The SAGES First Seminar Essay Awards

2015-2016
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The SAGES First Seminar Essay Awards highlight the best student writing produced in SAGES First Seminars each year.

The essays included in this booklet were selected from those nominated by SAGES faculty for this award in fall 2015.

April 15, 2016
Both Aya and Amalia were students in FSNA 161, Making Sense of Place, in which they were asked to consider how places become imbued with certain meanings, and how these meanings change over time. They and their classmates wrote an essay examining an everyday object, and a second essay critically analyzing a place. For the third prompt—represented by Aya and Amalia’s responses here—students were asked to write an argument on any topic, theme, or debate from our class by focusing concretely on objects, places, or texts.

“My Life as a Palestinian Refugee from Lebanon”
Aya Bahij
Written for FSNA 161, “Making Sense of Place”; Eric Chilton, English (Seminar Leader)

Instructor’s Nomination: Aya’s essay evolved over many drafts, and through her process she learned how to convey her own experience as evidence that is powerful and compelling for readers. Whether in a scene of a tense visit to a border, or in her evocative description of seemingly mundane objects—a key, a scarf, a jar of sand—Aya shows us how, for a refugee, the concept of home can be complicated.

“Simulation and Place”
Amalia Donastorg
Written for FSNA 161, “Making Sense of Place”; Eric Chilton, English (Seminar Leader)

Instructor’s Nomination: Amalia’s exploration of dystopian fictions and real places develops in a subtle, engaging fashion. Her writing is fluent and clear: like listening to a friend. But as we trace the implications of her argument, we realize how profound the consequences. How is it that simulations can be so seductive? Amalia leads us expertly to a conclusion that answers some questions, and invites us to ask more.
A Glimpse of My Life as a Palestinian Refugee from Lebanon

I will never forget where I was at 12:57 pm on May 15th, 2010. My scout group was participating in a field trip from our refugee camp to our homeland. The excited passengers pressed their faces against the windows. Everyone was waiting for that magical moment. The moment that was supposed to make the seven hour drive worth it. The bus took a right turn and parked next to the hundreds of other busses already there. My friends and I put on our backpacks and got ready to leave the bus. We were about to embark on one of the most exciting experiences we would ever have in our lives. Some of us were here for the first time. Others were returning for the first time in sixty one years. Despite the different ages and different stories, this time we were all here for the same reason. We were all going on a peaceful field trip to the southern border of Lebanon. We would have to climb a mountain to get a peek at our homeland. We would still be behind a fence separating the border of Lebanon and Palestine. The date is significant because it was the 61st anniversary of the Palestinian crisis. We started walking around taking lots of pictures, stopping every once in a while imagining how our lives would have been different if the Palestinian Israeli war had never happened. We were asking ourselves what it would feel like to look at the country we belonged to, even though we had never set foot in it.

The sky was bright blue, not a single cloud was disturbing the beauty of the scene. The atmosphere however was mixed with different thoughts and feelings. My brain was like a jungle at that point. I can barely see it. I can barely see the paradise that I’ve been deprived of. I can barely see the country I belong to, the place where I would be allowed to call home and not get treated as a second class citizen. There, I would have all my human rights. I would be able to vote on who governs my country and speaks in my name. I would be able to become a journalist, a lawyer or even a president and get paid equal to my colleagues. I would have a nationality, and be like everyone else. I walked around and looked at the other refugees’ faces. Their faces were full of sadness. An old lady sitting in a wheelchair
next to me alternated between sobbing and retelling the flashbacks of how she was forced out of her house as a child. She said she’d rather die on the Palestinian ground than live an extra day anywhere else. Those words were the best interpretation of the look on most of the visitors’ faces. A few minutes later I saw a crowd coming towards me yelling “Go back to your busses! The Israeli army is shooting on us.” At that moment, I recalled the stories that my kindergarten teacher told me about the brave soldiers who were killed by the Israelis. I didn’t want to die! I was too young for this. The bright blue sky turned grey. The place was full with screams and cries for help. I tried to run back to my bus but I didn’t know where to go; I didn’t know where my bus was. I tried to call my parents who were still at home in the refugee camp but my phone was dead. I was terrified and so was everybody else in that place. I looked at my watch and it was just 12:57 pm. Despite the warnings to return to our busses some people were still running towards the border. Their thoughts were “if I’m going to die I’d rather die in my homeland.” Some people took the risk of putting their life in danger and crossing the border just to grab a handful of sand; something that seemed absurd but I understood. As a child, I saw my grandmother receiving gifts such as jars of sand from our relatives in Palestine. I did not understand why someone would give a sand jar as a gift so I asked my grandmother about it. She simply answered “this sand is from our homeland, and everything from home is priceless.” To be honest, I did not understand what she meant but as I grew up I began to understand those words. “Everything from our homeland is priceless.”

One day, when I was much younger, my father showed my brother and me things that my grandfather brought with him when he was forced out of Palestine. There were some old pictures, lanterns, keys and old clothes that my grandfather's family brought with them. I saw my grandfather’s black and white Palestinian scarf and recognized it as the Kufiyah a scarf that almost everyone in the camp wore. I asked my dad if I could have it but he hesitated. He told me that this is one of the items that meant the most to my grandfather. This was the scarf that he used to wear when he helped his father in the farm. It’s also the
same scarf he was wearing while he fled from Palestine to Lebanon. In addition to being a universal Palestinian symbol of resistance to the oppression that the Palestinians were going through, this scarf had a huge sentimental value for my grandfather. It’s the one thing that witnessed his struggles and was with him through everything. This scarf held the same meaning for everyone in the camp. Every scarf held a story and despite the fashion world’s attempt to change its colors to make it just a piece of clothing, the Palestinian refugees in my camp did not shift from wearing the traditional black and white scarf. Similarly, my high school teachers tried to ban wearing the colored Palestinian scarves saying that that the traditional scarf is a symbol for resistance not a fashion statement. The refugees strongly expressed their attachment to the things they carried with them on the journey from Palestine to Lebanon.

Still to this day, my grandmother takes her little purse with her whenever she leaves her house. This purse usually has some money, Strepsils (medicated throat lozenges), my grandmother’s ID, and the one thing that never leaves this purse; the old keys to her family home in Palestine. My grandmother was nine years old when she immigrated to Lebanon with her family. No one in our family has returned to that house. The Israeli military have probably destroyed it and built a settlement for the new Israeli citizens there since the whole area is now considered
a part of the state of Israel. Despite the fact that this key has become a useless rusty piece of metal my grandmother is more attached to it than to any other item she owns. Similar to the sand and the scarf, the key stopped being just a piece of metal. For her and people like her it has become the embodiment of being able to return home.

Most people view their homes as a safe shelter. Homes are the places where we can relax and act the way we want. They’re where families gather, babies take their first steps, and memories are created. When you spend long periods away from your house, you hold on to memories that make you feel connected to it, to your safe shelter. For us, the Palestinian refugees, these memories turned into dreams. The prohibition from returning or even visiting our homeland made us even more emotionally attached to it. Our attachment to our homeland is reflected in the first generation refugees’ attachment to their house keys. Despite the fact that their houses were destroyed and that their rusty keys are now useless, they did not give up their hope. Holding on to these keys represents holding on to their houses, origins, traditions, and their right to return home. These keys represent our heritage. Even though the Palestinian refugees have been in Lebanon for the past 67 years, essentially three generations, the Lebanese government still refuses to naturalize us or give us Lebanese citizenship. My generation and my father’s generation were born in Lebanon but are still considered to be refugees. As a result, we’re deprived of many of our basic
human rights like free access to education and health services in Lebanon. This discrimination built a barrier between the Palestinians and the Lebanese citizens. This barrier prevented many of the Palestinians from integrating with society and made them even more determined to return to their country.

My mother is Lebanese and my father is Palestinian. I grew up in Baddawi camp living just like any other Palestinian refugee. On school breaks and vacation I would leave the camp to visit my mother’s family in Beirut, the capital, which is about two hours away. I always saw the difference between both worlds, the difference between the life of the Palestinian refugees in the camp and the life of the Lebanese citizens in their own country. The Lebanese people often look at the Palestinians as a source of anarchy and chaos in Lebanon. Many of them tend to blame the Palestinians for the presence of terrorist organizations in Lebanon. The disdain is mutual on both sides. The Palestinian refugees in the camp view the Lebanese natives as arrogant privileged individuals who won’t allow the Palestinians to have a normal life. In addition to the maltreatment that we receive for being born as refugees in Lebanon, we’re forced to give up on many of our dreams and are forced to plan our life based on the restrictions that the Lebanese limit us to. A few years ago there were 72 professions in Lebanon that would not employ Palestinian refugees. Even though the Lebanese law decreased this number to almost 20 professions as requested by the United Nations, the Palestinian refugees are still practically not allowed to work in all 72 professions.

As a child, I wasn’t allowed to dream about what I wanted to be when I grew up. My first grade teacher tried to explain why we are not allowed to become doctors, lawyers, dentists, journalists etc. However, she always ended up in tears saying that one day we are going to go back to Palestine and be able to dream freely about our futures and hopes. I didn’t understand how this would affect my life until last year. I was consulting my family about which university to apply to and which major to choose. Attending the United World College in Norway opened up so many scholarship opportunities for me. My father constantly encouraged me to follow my dreams and
not think about going back to Lebanon. My brother, who is a year younger than me, was still living at home in the refugee camp and was applying to colleges at the same time as me. For him, it wasn’t as exciting as it was for me. He had to limit himself to a degree that will enable him to be employed in a position that refugees can hold and one that will support a family. My brother was lucky enough that the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are able to find jobs as computer engineers; the major he’s passionate about the most. However, many of my friends had to give up their dreams of becoming lawyers or journalists and study business as a major because they don’t want to spend a lot of money to receive a degree they are passionate about but can’t gain employment in. Many of my older friends ended up graduating from college with math, nursing, engineering and even medical degrees and are sitting home unemployed. Despite the youth’s continuous attempts to improve their financial and social situation, their life is still a struggle. It is frustrating to feel that you’re always going to be stuck in the restrictions of being a refugee no matter how much you work on improving your future. This feeling started with my grandparents’ generation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and was passed down to my generation due to the harsh circumstances and discrimination that we go through every day.

The life of a Palestinian refugee is complicated. It is hard for refugees to move forward when as a people we want to go back. The symbols of our heritage: house keys, scarves and jars of sands are double edged swords. They hold our hopes and dreams to return to our homeland, our roots, but they also hold us back from moving on and having a normal life. My life will always have trials, for example, in 2005 the International Civil Aviation Organization announced that all passports need to be machine readable by November 25, 2015. They gave countries 10 years to upgrade their passports. Even though my passport was recently issued, 2013, it is not machine readable. I found out about this restriction, via email in early November. I was heartbroken to find out that I might not be able to return to the U.S. if I went home over the winter break. This news brought me back to the jungle in my head that I first visited on the 15th of May 2010. I understand that an extension has been given to
Palestinian refugees and am hopeful that my return in January will be smooth, but I am still nervous that there will be problems. If I had a homeland, a government, an authority that was willing to claim me and issue me a state sponsored passport my winter break would not have a cloud hanging over it worrying about my return. Even though being a Palestinian refugee presents me with a lot of challenges, I don’t have the option to quit being who I am. To be honest, it makes me feel that I need to do my best to let more people hear my and my people’s stories, hoping to gain enough support to be able to change this situation one day.
Simulation and Place

I’ve always been a fan of images of dystopia, be they fiction, film, poem, song, etc. Images of dystopia manage to both terrify and intrigue the reader or listener, to show elements of reality while taking them forward a few hundred years. My first true encounter with the genre was Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury. An image from the book still haunts me to this day: the main character’s wife, Mildred Montag, growing more and more absent as she is entranced and sedated by the technology surrounding them. Mildred longs for a fourth wall of television to further distance herself from real life, to be in a place other than her physical living room. Mildred embodied what scared me, and still scares me, about dystopian fiction- its uncanny resemblance to reality. Though exaggerated, Mildred’s nearly complete immersion into the world of simulated reality calls us to assess our own interactions with simulation.

Simulation has created quite a shift in ideas of place. Through simulation, “place” takes on a different meaning than it does traditionally. Traditionally, the word “place” calls to mind spatial areas that can be physically occupied. A parking lot. A football stadium. A dental office. These are all what I will call physical places. Physical places take up space in the world. But simulation has rocked this traditional idea of place, turning it into something that doesn’t necessarily take up any space or require any travel to access. No more is place defined by physical parameters, its objects interacted with by touch. Through simulation, place is defined by what we experience and interact with, more often than not, through sight and sound rather than touch. And since simulated place is not limited by physical space, it can be endless while taking up no space. Everyone has the opportunity to see and interact with something unique, to be somewhere else entirely.
This is very often achieved through thoughts. A space can be shared by two people without either party being mentally present. Today, this scenario is heightened as technology can do the thinking for us. We can share a space with others, but none of us have to be in the same place. A small example of this can be accessed daily. At any given casual meal with people of a certain generation the following scene can be witnessed: no one looking at anyone else, no one talking, all eyes glued to a phone. Everyone is sharing the same physical place, but each of them are in their own mental place facilitated by simulation.

However, the scene painted above is only a minor example of place transformed by simulation. I had my first dramatic experience of place transformed by simulation using Google Cardboard, a simple tool developed by Google that aims at giving its users easy, non-intrusive access to virtual reality. Using a phone and a Google Cardboard application, the user can be transported anywhere from a golfing green to a basketball court. In one of my classes a couple of months ago, a fellow student brought in one of these cardboard channels to virtual reality and passed it around the class. I was one of the last to receive the Google Cardboard, and I spent most of the time that it was in the room observing my classmates. The effect was immediate. Whoever was using the Google Cardboard was very obviously no longer present in the classroom. The student in virtual reality turned their head, exploring the new world that only they had access to, reached out to touch something that was only there to them, and was obviously oblivious to the engaging class discussion that was taking place on simulations. Each student, myself included, displayed this behavior upon looking through the Google Cardboard. I was amazed by the transformative effect the simulation gave to my surroundings. I was no longer in the classroom, I was in a field of rolling hills and waterfalls. Everything seemed close enough to touch, real enough to run through. The most telling difference between the

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simulation and reality was that I could only access the tranquil outdoor scene through sight; I was missing touch and sound. Though the Google Cardboard could be set down, allowing gently sitting the student right back into the classroom, it still significantly uprooted the user from reality. More severely than the aforementioned diners on their phones, the student using the Google Cardboard was completely transported somewhere else, though they were sharing the same physical space as sixteen other students.

An even more dramatic demonstration of simulation can be found in an episode of the British television show *Black Mirror* called “Fifteen Million Merits”. The episode follows the main character, Bingham, as he lives and works in a dystopian future where most citizens either earn money, or merits, by pedaling on exercise bikes, generating power, or by cleaning up after those pedaling. They live in small cells, and there is never anything that is apparently natural or outdoors. The citizens live, though communally, isolated from each other. As they pedal side by side, the citizens are alone, absorbed by a screen which simulates a place of their choice. While some citizens are better than others at remaining present in the physical space than others, most of the citizens are entranced by the simulation of their choice and seem to derive satisfaction from their life. In the simulation, they are more than generators of electricity. They can achieve, even if only they know about it, status in whatever life they choose to lead virtually. However, this requires accepting the simulation as reality, and serves to alienate the citizens from each other. Even in the brief moments of separation from the simulations, the citizens do not seem to be present in the shared physical space and these fleeting occurrences are largely silent, evidence of the
comfort they’ve taken in the simulation and the ensuing self-isolation it has caused in the citizens. Though *Black Mirror*’s “Five Million Merits” shows a version of reality significantly detached from our own, it could not exist without its sturdy foundation in the real world. The bikers’ fixation on the screen and oblivion to their grey physical surroundings is a testimony to scenes such as the table of peers on their phones or my college classmates using Google Cardboard. In all three cases, simulation has managed to divide people sharing a physical place by granting them individual access to a simulated place.

*Feed* by M.T. Anderson is another dystopian novel that caught my interest years ago. *Feed* presents an America where internetworking brain implants, or the “feed”, have taken off. In this culture dominated by corporations, advertisements are presented to viewers directly through their thoughts. People have the option, more than ever, to choose where they are mentally, if not physically. In *Feed*, the idea of place is not only affected by simulation, but defined by simulation. The simulation given by the feed is always present, even when the characters are interacting with each other in the physical world. This is evident in brief interruptions throughout the narrative. As the main character, Titus, recounts the events of his past year in first person, his story is studded by snippets of advertisements. The advertisements distract the reader from the story in a way that mirrors the way that the advertisements and simulations distract the people in *Feed* from reality. Because of the feed’s ability to completely block out the physical world and replace it with a simulated one, the physical world loses more and more importance. As everyone retreats further into their personal feed, where they are physically no longer matters as long as they have their simulation: “…he sat in his closet watching *Top Quark*” Titus says of his younger brother. *Feed* frighteningly shows the potential power in simulation— that it may one day completely define our ideas of place.

While the simulations demonstrated by Google Cardboard, *Black Mirror*, and *Feed* vary in terms of extremity,

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they all serve as examples that show how thoroughly simulations can alienate people, driving them into self-isolation and, like Mildred Montag, into rejection of reality. Since simulations are now a part of our world, how can we avoid these unsavory effects of simulation? Should we simply seek to avoid simulation?

Avoiding simulation may not be possible at all, and not just because of the technology of today’s world. In “Simulated Nature and Natural Simulations: Rethinking the Relation Between the Beholder and the World,” Katherine Hayles argues that our use of our body to interact with our physical surroundings is a mode of simulation: “We are born into the world with a set of equipment… This physical equipment constitutes our original virtual reality gear… for it provides us with a multimedia simulation through which we can begin to manipulate the world. The first prostheses we contend with are our own bodies.”

Hayles continues her argument by claiming that the only time the world retains its original form is when it is looked upon “directly, without meditation.” If these beliefs are held to be reasonable, than any efforts to avoid simulation will not only prove frustrating but futile.

The best answer, then, to avoid the potentially catastrophic effects of simulation is to accept simulation as a part of life, but not as life. Simulation is not going away- it’s a part of life in too many disciplines to suddenly vanish. Neither should simulation vanish. Simulation has allowed so many advances to occur. In my own education, I have utilized simulations as avenues to learn about chemistry, biology, and physics. Without such simulations, I would not have the same opportunities to observe chemical reactions, biological processes, or physical mechanics as I do now. Simulations in maps now allow people to gain some knowledge about nearly anywhere in the world, making them better informed citizens of our planet. In the


5 Ibid.
medical field, virtual surgery is increasingly common as a mode of education, allowing medical professional students to practice procedures more frequently.

The key is to recognize these positive effects of simulation without letting simulation itself define our idea of place. The solution is not to fall into despair, which happens when simulations are depended upon. This can be seen in both Black Mirror and Feed: the beholders of the simulation took too passive a role in their interaction with simulations. In Lionel Shriver’s We Need to Talk About Kevin, Kevin expresses anguish over the abundance of visual simulation in the world that serves as an example of what we should not do: “‘You wake up, you watch TV, and you get in the car and you listen to the radio… You read the paper… you read a book… You watch TV all night, or maybe you go out so you can watch a movie, and maybe you’ll get a phone call so you can tell your friend what you’ve been watching.’”6 What Kevin expresses here is an observation of the passivity associated with simulations, and it is this passivity that causes dependence such as that seen in the dystopian examples. But to recognize simulations’ utility as tools allows us to remain present in the world and to avoid falling prey to self-isolation. Since, by Hayles’ argument, the physical world and simulation are too closely mingled to be separated, accepting simulations is a necessary part of life. Rather than allowing simulation to act as a definer of place, we can use it as a means to enhance where we already are.

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