In this chapter, I argue that Jean Said Makdisi’s 1990 Lebanese civil war memoir, *Beirut Fragments*, chronicles the privatization of the democratic public sphere through the “re-privatization” of women’s work. By “re-privatization” I mean an organization of labor where workers in a postindustrial workforce find themselves in places that resemble or repeat industrialism’s domestic sphere, but are subject to more direct forms of exploitation; that is, where obstacles of public regulation and oversight can be bypassed or overcome. Makdisi’s book presents a public sphere with its linguistification or background lifeworld communicational understanding unraveling. In Habermas’s public sphere, the private sphere disappears into the past so that its quasi-transcending socialization processes are absorbed into its processes of modernization; in the remnants of Makdisi’s public sphere, the private sphere is at a historical standstill, its communicational structure no longer forward leaning. *Beirut Fragments* can thus be seen to be criticizing a version of feminism—and in particular I address Toril Moi’s quarrels with feminist poststructuralism—that posits agency in contingent, situational, private language use. I argue that such a privatization removes the pedagogical content necessary for the public sphere to perform its critiques (Moi can identify the pedagogical in language use only within a logic of domination). By taking the alienation of women’s privatization and the privatization of socialization processes to an extreme, Makdisi’s memoir envisions a very dystopian moment of the public sphere’s demise as it splinters from the sociality of its pedagogical functions.¹

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The Lebanese civil war raged for fourteen years, and can be said to have destroyed the public institutions through which the state acted. “Here and there,” Makdisi describes the crossroads lying between West Beirut and East Beirut, “a tattered flag or a pockmarked national emblem hangs lopsided from a balcony where diplomats once hosted leisurely receptions and chatted and smoked over drinks” (75). Not only the diplomatic quarters, but also the national art museum and other buildings that held the symbols that once cohered a national community have given way to military checkpoints, garbage heaps, and ruins. “The museum building itself now serves only a military function, while dark rumors circulate as to the fate and whereabouts of the treasures that once lay within” (74). “References to the museum,” she explains, “no longer bear the slightest connotation of culture” (54). With the crumbling of the institutionalized public sphere, Makdisi is forced increasingly to take shelter in her home. Her access to the university where she works gets cut off by the war, and her work turns away from the public pedagogical toward private familial responsibility.

Beirut Fragments is a document that witnesses witnessing. It therefore invites expectations that it will adopt techniques of realism. Beirut Fragments, however, fails in adhering to realist form. I argue here that Makdisi’s failure in following through on such generic conventions parallels a failure of the communicative conventions of the public sphere in a time of war. With the slipping up of recognizable features of genre, what Makdisi witnesses is a privatization of public-sphere functions implicated in the “re-privatization” of women’s work. Makdisi’s memoir is a fragmented autobiographical tale where public institutions fragment and finally break down, and where these public institutions’ former democratic functions and conventions of citizenship—including witnessing and self-narration—are increasingly “re-privatized” as women’s work.

The re-privatization of women’s work plays out as a privatization of language. That is, it plays out as a block in the sociational and pedagogical functions of language as well as in the formation of agreed-upon meaning-making contexts that transcend private identities. Makdisi lists words in her glossary whose meanings have been reassigned in the course of the war and have become vague references to a situation without references: the words “masdar mawthuk bihi,” for example, used to mean “a source in which confidence can be placed” when referring to newscasters, and has come to mean “rumor, painted full of tongues” (60–61). “Al hawadith,” the definition of which is “the events,” now figures a grand gesture toward sequences of the war’s