

# On “Archiving Identity”

Ely Dagher

2008

Every day we find ourselves confronted with perpetuating our identity and proliferating its aspects. We flaunt it whenever we have the chance to, and maybe for we are pressured to do so. As Amin Maalouf states, one's identity is partially established when born, but it is also in constant change and development throughout one's life (Maalouf, 2000, p. 3). It is not one but a multitude of elements that constitute this identity. Individual, collective, and national identities often have nothing of a stable status for they keep evolving and altering through time.

Unfortunately, that is not how identities are portrayed or projected. *Ethnic classification*, for example, turns into a necessity, labelling and categorizing people under one title, a phenomenon Derrida would refer to as *archive fever*. It is yet another way of keeping an identification archive, of organising and classifying the global population under certain labels, be they linguistic, cultural, territorial or colour based; Order is no longer assured by these limits. They 'have been shaken, by an earthquake from which no classificational concept and no implementation of the archive can be sheltered' (Derrida, 1996, p. 6). People commit crimes in the name of their identity, or, in other words, in the name of their category. Violence is often committed when there is a feeling of threat towards that specific identity<sup>1</sup>. The problem here lies in the misconception of, and our relation to, an identity and the sources of its power and authorization. Instead of accepting the multitude of facets identity has to offer it is often claimed that identity is 'a kind of fundamental truth, an essence,' (Maalouf, 2000, p. 4) something that exists deep down inside each and every one of us.

The reasons why we reject this multitude of elements and choose to limit ourselves to one and only one of these elements as a title for what our identity *is*, are numerous. How do we come to choose? How is this concept of identity proliferated and implemented amongst people and nations, through the authorizing function of the archive? What happens to the authenticity of identity and its archive then? Can it be sheltered from the constructive nature of the archive, and memory, which constitutes the basis of its structure? How is that reconstruction considered a way of communication towards the present, rather than to *remember* the past? Is there a unifying force within the archive? Moreover, can identity be considered a unifying force through the use of that archive?

---

<sup>1</sup> Maalouf (2000) states that whichever part of an individual's identity that is threatened, invades the person's whole identity. Once that person holds that identity as his one and only, whoever identifies with it then considers any crimes committed for the sake of protecting it legitimate. He then adds that this identity may alter and get replaced with another one just as fanatically .

## Who constructs whose identity?

'My pictures are a visual diary of my life, the diary I let people read' (Coulthard & Goldin, 1995). That is what we hear right after we read the title *I'll be your mirror*, in a TV documentary on Nan Goldin's life. She then continues: 'I always wanted to leave a record of my life that no one can revise'. The documentary itself is co-directed by Nan Goldin. Throughout her life, she used her photographic images to keep her memories alive, or so she thought, and to illustrate and construct her own projected identity. *I'll be your mirror* is not so different; for she wanted again to leave a record of her life that 'no one can revise', one that only she can authorize through her own archive. Nan Goldin constructs her own identity; her mirror. She projects it and accepts it as her own, which is not always the case of a given identity.

One such example would be seen in Germany. The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the German east and west unification 'had a paradoxical effect on Germans, instilling in them a euphoric sense of national pride, but also triggering a deep crisis about what precisely it is that one ought to be proud of' (Gemünden, 1999, p. 120). A state of confusion was created, for unified German identity was missing. For Long West and East had gone in different directions. In the new Germany 'questions such as who is German? What is German? And where is Germany, Have suddenly become the subject of heated debate' (Gemünden, 1999, p. 120). There was no clear authorizing factor within this unification. Suddenly there was a concept of a unified national identity but no one knew what identity it actually unified. Different German communities were simultaneously facing this identity concept that was blank and for them to fill up. Unlike Nan Goldin, the unified Germans did not know what they were or at least what they were supposed to be. The unification followed post-war and anti-nationalist conditions, in which the German culture's link to fascism led to its rejection and replacement with an Americanized one. There was no clear implementing body or even knowledge of what to implement at the moment of unification. Being able to implement your own identity is not always as self-evident as in Nan Goldin's case, for its subject may contain elements that might reject it. The construction or reconstruction of identity does not always happen so voluntary, for identity is not always authorized by the totality of the body on which it is implemented.

This leads me to the Lebanese collective identity; an issue that I have struggled with for as long as I remember and only recently started to understand. Ever since the end of the First World War many new nation-states were formed. Unlike some Central and Eastern European states, where nationalist thinking and

the idea of separate identity were already established<sup>2</sup>, the Arab communities within the once existing Ottoman Empire had little or no national consciousness. Instead, they were connected amongst each other through long-established loyalties of other sorts.

After long negotiations and shuffling about the ex-Ottoman empire, the Allies redrew the regional map and divided the Empire into five new, and soon to be independent, nation-states. These new countries were all created solely by the Allies, without consulting the people within them, except for Lebanon. The Lebanese Christian community, consisting of mainly Maronites inhabiting a semi-independent region within the Ottoman Empire, Mount Lebanon, was lobbying for the borders to be redrawn by the Allies. They demanded the annexation of neighbouring coastal cities and the eastern valley of the Bekaa to Mount Lebanon, for they considered that they had a common historical character that differed from that of the surrounding territories (Salibi, 1993, p. 24). The new Lebanese border thus came into existence in coaction with these Christian communities. This new *Greater Lebanon's* majority was no longer composed of Christians but now contained as much, if not more, Muslims. However, in this new country the Maronites remained in control. They promoted the Lebanese identity, Lebanism, instead of a national Arab one, for they considered themselves closer to the Western world. With their strong Phoenician and Mediterranean heritage, the only important thing they considered to have in common with the Arabs was their language. The French supported that idea, ignoring the fact that not everyone in the new Lebanon agreed with this. The French mandate helped promoting Lebanism and left twenty-three years later the newly independent country. There was a strong opposition against this newly formed country for it was seen as treason against the Arab unity. The newly formed neighbouring Arab states had dreams of a larger Arab nation. Lebanism strongly opposed this Arabism coming from both inside and outside the country. Nan Goldin implemented her own identity on herself and her archive. In the case of the Lebanese collective identity, the Maronite and French authorities implemented their own vision of that identity on more people who, in fact, did not identify with it and rejected it.

## **The new, past infrastructure.**

This new Lebanese identity was supposed to be promoted and accepted by all the people living within the new borders of the country. Creating a new identity in this case implied creating a new record of history to

---

<sup>2</sup> The end of the First World War led to the end of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman Empires. Their territories were divided into the German, Austrian and Hungarian republics alongside with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that appeared later with the Bolshevik revolution (Salibi, 1993).

support it; a new archival document of what exactly being Lebanese is constituted of. Just like in unified Germany where it was time for 'taking stock of German history at the threshold of a new beginning... the fight over Germany's future is fought across its past' (Gemünden, 1999, p. 120). Suddenly East and West were united, creating a sort of Ground Zero; a new starting point; a new identity for the unified nation. It was time to rewrite history then and there by both sides, which is not the case for Lebanon; there never was a ground zero. I believe that identity is mainly proliferated through the use and reading of the archive. Its construction is based on collective memory, which then becomes the target of any power aspiring to influence that identity. Bardenstein states that the construction of collective memory is inextricably linked to the construction of collective identity in the present (1999, p. 148). She supports her argument by referring to Halbwachs (1980, p. 86) who illustrates it as such: 'every group develops the memory of its own past that highlights its unique identity vis-à-vis other groups. These reconstructed images provide the group with an account of its origin and development and thus allow it to recognize itself through time'.

Nan Goldin gathered her archival body of work, her images, and managed it in a precise way to reconstruct, scheme, and project her own identity. In Israel, a massive state-sponsored forestation campaign has been going on ever since the inception of Israel to bring back Israel's claims of former glory. Neglecting the fact that the planted species are not native species of the region but of northern Europe, The several hundred million trees planted are one of many aspects of 'the redefinition of Jewish collective identity as a national one now bound to a specific geographical location, and of the Zionist reperiodization of Jewish collective memory as a cycle of ancient Jewish presence in the holy land/exile/return' (Bardenstein, 1999, p. 148). In the former West-Berlin of the now unified Germany, many of those who fully lived the Westernization of Western-Germany now rejected it and wanted to go back to what was 'authentically German': German language, art, literature, images. Here begins the excavation for the authentic German archive, of a time when all Germans could identify with each other. This shift in vision can be seen very clearly in Wim Wenders' movies and essays from the pre- and post-unification periods. He calls for the return to the *Kulturation*<sup>3</sup>. Wim Wenders' and other German intellectuals' new vision could be identified with the description given by Huyssen: a 'contested reorganization of cultural capital and realignment of national memory' (1995, cited in Gemünden, 1999, p. 123). Unfortunately, this does not happen without any repercussions. Gemünden, when talking about Wenders, states that 'it becomes obvious, however, that only by creating an outside enemy - American popular culture - can he sustain his search for an inside remedy' (1999, p. 127). This supports Amin Maalouf's argument that 'the identity a person lays claim to often is

---

<sup>3</sup> *Kulturation* is a notion dating back to eighteenth century and which stands for an idea of a nation with one shared culture; literature, art, philosophy, music and so forth. Instead of nationhood, it represents a sense of authentic regrouping cultural identity that is outside of history (Gemünden, 1999).

based, in reverse, on that of his enemy' (2000, p. 13). An enemy, which Wenders and others created in opposition to their own concept of *Kulturation*, which is in itself problematic considering that the homogeneity it claims actually never existed. Going back to the newly formed Lebanon, the French mandating authority with the help of the Christian Maronite ones, overlooked Turkish and Arab heritage when proceeding with their archaeological excavations.

They hailed the Phoenician, Roman and Crusaders' ruins, and placed them in a newly established archaeological "National Museum" in Beirut. Not only Arab, Turkish, and other culture's traces were ignored, but also the contemporary history of Lebanon and its capital were ignored in order to leave space for the appropriation and reconstruction of Beirut<sup>4</sup>. By promoting the Christian, *Phoenician*, westernized identity as the Lebanese one, this involuntarily, but directly, strengthened other's Arab identity by placing it in a position of threat. That widened the gap between the people and opened way for further conflict in the future; for every action has a counter reaction. Lebanon's archaeological/historical archive did not follow a chronological narrative in the construction of its history. Instead, it was based on chronological limitations of ideological borders and colonial prejudice.

Examining those cases puts together a clearer idea of how identity is communicated and authorized through the archive and its authorizing body when conveying from one institution to another. That is the passage from the private to the public, the house to the museum, where information is classified under the title of archive by a virtue of topo-nomological privilege (Derrida, 1996, p. 3). During this transfer information might get lost, misplaced, reorganized, inserted etc... How then do we perceive this authorizing function of the archive within the production of identity? The topo-nomological hypothesis of what is Lebanese identity, during the French mandate, was defined by a questionable typographic impression of its archaeological and historical archive.

As suggested by Derrida in his preamble, the meaning of impression does not stop at the typographic "that of inscription". He questions our impression of the archival concept itself by referring to it as not one but a series of inconstant impressions (1996, p. 26-28). He continues questioning a third meaning: the impression left by the authorizing body on its own archive, and the way that archive is perceived through the impression left by its authorizing body on the addressees. He does that when, again, referring to psychoanalysis and including within the typographical aspect of impression the unconscious repression and suppression; that which affects the affect and Freud's impression on the history of psychoanalysis and the history of history

---

<sup>4</sup> Beirut was then to be rebuilt and modernized by the French, in a project entitled "Beirut in five years". A new Downtown district was to be constructed, covering the historical centre of the city with surviving eighteenth and nineteenth century Arab and Mediterranean urban developments (Davie, 1997).

itself; what he calls, *Freudian impression* (1996, p, 30). Just as Derrida questions Freud's authorizing role on his own psychoanalytical archive, we must question the author and his impression, in all the examples cited in the previous section. One might easily question the legitimacy of those archival forms based on the impression left by their authorizing body. Certain archaeological sites in 'mandated Lebanon' were ignored for they promoted the Arab, Turkish and other minorities' cultures within Lebanon's heritage which at the time, for the French and Christians, seemed to be an intermediate and primitive stage of Lebanese history and needed no further proliferation. Lebanon was then decreed of Phoenician origin with Syria as an Aramaic neighbour. Manipulating the archive was mainly to legitimize the French occupation as the saviour; that is to rebuild on one hand, and turn all anti-occupation nationalist claims illegitimate.

## Who gets the archival sceptre?

As shown in the cited examples in this essay, 'there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation'(Derrida, 1995, p. 4). In order for Nan Goldin to have complete power and control over her identity in her autobiographical film *I'll be your mirror*, she needed complete control over her own archive: 'Other people have their versions of my stories but I always wanted to leave a record of my life that no one can revise' (Coulthard & Goldin, 1995). Because Nan Goldin knows that whoever controls her archive controls the reconstruction of her present memory and identity, she wanted to make her own version of it. She reconstructs her identity, by using her photographic and video archive of her life within a film documentary; a new impression, a new archive. This new impression leaves little or no room for reinterpretation of what and who Nan Goldin is, just as she intended it to be. One might argue that this film itself is a questionable document in terms of its authenticity considering the repression and suppression that might have occurred at the moment of consignment<sup>5</sup>. During the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990, which directly involved Syria and Israel, and other forces indirectly, massacres took place and cities were destroyed. Until today, there is no official record of Lebanese history ever since the early 1970's. In school history textbooks, which are often seen as a guide for shaping national identity, history comes to a halt long before 1970's. 'You get this feeling they think that if

---

<sup>5</sup> By consignment Derrida does not only mean, in the ordinary sense, the act of assigning residence (to deposit), but also the act of *consigning* through *gathering together signs to create one new entity*. It is then not only the traditional *consignato*, the written proof, but also what all *consignato* begins by presupposing. This power of *consignation* is paired with the archontic function within an archive(Derrida, 1996)

history is going to create a problem, then we can just forget it ever happened', says the former director of the education centre for research and development (Fattah, 2007).

Derrida states that the archive associated with the death drive that occurs at the moment of consignation always works against itself. The archive itself does not occur without consignation in an external place that assures possibilities of re-impression, repetition, reproduction or memorization. This by itself, according to Freud, exposes the death drive that leads to the destruction and 'the introduction of, forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the monument' (Derrida, 1995, p. 12). Foucault claims that 'in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*' (1972, p. 8). One reason for which there is no archive of the war history in Lebanon might be that according to Derrida, there is no archive without an outside, a place of certain exteriority. The Lebanese war has not officially ended for there were neither losers nor winners. Hence, there is no power to be in charge of the destruction and deconstruction of the memory in order to reconstruct it. I would also like to state that the several versions of the Lebanese history that have been written were all banned for offending certain communities. There is not one single authorizing factor, one single power, but a multitude of them. It is not time for its destruction yet. The memory of the war cannot go into the archive, into the *monument* for it has not yet been settled. In a recent TV documentary about the Lebanese civil war, the socialist progressive party leader Walid Jumblat asks, 'what is Lebanon's identity? Is it Arab, Western, Christian, Muslim or Israeli? That is the strategic question. That is the question that has not been settled until today' (Al-Issaewi, 2001). Instead of accepting the fact that Lebanon's collective national identity, any identity, is constructed out of different elements and impressions, there is always a search for the "true" and "sole" identity to be implemented. In this case the identity has not yet been decided on by the –non-existing- real authorizing power. As long as the identity is not defined, the archive that defines it and authorizes it cannot be recorded.

## **The archive as post-memory?**

Derrida refers to the moment of consignation, or the instant of archivization, as a certain hypomnesic and prosthetic experience of the technical substrate and not a so-called live or spontaneous memory (1996, p. 25). The archive and the impression that it is, is not only a reconstruction of the deconstructed memory. Through its technical structure it is also a determining factor of the *archivabile* content in its coming into existence and its relationship to the future. I would like to emphasize on the term reconstruction here for it contains a reference to the interpretation formed by piecing together chosen bits of the deconstructed body

under certain rules of categorization, thus creating a new entity that is now independent from the memory and history; one that replaces them. 'The archivization produces as much as it records the event' (Derrida, 1996, p. 17). This entity is no longer an object of the past but one that represents it in a new form that projects itself in the present and not in the past. In the example of the museum during the French mandate, and later the Lebanese history textbooks, the archive and the concept of the archive are forms of communication, or justification, of the present rather than the past. The new archive is directed towards communicating a present concept, like that of identity. A unified German identity was being forged in essays written by post-wall German intellectuals<sup>6</sup>, which claimed an archive of past homogeneity amongst Germans that actually never existed. It was one of fictional construct; a construction aimed at erasing the outcomes of Western integration and the democracy of the previous forty years. The archive uses the past as a foundation, but fully separates itself at the moment of consignation. When Nan Goldin took pictures of her friends, lovers, and family, she thought it would allow her to keep them forever: 'I used to think that I could never lose anyone if I photograph them enough. In fact, my pictures show me how much I have lost'(Coulthard & Goldin, 1995). Instead of her pictures being objects of the past, objects of mnemonic functions, her pictures take on a new form that shows something different from what the experience was like at the moment of consignation. *I'll be your mirror* ends with the dramatic song *All by myself* playing over photographs of Goldin, for her archive of images communicates a sense of present loss instead of a sense of past life.

## **Concluding existential questions on identity.**

According to Derrida, the archive is considered a unifying force through its archontic<sup>7</sup> power that is paired with the power of consignation. He states that the theory and concept of the archive gathers together sings to coordinate a single corpus: one of synchrony in which all elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration (1996, p. 3). This means that an archive with any sign of heterogeneity or disassociation within its elements, leads to some questioning; the questioning of its archontic principle, the legitimacy that depends on it and its authority. Thus threatening the foundation of the concept of an archive and its institutional implementation, which is the theory of both the law and the right which authorizes it (Derrida,

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Gemünden's analysis of Wim Wenders' speech and essays, he states that post-wall Wenders starts by rewriting the memories that constructed his own identity according to events that took place long after he had these experiences (1999, p. 125). Wenders blames the German identity vacuum for the lack of genuine German culture, and the fact that identity is being imported from America. He makes a call to find the old genuine German cultural identity.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida defines the archontic power as one that represents the place and the law. The archive takes place in a house arrest, one that has passed from the private to the public (1996).

1996, p. 4). In the examples cited in this essay all classification limits, analogies, titles, and borders are neither constant nor secure. Disassociations and heterogeneity arose making the archive and its archontic stature questionable and illegitimate in its institutional and unification implementing factor that is “identity”. A given identity can no longer be considered as a single legitimate unifying force when its basis is a physical archive, one that could itself be based on that identity to start with, as is the case for the Lebanese history textbooks. Where does authenticity stand in the concept of identity and its classification when it is based on archival documents specifically recorded to communicate that specific identity?

It gets even more problematic when considering that the concept of collective identity is an archival concept by itself. Having stated that, how can we conceive identity as a kind of essence or a fundamental truth, or even a group of elements gathered objectively deep within us when identity itself is an authorized archival form of groups based on authorized sub-archival ones? How trivial does the concept of identity become, even the individual one, when it loses its most primary function?

Considering my argumentation on the concept of identity as a concept of archivization and the analogy between them, the theory of identity can no longer be considered as it is in its present state. A new theory of identity emerges when replacing the theory of “the archive” by that of “identity” in a previously quoted argument by Derrida: ‘The very theory and science of ‘identity ‘must include the theory of both the law which begins by inscribing itself there and of the right which authorizes it’ (Derrida, 1996, p. 4). Identity is often used as entrapment and an excuse for full political power over that which identifies with it. If that offered theory of identity is to be considered within its science, identity will be viewed differently. Committing “defensive” crime in the name of your identity would no longer be legitimate. What is really at stake here is that problems resulting from identity issues in general might not be overcome unless the general misconception around identity and the theory of identity are to be revised and brought to the level at which Derrida conceives the concept and theory of the archive.

## References

- Bardenstein, C.B., 1999. Trees, Forests, and the Shaping of Palestinian and Israeli Collective Memory. In M. Bal, J. Crewe, I. Spitzer, eds. 1999. *Acts of memory. Cultural recall in the present*. Hanover & London: University press of New England. pp. 148-168.
- Davie, M., 1997. *Le Patrimoine Architectural Et Urbain au Liban: Pour qui, pourquoi, comment faire? Enjeux des identités dans la genèse du patrimoine libanais*. [Online] Al Mashriq. Available at: <http://almashriq.hiof.no/lebanon/900/902/MAY-Davie/patrimoine.html>, [accessed 11 November 2008].
- Derrida, J., 1995. *Archive Fever*. Translated from French by Eric Prenowitz, 1996. Chicago (IL): the University of Chicago Press.
- Fattah, H. M., 2007. Lebanon's history textbooks sidestep its civil war. *International Herald Tribune*, [internet] 10 January. Available at: <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/01/10/news/beirut.php?page=1>, [accessed 28 November 2008].
- Foucault, M., 1972. *The Archeology of knowledge and the discourse of language*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gemünden, G., 1999. Nostalgia for the nation: Intellectuals and national identity in unified Germany. In M. Bal, J. Crewe, I. Spitzer, eds. 1999. *Acts of memory. Cultural recall in the present*. Hanover & London: University press of New England. pp. 120-133.
- I'll be your mirror*, 1995. [TV Documentary] Directed by Edmund Coulthard & Nan Goldin. London: Blast! Films for BBC-TV.
- Maalouf, A., 1998. *On Identity*. Translated from French by Barbara Bray, 2000. London: the Harvill Press.
- Salibi, K., 1993. *A House of Many Mansions – The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. London: I.B. Tauris & co Ltd.
- The War of Lebanon*, 2001. [TV Documentary] Directed by Omar Al-Issaewi. Qatar: Al Jazeera Satellite Channel.

