

Walls of Thawra

The images of graffiti on the Walls of Thawra account affectively chart alternative political imaginaries. The archive is born out of the urgency of documenting the October 2019 uprising and reflects an anticipated nostalgia for a fleeting moment and a fear that its political potential will not materialize, as was the case under Chehab and Hariri. More importantly, this urgency invites a forward-looking perspective—what if these images remained accessible for future generations? Who would use them, when, and how?

The 2019 uprisings can be read as symptomatic of the postwar neoliberal project's collapse, resulting in the devaluation of the local currency and compounding socioeconomic crises. The photographs of destroyed ATMs, "Eat the Rich" slogans, and stencils denigrating the International Monetary Fund can be read as critiques of the postwar neoliberal policies that Hariri established, how they laid the groundwork for rampant corruption, and how that framework slowly—then rapidly—fell apart after his assassination. The language is rife with anger, grief, and frustration; it highlights how affect can be an important tool

to bring national publics together, regardless of sectarian affiliation or socio-economic class. As Ahmed argues, slogans and symbols are powerful cultural vectors that not only generate emotional responses but also use these responses to elicit political action.[23] In the case of the 2019 uprisings, this included the occupation and reappropriation of downtown Beirut as a public space for all—a symbolic response to Solidere's reconstruction project.

In addition to reshaping spatial and urban boundaries, Walls of Thawra demonstrates how archives that center affective political engagements can allow space for marginalized voices to emerge. More specifically, the account posts graffiti that state "the gays built Beirut," slogans in support of the Lebanese LGBTQ community, as well as stencils that read "Love Each Other." Once again, these acts show how words are imbued with cultural and affective power to bring communities marginalized by the state under the banner of a national public. Marking these words on the city walls and reproducing and circulating them on Instagram demonstrates how the body that protests, occupies space, and engages with politics through emotion imprints itself on the fabric of the city.

Cruel Optimism and National Belonging

After the civil war, the Arab Spring, and the October 2019 uprisings, the question "what comes next?" looms large. What are the social, political, and cultural implications, as well as the repercussions of affective engagements with nostalgia on digital media platforms? How do they reconfigure attachments to national belonging and identity? The Instagram accounts examined here echo Gordon's conceptualization of haunting as a moment "when the cracks and the rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings won't go away, when easily living one day and then the next becomes impossible, when the present seamlessly becoming 'the future' gets entirely jammed up."[24] This moment involves a realization that something can no longer hold, but the conditions of its rebuilding are less clear.

Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" is useful for thinking through these questions. Cruel optimism is a relationship in which the "attachment to compromised conditions of possibility . . . is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic." This relation is symptomatic of the impasse,

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[23] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*.
[24] Gordon, "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity," 2.

and it characterizes postmodern political life. Berlant notes that "it may be a relation of cruel optimism, when, despite an awareness that the normative political sphere appears as a shrunken, broken, or distant place of activity among elites, members of the body politic return periodically to its recommitment ceremonies and scene." Cruel optimism offers new avenues to critically examine the activism of accounts such as Walls of Thawra. Does it reflect a tangible and real mobilization, or is it merely "noise, the activity of visceral immediacy that communication rationalizes"?[25]

Perhaps what the analysis of these Instagram accounts highlights is the stickiness of the sectarian power-sharing system as an oppressive structure that frames daily life in

> Marking these words on the city walls and reproducing and circulating them on Instagram demonstrates how the body that protests, occupies space, and engages with politics through emotion imprints itself on the fabric of the city.

Lebanon. Whether it is the images on Old Beirut Lebanon that wish to project a nonsectarian, utopian imaginary on the past or Walls of Thawra's desire to actively call for dissolving the sectarian system, systemic change remains a persistent theme. The desire to break away from the current system is a relation of cruel optimism that reflects an affective double bind: a "binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent." There is a persistence and exhausting compulsion to this attachment, framed by a desire to remain part of a polity and the realization that breaking from it "could induce many potential losses along with new freedoms."[26] With Lebanon's unresolved past (and resulting trauma), the polity—in terms of the nation-state and national belonging—is increasingly fragmented, scattering in its wake heterogeneous understandings of alternative imaginaries and better futures. Thus, it is increasingly difficult to break away from the status quo even when it breaks you down; it is a heightened sense of loss, compounded by fear of future losses.

A Case for the Molecular

Using a contextualized approach and interlaced theoretical framework, I argued that the digital images on Old Beirut Lebanon and Walls of Thawra func-

25 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 33, 227, 229.
26 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 51, 228.

tion as engagements with the afterlives of the Chehab and Hariri eras. More specifically, they affectively engage with what was lost, what could have been, and what could be as cultural dimensions that can shape alternative political imaginaries. In the slippery yet persistent nature of memory, where do people place themselves, their stories, and narratives? Is there room for hope in this exploration of nostalgia, affect, and digital archives—in the relation of cruel optimism—and if so, where? Perhaps a window of hope emerges when we place these accounts and their affective engagements at the molecular level, following Gramsci, viewing them as cultural moments in the transformative "processes both between and within subaltern actors and groups, and between these and dominant groups," which produce change "from below, through small and even fragmented action." More important, it may be the feeling—the affective bind—of the perceived "cultural moment of unity" that Old Beirut Lebanon and Walls of Thawra offer through their public and accessible platforms and through their nostalgic engagements with past and present that allows "individuals and groups [to forge] new alliances and solidarities, political and cultural projects and imaginaries [that] may well be at the very basis of a future revolutionary project."[27]

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[27] Alessandra Marchi, "Molecular Transformations: Reading the Arab Uprisings with and beyond Gramsci," *Middle East Critique* 30, no. 1 (2021): 16, 17.

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