

## LECTIO PRAECURSORIA

### *A Beach Multiple: An ethnography of environmentalism on the Lebanese Coastline*

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Honoured Custos, Honoured Opponent,  
members of the audience,

According to a well-known old slogan from the French new left, ‘under the cobblestones, there lies a beach’ (Wark 2011: 149-150). The implications of this slogan for the political imagination are simple, but effective: if you dig up the cobblestones and throw them at the authorities, you will encounter a leisurely beach under them.

What if we start, not from the cobblestones, but the beach? The beach, which is an over-fantasised and reified place in capitalist modernity (Taussig 2000)? Can we still find some proverbial cobblestones? Ones that, as in this old slogan, refer both to societal infrastructure and antagonistic politics? Can a place of leisure provide the key to understanding urban and environmental politics?

My dissertation describes the ways in which a coastline was definitively political. On the white sands of Beirut’s only public beach, Ramlet al-Bayda, many objects, ideas, and structures were indeed mixed. They were burrowed into the subterranean and glittered superficially on the surface. Perhaps not literal cobblestones, the processes, desires, and conflicts I documented on the sands of Ramlet al-Bayda certainly opened a view to political, social, and environmental changes in Lebanon. These developments, in turn, speak to wider

global dynamics of environmental ruination in late capitalism and to anthropological questions of space and environment.

It was the late summer of 2019, on the eastern banks of the Mediterranean Sea below the peak of Mount Lebanon in the shadow of the city’s skyscrapers on a public beach between urban expansion and the waves. While leisurely crowds enjoyed their Saturday morning in the blazing sun, a bulldozer rolled down the sands. It crushed, dismantled, and demolished makeshift buildings used by the environmental group that managed the beach. That bulldozer was commissioned by the Beirut municipality. Agitated, environmental activists shuffled around and argued with the municipal police. There was an air of chaos, with the environmentalists wearing mixed expressions of resignation and indignation on their faces.

What was going on? At least two different versions of the events existed. According to the municipality, the environmental group did not have the appropriate permits for their activity, and their work had to be stopped and cleared out. According to the environmentalists, however, the municipality was acting on behalf of private capital interests, punishing them and ignoring the permits they actually did possess. This was because the group opposed the privatisation of the coast, a century-long process with renewed speed since the 1990s.

These events were unfolding on Ramlet al-Bayda—or the ‘White Sands’ in English. As the only public beach left on the coastline of Beirut, it marks one of the few locations on the city’s coastline where one can enter and relax without paying fees. Now, this access was threatened by bulldozers. That morning with the bulldozers was one of the more dramatic moments of my fieldwork. It encapsulated how the coastline is more than simply a place for leisure and recreation—it is also a place of crucial change in politics and the political economy.

My dissertation seeks to disentangle political contestations over the meaning, value, and use of the Lebanese coastline. I wanted to understand the interplay between political, social, historical, economic, legal, and discursive elements in disputes over meaning and control over the coast. To this end, I relied on participant observation with a number of environmental groups working on the coastline for one year in 2018 and 2019. In doing so, I documented the lead up to a societal and economic collapse and popular uprising in late 2019. Later, these were added to, resulting from the catastrophic explosion of Beirut’s port in August 2020, which ravaged entire neighbourhoods.

I got to know many volunteers, workers, and activists among the environmentalists. Rana, for instance, was from a well-known Beiruti family. She had a background in engineering and two decades of experience as a civil society figure. Dina, on the other hand, was a marine ecologist in her 30s. She headed a new nongovernmental organisation (NGO) that worked on marine pedagogy. Mahmoud was a law student in his late 20s and volunteered in oppositional electoral campaigns and coastal cleanups. Their names, like those of all my other interlocutors, are pseudonymous.

Rana, Dina, and Mahmoud were all committed participants in environmental work on the coastline. They organised cleanups, opposed the privatisation of public beaches, educated others about coastal nature, and campaigned against invasive fish species, to name just a few of their activities.

I consider ethnographic fieldwork a pedagogical process rather than a ‘method’ for gathering ‘data’. Ethnography is a long-term process of the ethnographer’s co-presence in the lives of their interlocutors (Chua 2015). This means not simply analysing the actions of my interlocutors, but thinking alongside them.

I followed the multiple contestations, configurations, and characteristics that defined the Ramlet al-Bayda beach, which served as a good place to document the transformations the Lebanese coastline was experiencing. The resulting fieldnotes, interviews, and observations formed the basis for my description of the Lebanese coastline and the beach as multiply located through its many relations. Building upon this fieldwork, my dissertation presents an ethnography of environmentalist work on the Lebanese coastline and contributes to the anthropological scholarship on space, environment, and grassroots politics.

Traditionally, ethnographers are rather lonesome creatures, who do much of their thinking by themselves. Instead, since the beginning of my PhD project, I had the opportunity to be a part of a collaborative research project, called the ‘Crosslocations’, headed by Professor Sarah Green. Together with a group of anthropologists, we developed concepts allowing us to rethink issues of spatial relationality—most importantly to my own work, the concept of relative location (see Green et al. 2024).

Relative location refers to how places, as well as people and objects, are positioned relative to each other. This includes not just how far or close they are situated based on geographic distance, but all the other kinds of connections and disconnections between them, and the forces that calibrate these relations.

This concept of relative location was central to my analysis of the actions and ideas of environmentalists, and the processes they encountered. Given its importance, I offer a simple example: whether a beach is public or private means that it is open to different kinds of users. Through this, different beaches are connected to different lifeworlds or spaces situated much further away.

A public beach might have regular visitors from working class neighbourhoods, whereas a private luxury resort might draw in rich tourists from abroad. This quite obvious point is, however, conceptually meaningful. Any location has multiple connections or disconnections to other places. Therefore, a single beach, or any other place, in fact, has many locations at once. This means that, where it is, relatively speaking, can be known in many different ways.

The idea that any place has multiple, overlapping locations, as developed in our research collective, was foundational to my analysis of environmentalism on the public beach in Beirut. Ramlet al-Bayda was a place located in many different ways. It was multiple in the ways in which it was known. Hence, 'The Beach Multiple' as the title of my dissertation.

But what of the cobblestones I suggested we can find in the public beach of Beirut? In this case, I mean cobblestones as the bits and pieces that help understand the changes occurring on the Lebanese coastline as exemplary of late neoliberal processes. And, as bits and pieces that help unpack spatial multiplicity through relative location.

When the civil war ended in 1990, Lebanon entered a period of heightened neoliberal economic expansion. Clientelist networks played a central role, former warlords were propelled to important positions, and political leaders and business elites were entangled. The country's economy relied on the banking industry, the construction sector, and tourism. In a country where the landscape is dominated by the mountains and the sea, beach resorts were a key element of neoliberal spatial expansion.

Historically, these processes were not completely new. They stretched to the early twentieth century and intensified and took various new forms since the 1990s in the context of the post-war political economy. Scholars such as Hannes Baumann (2017: 4) have called the Lebanese system actually existing neoliberalism, with 'liberal talk and [an] illiberal walk'. In essence, Lebanese neoliberalism is a mix of hefty liberal ideals with a rather illiberal reality. Rima Majed (2022) describes it as a system of sectarian neoliberalism, where neoliberal doctrine fuses with power-sharing between political heads of Lebanon's many religious communities.

In this context, lands considered public continued and are still continuing to be privatised and enclosed by the mixed forces of political power and private capital. I witnessed this process at Ramlet al-Bayda, where a new hotel project enclosed a large chunk of the beach. It did this by stretching the limits of zoning laws and defying opposition from protestors. My interlocutor Rana suspected that it was the hotel that was the ultimate force beyond the destructive bulldozer that so dramatically challenged their guardianship. In other words, the hotel, and, ultimately, the bulldozer were symbols of neoliberal enclosure.

Sectarian neoliberalism was also a key cause of intensifying environmental degradation. In the late 2010s, for instance, a crisis of waste infrastructure emerged. This was also visible on Beirut's beach, where combined storm sewage outlets flowed on the sands and waves washed in solid waste from overflowing coastal dump sites. At the same time, environmental consciousness grew among Lebanon's middle classes, and the environmental movement expanded (Kingston 2001; Makdisi 2012).

My interlocutors were environmentalists, and, thus, part of civil society. Civil society, in its local form, was a central way in which many organised to oppose the current situation. This was the case even as many criticised the depoliticising effect of the spread of NGOs.

This process is familiar across the globe. Famously, James Ferguson's (1994) argument on development as an antipolitics machine has been applied to describe the NGO sector (Fisher 1997). NGOisation refers to a move away from politics into the supposedly nonpolitical form of civil society (Salloukh et al. 2015: Ch. 3). This was one crucial context for my research.

To consider this wider context of coastal neoliberalism, NGOisation, and environmental consciousness together with the concept of relative location, I applied the idea of the poetics of space. Developed by anthropologist Rupert Stasch (2013), the poetics of space refers to how spaces become reflexive repositories of larger cultural or societal fields.

This stands for the ways in which people think through wider issues of social importance through relational space. As a simple example, consider if living in the city centre or a distant suburb makes a difference beyond a geographic difference. The relation between these two spaces is rich with meaning, including, for example, about class or urban politics.

I developed this concept to the poetics of relative location in order to describe how my interlocutors understood the different relative locations of coastal places in Lebanon. Each of these locations carried larger cultural, societal or political meaning. As an example, the enclosure of a public beach would be understood as representative of neoliberal sectarianism in Lebanon or, in technical terms, as a metonym of it.

The six ethnographic chapters in my dissertation each unpack the poetics of relative location from distinct perspectives, thereby uncovering the cobblestones of the politics of the Lebanese coastline. In the language of relative location, the chapters describe the layers in the multiple locations the beach took and the logics that calibrated them.

In Chapter 2. The Beach, I provide an ethnographic and historical overview of the Ramlet al-Bayda public beach. I suggest that, in the late 2010s, the beach was a precarious space, since its continued existence was threatened by privatisation. It was also a place for prefigurative politics (e.g., Graeber 2015: 2). For my interlocutors, whatever happened at the beach foreshadowed how change across the coastline might unfold.

Chapter 3. The Land Registry follows activists hunting for a lost cadastral map from historical survey work to prove that what was rightly public had been illegally privatised. A land registry reform carried out by the French in the 1920s during their colonial rule still haunted Beirut's urban politics in the late 2010s. I show how this was a matter of bureaucratic knowledge and a spatial logic embedded in the colonial mapping of the land registry.

Chapter 4. The Sand centres the substance forming the beach and asks: What is the relationship between materiality and knowledge?

I describe how the beach sand became a troublesome mixed matter. The sand grounded the politics of the coastline by infusing environmentalist and bureaucratic knowledge systems, human emotions, and other materials.

In Chapter 5. Waste, I examine garbage and sewage on the coastline. For volunteers removing garbage from the coast, this seemingly nonpolitical work was not just a matter of cleaning up waste. Instead, it hinted at a desire for wider cleanups in the political system. The circulation of waste worked as a metonymy for the political order in Lebanon, so that working against waste was working for social change.

Chapter 6. The Public Space describes how the term 'public space' circulated in various articulations: as a nostalgic idea, as a critical social scientific concept, and as a liberal property logic. This underscores the role played by the conceptual imagination on the coastline. In particular, public space as a term in Beirut was contested and multiple in its meanings.

Finally, Chapter 7. The Ocean follows marine environmental advocacy. This chapter examines how one group sought to educate the Lebanese of their marine and coastal nature. The pedagogical work of teaching the Lebanese to know their sea was one key way in which environmentalists sought to safeguard the country's coastline, which was, as the chapters cumulatively show, multiply located.

From these chapters, three broad themes emerge: late neoliberalism, NGOisation, and environmentalism. I develop these themes throughout my dissertation as crucial contexts for understanding the multiple locations of the beach.

Firstly, neoliberalism refers to the grassroots realities of Lebanon's ailing sectarian neoliberal political economy as it actualises in coastal privatisation, the breakdown of waste infrastructures, and coastal real estate businesses.

Neoliberalism is also connected to a late liberal oppositional subjectivity as it emerged in the form of civil society and NGOs aimed at protecting coastal spatial and environmental commons.

Secondly, NGOisation is opened up to the ethnographic examination of the political and nonpolitical. My interlocutors negotiated the limits of these terms. As such, they saw their work as nonpolitical, because they thought politics was a corrupt and sectarian matter. This nonpolitical frame provided both a safe haven and a limitation for environmental and progressive ideas.

Finally, I offer a description of grassroots environmentalism in Lebanon as a part of the wider rise of environmental movements and issues both in the Arab-speaking region and conceptually in anthropological scholarship.

So, in the end, what proverbial 'cobblestones' did I uncover from the old sands of the Ramlet al-Bayda beach? And what did I learn of the, to use the words of Munira Khayyat, 'well-intentioned, if doomed, environmental action ongoing in a place of neoliberal ruination?'<sup>1</sup>

Approaching the Lebanese coastline through the poetics of relative location, I argue that, where the Ramlet al-Bayda beach stood is not reducible to a single perspective or master narrative. Instead, it is a multiplicity of tangential, overlapping, conflicting or co-existing processes.

Thus, relative location allowed me to unearth and sieve from the sands those key processes that affected Lebanon in the years before the 2019 uprising and collapse.

I show that the coastline was a multiply located political line, a threshold for ongoing changes in the country's neoliberal twilight.

Overall, this dissertation uncovers new ways to think of the relationality of space and grassroots political work on issues of



environment and urban space. It is my wish that this work has also valued the political imagination and the possibility for change, additional cobblestones buried in the beach in our troubled planetary era.

I now call upon you, Professor Ghassan Hage, as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of Social Sciences, to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

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## NOTES

1 Personal communication.

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