Voices of Displacement

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Abstract

This paper describes the design and making of a digital book base on the recordings oral history recordings made by the anthropologist Rosemary Sayigh in former Palestine between 1998 and 2000. The recordings represent around fifty hours of interviews and accompanying photographs that could not otherwise have been conveyed in a conventional printed book. The book is meant primarily for an audience of researchers and those with a special interest in women's studies and the Palestine question.

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0.1 Introduction

Digital books are usually understood as digital versions of printed books presented either as PDF[1] files or in some proprietary format, both requiring special programs or machines to be read. This digital book by Rosemary Sayigh attempts to take advantage of the abilities of the hypertext markup language (HTML) to present multimedia content that otherwise cannot be conveyed by normal print, while maintaining the character and flow of a normal book.

The Author

Rosemary Sayigh is an anthropologist, researcher and author living in Beirut. In addition to a number of articles and papers on Palestinian refugees, she has published two books *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries : A People's History*[2] and *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon.*[3]

Many of her articles and *Too Many Enemies* are based on oral history interviews with Palestinian women (and men) displaced by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In transforming these conversations from tape and notes to printed text, much of the content and character is lost to transcription, translation, interpretation and description. In publishing this, her most recent book, in digital form which includes the interviews as they were originally recorded, it is hoped that both the atmosphere of the circumstances around the subject and the nuances of language would be preserved.

Voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement is available at:

> `http://almashriq.hiof.no/voices/.`

Background

Following the upheavals of 19th century Europe and the founding of the Zionist movement, the demographics of Ottoman Palestine began to change with the growing immigration of Jewish settlers. The first world war and the subsequent demise of Ottoman rule, its replacement by the British Mandate, and the systematic persecution of Jews before and during the second world war brought a dramatic increase of foreign settlers to Palestine. Palestinian resistance in the 1930s against occupation and growing settlement compounded with Zionist insurgency, culminated in the withdrawal by the British in 1947. The subsequent wars, first establishing the state of Israel in 1948, then occupying the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan and Sinai in 1967 and finally the war of 1973, displaced much of the Palestinian population

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[1] Adobe's *Portable Document Format*
[2] Zed Books, London, 1979 ISBN-13: 978-0905762258
[3] Zed Books, London, 1994 ISBN-13: 978-1856490566

to camps in the Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Gaza, West Bank, with a significant portion also seeking refuge in other parts of the world.[4]

The Interviews

The interviews were recorded during some intense traveling in Palestine carried out between 1998 and 2000 made possible by a stipend from the Diana Tamari Sabbagh Foundation. The recordings were made with the aid of a simple, handheld analog audiotape recorder. At the time there were no plans to use the recordings as anything other than notes for later writing, so no special provisions for optimal placement of microphones or screening of ambient sound.

Even though they are of varying technical quality the recordings are very intimate, conveying much of the atmosphere of the place they were made. No editing has been done other than trimming off empty portions at the beginning and end of tapes.

The tapes were digitized very early in the project and fresh audio CD's produced to ensure that no interviews were lost.

A Digital Book

The idea of publishing *Voices* as a digital book came up in a conversation with Rosemary Sayigh in 1999 when she was asked about the recordings for *Too Many enemies*. I had just read the book which made a deep impression on me and wondered where the tapes were and that it might be a good idea to digitize them for archival with a relevant library. The recordings with the women of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps had been made at the height of the "War of the Camps" towards the end of the Lebanese civil war and as fate would have it, most of the tapes were since lost.

At the time I had been working at the American University of Beirut on digitizing the first in a series of recordings made of interviews with prominent public figures in the late 1960's.[5] On hearing about the characteristics and functionality of the project, Rosemary wondered if *Voices* might not just as well be published in the same way. Apart from the cost of including pictures in a printed book and the plain impossibility of including sound, there was always the demand for "impartiality" when publishing material on the Middle East conflict. Publishing digitally at a non-commercial site, she would have virtually complete control over her material.

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[4]The introductory chapter of the book "Introduction: Why Palestinians? Why Displacement? Why Women?" provides an in-depth insight into the displacement of those interviewed.

[5]The CAMES Oral History Project http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/cames/interviews/

A digital book written explicitly for reading on a computer would have several advantages:

- There is not real limit on quantity of material.

- Any combination of text and multimedia material can be included and cross linked at relevant points.

- All the recorded audio could be included along with color photographs, maps, charts and other relevant ancillary material.

- The book could be published in successive versions covering increasing amounts of material.

- The hypertext format allows for varying degrees of complexity, from short introductions to lengthy, in-depth material addressing the preference of a diverse readership.

- Links could be made to external sources as references.

- The sequence of linking gives almost complete control over the flow of pages.

We were also careful to consider the possible disadvantages apart from physically not being able to hold a printed paper book:

- Given the expectations of the target audience, many of whom have quite conservative perceptions of how a "book" should behave, based on their own ways of reading texts, the flat, non-sequential nature of hypertext might be confusing.

- The conservative nature of academia generally perceives the Internet to be a useful resource in cataloging scientific material, but not in publishing it.

- The global commercialization of the academic press over recent decades has relegated the peer review process to a measure of payment for academic material on the Internet, often throwing suspicion on freely available material.

- Technical limitations on individual users' computers and available bandwidth might limit access to the book and specifically the sound recordings.

- Possibility of misuse of the sound recordings was also a concern.

A digital version of a traditional paper book was never considered. With the final product nearing the sequential nature of a print book, it might well have been worthwhile considering such an approach.

0.2 Designing

As the author of the book, Rosemary's vision of how her material should be read was the single most determining factor in design of the book. With no previous experience of writing for digital media,
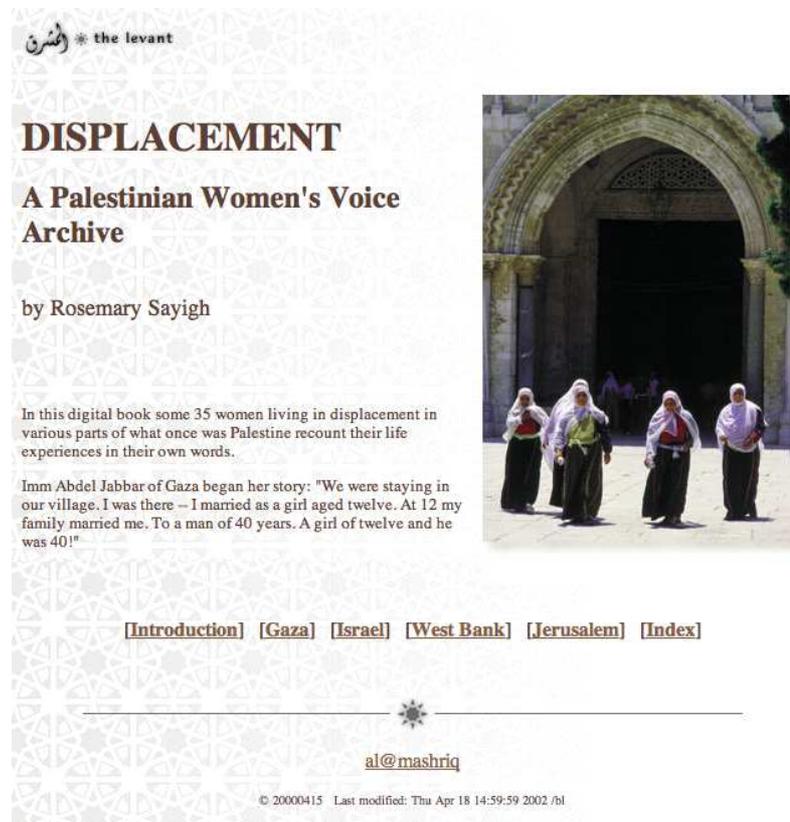
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Figure 0.1: Main page of the first version of protoype site.

we needed an example of what the book could be in order to start a meaningful dialogue about the design and assembly of the material. A series of pages were set up somewhat along the lines of other themes on the Al Mashriq[6] server as a basic illustration of the how the material and ancillary supporting information could be presented. The prototype site gave us a basis on which to discuss alternative forms of layout and presentation.(Figure 0.1) One of the first questions that needed addressing was the basic structure of the material as this would affect the functionality of the book. Of the various ways of classifying the interviews, it was decided that the most logical way would by geographically by regions: Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and Israel.

The geographic structure of the material was used for navigation both as a simple line of text at the top of each page and a simple map attached to each main page level where the region in focus was shown in filled green while the other three areas were clickable. (Figure 0.2)

The target audience would be similar to that of the previous two books,

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[6]http://almashriq.hiof.no/

Palestinians and *Too Many Enemies* which were written for academics and non-academics with a special interest in the Middle East conflict.

The book project also became the subject of two master's degree theses at Østfold University College. During 2003-2004 Hanne Lorentzen and Synne Nygaard worked on structure and multimedia aspects of "Oral History in Digital Environments" with *Voices* as case material. Later, Susanne Olsen worked on the graphic design of *Voices* as it now appears. Lorentzen and Nygaard completed a second version of a provisional site refining the geographic structure and retaining the map as navigation aid. Additional background material was added and some complex interlinking of pages was attempted. (Figure 0.3)

Rosemary now had a fairly rich site with which to work. After having decided on the main structure, there were new challenges posed by the very fluid character of the site as compared to the rigidity and restrictions of a conventional, linear book. The three most pressing issues were how to convey the interviews to a non-arabic speaking audience, what additional background material to include and what navigational form the book should take.

As our discussions progressed Rosemary became increasingly convinced that she wanted the book to navigate in a more sequential manner in order to increase the exposure of the introductory pages. What was even more important was the visual appearance and character of the book. In order to help the reader understand better the content of the interviews, we attempted to organize the flow of the book in such a manner that the reader would be exposed to the introductory and background material for each geographic district before going on to the interviews themselves.

On the basis of the first version and on-going discussions, it became increasingly clear that we had much greater leeway in designing flow, layout and graphic appearance than in normal print publishing. To be fair, it should be mentioned that as subject of student research, there were no real economic restrictions either, given that the interviews were already collected and digitized.

With respect to visual graphic appearance probably the most difficult ambition was that the book should convey an atmosphere reflecting both female gender and the violence of war. In her research for the final design, Susanne Olsen consulted with female web-designers in Norway but found that the concept was entirely foreign to them. In March of 2004 a visit to Lebanon was organized for Susanne Olsen and Synne Nygaard. Interviews with Rosemary gave them a closer understand of how she wished the book to work. They also made extended visits to the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut which gave a completely different and more realistic insight into what the interviews and displacement was about.

After visiting the camps and meeting some of the women living there, the students acquired a completely different view of the way in which

Figure 0.2: Part of the regional page for Gaza in the first version of the provisional site with the whole page inset.

the violence of war and displacement affected their daily lives. Another part of the field study was to gain some experience that might help in the graphic design of the book. We photographed extensively many of the wall posters in the camps which reflect the iconography of the various political factions vying for political control, but also include martyrs of the ongoing struggle in Palestine.

Another source of graphic design to which we referred was the collection of Palestinian political posters at the Archives and Special Collections of the Jafet Library at the American University of Beirut.[7] The collection at AUB spans from the 1960's through the 1980's. By the late 1970's posters by the PLO in particular had developed a very distinctive and focused style, with simple and clear messages conveyed in strong colors. The white, red, green and black colors of the Palestinian flag which is also used extensively in the embroidery of traditional womens dresses characterizes many of the posters and became a guide for the color scheme used in the final design of the book. (Figure 0.4 and 0.5)

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[7]This collection was digitized by the author in 1997 and is accessible at http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/

Figure 0.3: Regional page for Gaza in the second version of the site.

In a traditional printed book the emphasis is on text. Unless the book is a photographic report or relies heavily on pictures, these are included only as far as economy will allow. The use of accompanying sound has almost exclusively been limited to language teaching aids and the like. In our case we could use pictures freely only limited by availability and sound, in the form of the interviews, was to be the main content, not an instructional supplement.

The chosen approach was therefore to equate the collections of interviews and the background material of each geographic region. From the list of interviews each subject is given her own page with one or more links to the audio, Rosemary's notes around the interview and an English translation of the opening lines of the interview.

Photographic material came from many sources. For those of the subjects that had agreed to be photographs and have their pictures published, Rosemary's own pictures taken at the time of the interviews were preferred. In cases where the subjects wished not to be shown, anonymized photographic material related to the area or themes discussed was chosen from a variety of sources. The final choice of pictures was always Rosemary's own.

The graphic design of the main sections of the book relied strongly on absolute positioning of pictures and text. Having decided that a book that contained so much sound should be easily accessible to the visually impaired pure bit-maps with client side image maps were not an
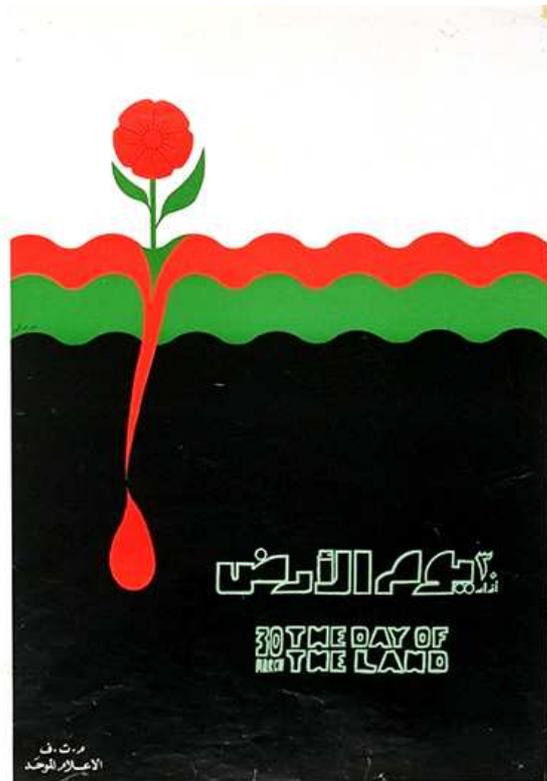
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Figure 0.4: PLO poster commemorating "Land Day". (Courtesy of AUB Libraries)

option. The visually impaired should have the full flexibility of being able to vary the size of text in the way HTML was originally meant to work. The text on the pages should be readable in a reasonably efficient manner by sound conversion software without extraneous material. The test was always readability with the *Lynx* web-browser.

0.3 Making

In keeping with the general policy practiced on the Al Mashriq site it was decided at the outset that the book would be made with static HTML pages. As the site has been created and is maintained by only one person it is simply not feasible to have large amounts of dynamic material. The maintenance of changing software versions over time and complex restructuring that follows from upgrading of both machine and programs is beyond the scope of one person considering the "unlimited" lifespan projected for the site.

The recordings were digitized by playing the analog audio tapes directly into an audio recording program in the AIF format and then

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converted to MP3 with Lame.[8] The files are linked with the "m3u" uniform resource locator hinting them for streaming with the hypertext transfer protocol. The choice of protocol was mainly for reasons of platform independence. Although this form of transfer does not allow for spooling in the audio before the entire audio file is downloaded, it was felt that none of the interviews were so long that the necessary waiting time would be a serious impediment when balanced against platform independence.

One really practical problem was physically transporting the tapes to Norway for digitizing. Middle Eastern countries are notorious for their suspicion of private media recordings being sent in the post. For fear that the recordings be delayed, damaged or even confiscated, the tapes were transported privately.

Once the audio and photographic material was digitized, the remaining implementation was fairly straight forward. All HTML-code was handwritten for efficiency of transport and rendering. After repeated testing in various browsers on a variety of platforms, the use of CSS was kept to a bare minimum in order to ensure as consistent and accurate browser rendering as possible. Adjustments of the placement of text and pictures were made in response to feedback from Rosemary as her writing progressed and the various pages completed.

The internal structure of the site remained the same throughout the project once the geographic division of the book was decided. To facilitate moving audio between the progressive versions of the book, all m3u-files were kept together with the collections of audio interviews placed in separate directories for each geographic region. Simple UNIX scripts were developed to move the audio material (which took most space) between versions. A *robots.txt* file to prevent search indexing and simple server access control with username and password was implemented during the development phase.

As almost all of the interviews are spoken in Arabic and best understood by those familiar with the colloquial Arabic of Palestine. While there could be expected a sizeable expatriate audience of Palestinians and academics with a knowledge of the language, we also felt it important that the material should be formed so that it would be as easily available to readers in the Middle East as elsewhere. Internet connectivity is widely available in Middle East countries, but bandwidth is often severely restricted with slow dial-up connections as the norm. Using a dial-up connection in Beirut, Rosemary became our primary test user, forcing us to restrict graphics to the highest tolerable levels of compression in order to save bandwidth. With the low quality of the original sound recordings there was not much that could be done to reduce audio file sizes. Further reduction in bitrates would only have meant further deterioration in legibility.

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[8]http://lame.sourceforge.net/

Figure 0.5: The main page of the final "short" version of *Voices*

0.4 Publishing

As compiling all the necessary background information on the four geographic regions progressed somewhat slowly it was decided in late 2006 that a "short" version of the book should be published first which could grow as the supplementary material was completed. This version contains an explanatory introduction by Rosemary Sayigh, lists of speakers with recordings and notes on the interviews. It does not however, contain background material to the geographic regions. (Figure 0.5)

The site is covered by the *Creative Commons* "Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5" license.[9]

Voices was launched on June 16, 2007 with the announcement in figure 0.6.

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[9]http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/legalcode

Figure 0.6: Announcement for launching of *Voices*

Since then Rosemary has received various comments on the book, but
none as yet from readers who have perused the whole site. One of
the more interesting reactions has been an offer to translate all the
interviews in their entirety.

By the end of the first month after publishing (June 16 - July 14) the
book had received 24,946 hits from 2029 visitors.

0.5   Conclusion

The greatest failing of the project has been the great length of time that
has passed from inception to publishing. Apart from the time taken by
the natural sequence and inevitable delays in handling greater parts
of the work as student projects, a great deal of time was spent tran-
scribing the interviews in Beirut, preparing background material and
collecting pictures from other sources. The absence of a commitment
to publish according to a set schedule and the general freedom of a
non-commercial publishing environment must also take a significant
part of the blame.

Apart from the fact that the voices are there to be heard in their in-
terview situations, accompanied by a wealth of illustrative material,
something that otherwise would have impossible in print, the suc-

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320 cess of the book can only be measured by readers' reactions over time. However, the very early and serious offer of transcribing the interviews is a good measure of the importance attributed by its early readership.

Afterword

325 I would like to thank all who have collaborated and contributed to making the project possible, particularly four students: Beirut Abou-Hodeib for transcribing the opening lines of the Arabic language interviews, Hanne Lorentzen and Synne Nygaard who created the second prototype which compiled the bulk of the material and Susanne Olsen
330 for the final graphic design. Most of all I am grateful to Rosemary Sayigh for her unwavering confidence in the wisdom of publishing her work as a digital book made freely available to anyone who should care to share in the experience of displacement.

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