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Digital Landscape as Cultural Memory? Co-creation and the Memory of Nubia

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On Designing Phygital Narratives within the Cultural Heritage Ecosystem

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Reality has always been too small for the human imagination. We're always trying to transcend.

Brenda Laurel

Index

Letizia Bollini	*Phygital design for Cultural, Intangible and Landscapes Heritage*	**p. 6**
Letizia Bollini	*Per-forming spaces. On Designing Phygital Narratives within the Cultural Heritage Ecosystem*	**p. 8**
Andrea Resmini	*The spatial turn in Information Architecture*	**p. 18**
Giulia Faccin	*Blended Realities and Living Heritage: Reimagining Preservation Beyond Institutional Frameworks*	**p. 48**
Lisa Moren	*Emergence under the bay. Artwork in AR/VR*	**p. 74**
Raffaella Trocchianesi & Alice Biancardi	*Through multilayered landscapes. Phygital narrative and cultural identity*	**p. 92**
Davide Spallazzo	*Exploring the role of Boundary Objects in Mobile Experiences for the Cultural Heritage Field*	**p. 106**
Felix Meyer-Christian	*Transmedia Documentary Storytelling. Performing in Virtual and Reality*	**p. 122**

Lins Derry & Dario Rodighiero	*Choreography, Design, and Technology. An Interview with Lins Derry from the metaLAB (at) Harvard*	**p. 150**
Claire Bailey-Ross	*Narratives and Embodied Interaction. A case study in reimagining Cultural Heritage Spaces*	**p. 166**
Marco Borsotti	*Exhibition design and Per-forming spaces. Phygital Environmental Systems to Inhabit Cultural Narrative*	**p. 178**
Roberto Gigliotti	*Transgression. How body and time perform in exhibited space*	**p. 196**
Willeke Wendrich	*Digital Landscape as a Cultural Memory? Co-creation and the memory of Nubia*	**p. 212**
Biographies		**p. 228**

DIGITAL LANDSCAPE AS CULTURAL MEMORY? CO-CREATION AND THE MEMORY OF NUBIA

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Keywords: Heritage, Digitization, Reconstruction, Preservation, Reconnection

Abstract Can a digital reconstruction of a landscape and the settlements within aid in preserving or even constructing cultural memory? Digital Nubia is the development of a digital cultural landscape co-created with third-generation displaced Nubians, based on archival information, maps, descriptions, photographs, drawings and oral history, especially the memories of the Nubians who were forced to leave their houses, land and villages after the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s. The inhabitants of "Old Nubia", as it became to be known, used to live in a long string of settlements along the Nile River in the south of Egypt and the north of Sudan.

This article discusses the context, the settings, and the methods of co-creation that form the basis of the "Digital Nubia" project. It is a continuation and reformulation of a project that started in the US and Europe but is currently moving the initiative and responsibility into the hands of third-generation Nubians in Egypt and the Nubian diaspora outside Egypt. The project is just one of several modes of collaboration in an effort to preserve the memory of a way of life that has dramatically changed after the forced resettlement of the entire Nubian population. One of the relevant questions is whether a digital reconstruction of the landscape might be more than a reflection of a state of knowledge but can be an effective way of invoking memories or can function as an anchor for additional narratives.

Introduction Cultural memory is the shared history accessible to members of a community and conveyed through narratives, oral history, or written accounts (Assmann, 2011). It is based on and, at the same time, defines a shared identity. Cultural memory can continue to exist for long periods of time, but often, the term is used for shorter periods, covering the lifetime of one or several generations (Assmann, 2011). This is not just dependent on whether the memory is conveyed in writing or not — after all, oral traditions have been demonstrated to have a life span of thousands of years (Nunn, 2018) — but is affected by what is remembered and whether that the memory, which by definition is selective, remains relevant (Halbwachs, 1941). In its most explicit form, cultural memory is history writing, but apart from that, it defines what encapsulates belonging. Cuisine, one of the strongest and most important ways of confirming, maintaining and building identity and relationships, is both tangible — the food that is prepared and served — and intangible, the knowledge that underlies the ingredients, the correct taste, smell and feel of the dishes. Material culture, often understood as the most tangible of shared aspects consists of clothing, tools, vessels, furniture and other objects or materials that convey being linked to a group and being rooted in the relationships with and off the group. Architecture encapsulates the space but also the way in which a community lives and works, while settlement structure within the landscape provides not just the context, but the way a society moves, interacts and subsists.

All of these aspects are strongly connected to both individual memories and the shared memory of the group. Sensory input that allows these memories to surface is mostly visual, but sound, smell, taste and touch have the potential to bring to the fore even deeply buried and long-forgotten memories and connections. The importance of visiting one's place of origin, the area where one grew up and celebrated important communal events, is linked to these full-on sensory experiences. Without them, we only have shared narratives that keep the memory alive, with stories that are essential but limited in conveying the memories of a culture. Important for the *Digital Nubia* project is the essential role of the landscape of the desert cut through by the Nile River. The landscape is an essential part of *being in the world* and of belonging and a familiar landscape is a place, an essential part of cultural memory and identity. The distinction between space and place can be made based on familiarity, either through personal or shared memory, through

narratives, sketches or photographs (Tuan, 2001). In an urban setting, the built environment is of importance as a trigger of memory, while in a rural setting landscape is of prime significance as the context of the settlement and the houses within. That essential part of Nubian cultural memory has been lost by the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Digital Nubia was started in 2019 in Turin as part of a summer school on cultural heritage and digital humanities (Tamborrino & Wendrich, 2017). The project was conceived as a pilot to understand the importance of landscape as a context of ancient remains. Still, the great importance of landscape and living memory was also very much in my mind due to my fieldwork in the 1990s and became urgent after being invited by Nubians organising *World Nubian Day*, an annual celebration of Nubian culture on July 7, which started in 2004, although the celebration of being Nubian was not always recognised (*Second Nubian World Day, 2016; World Nubian Day*, 2022).

Suffering loss

Nubia is usually defined as the region along the Nile in the south of Egypt and the north of Sudan between the first to the sixth cataract. The landscape of Nubia is shaped by the river Nile which has carved its way through sandstone mountains interspersed with banks of hard granite. These are the cataracts, rapids where the river pushes its way over and through stone thresholds, forming natural boundaries. The Egyptian part of Nubia is located between the first cataract, just south of Aswan and the border with Sudan, while Sudanese Nubia ends at the sixth cataract to the north of Khartoum. The division between an Egyptian and a Sudanese Nubia was artificially drawn along the 22nd parallel by the British in 1899. With the ending of the British colonial power in 1954, it was defined as a national border. Thus the "cartographic amputation" of Nubia became a separation where before there was a continuity (DiMeo, 2015, p. 77). It was just one of the many decisions taken at a distance but directly influencing the perception and daily lives of the Nubian population.

The Egyptian region of Nubia, parts of which for now is the focus of *Digital Nubia*, extends approximately 1150 km southwards from the city of Aswan to Wadi Halfa. This stretch of mostly narrow Nile valley was the homeland of a people that identifies itself to the outside world as *Nubians*. However, within Egyptian Nubia, there were three distinct

language groups (Figure 1).

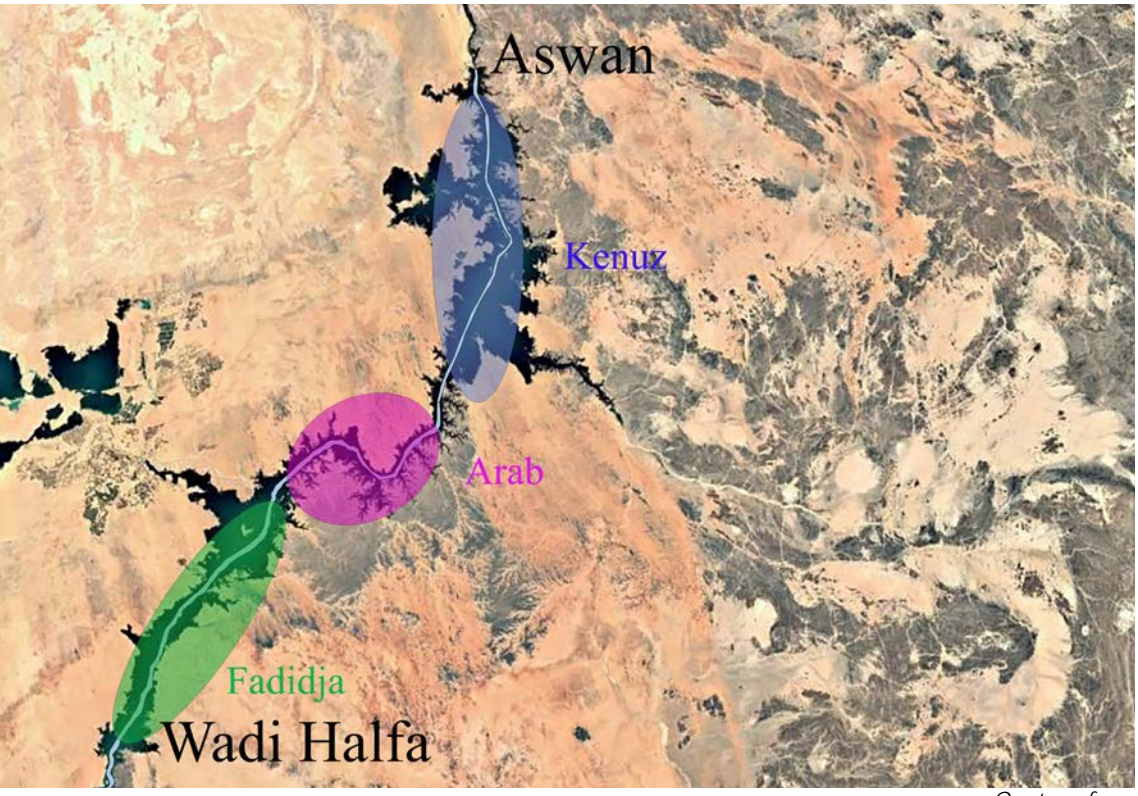


Fig. 1 *Map of Nubia, with the indication of the three language areas.* *Courtesy of the author*

Just south of Aswan, there were those that spoke Kenzi or Matoki (the latter being the term used by the Fadidja-speaking Nubians for the Kenzi tribes); along the large bend of the Nile lived mostly Arabic speakers, and in the southern part, the language spoken was Mahasa or Fadidja. The name Fadidja is at present generally accepted as an indication of those who came from Fadidja-speaking villages, but originally it was a derogatory term in Kenzi. Nubia was organised in settlements, small hamlets that were strung along the narrow banks of the Nile (*naga*) and districts (*nahia*), the latter named after the larger centres, such as Ballana (Fadidja) in the south, al-Malki (Arab) in the central part, and Dabud (Kenzi) in the north (Hopkins & Mehanna, 2010b).

Under British rule, Egypt decided to regulate the flood of the Nile. From 1899 to 1902 a dam was built across the river at Aswan, which was subsequently heightened with 7 meters between 1908 and 1912 (Carruthers, 2022, pp. 7—8). This resulted in the flooding of land along the Nile over a length of 250 km. A second elevation constructed from 1929 to 1934 caused



flooding all the way to Wadi Halfa at the border with Sudan. The resulting submerging of Upper Nubia, the land between the first and second cataracts, was especially dire in the northern part near Aswan, which was mostly inhabited by the Kenuz people. The reaction of the Nubian inhabitants of the region was to rebuild the villages on higher ground, not once, but in many cases, three times. The devastation and the sad view of flooded mud-brick houses at the lower elevations, slowly dissolving in the high lake stands, were met with resilience (Hopkins & Mehanna, 2010b). The area lost most of its agricultural land because many parts of the Nile valley were narrow and the most important crop used to date. The palm groves in the floodplain were destroyed when the water rose (Fernea & Kennedy, 1966). Additionally, growing annual crops was made difficult because of the unpredictable water level of the lake, which was controlled at the dam and served the priorities of Egypt to its north. When Gamal Abdel Nasser decided in 1960 to build a new, much higher dam the government decided that this time, the Nubian population had to be moved out of the region because the water level would rise to completely cover all existing settlements.

Around 50,000 Nubian people were displaced in Egypt and Sudan. From 1964 to 1970, all inhabitants of the Egyptian part of Nubia were moved to "New Nubia", an area in the desert north of Aswan. This resettlement area was far smaller and more compactly built up than the original Nubian settlements (*nagas*), which were focused strongly on the river for irrigation but also spiritual life. In stark contrast to the former, lush Nile Valley settlements, those in the resettlement area consisted of rows upon rows of houses, far from the Nile, without any shade or greenery. Even though the newly built villages were given the same names as the major habitation centres of *Old Nubia*, the entire structure and character of the villages were unfamiliar and uncomfortable. For the inhabitants, the psychological effect of moving to the desert from their river-oriented communities was profound, and it disrupted the social and cultural structures. The importance of the Nile was enormous, not just for agriculture and communication but also spiritually. Before leaving for good, the *sheikha* of the village of ed-Derr performed a departure ritual (Hopkins & Mehanna, 2010b, p. 38, citing Hohenwart 1965, p. 47). In addition, many of the houses in the resettlement area were unfinished when the people arrived after a long and arduous journey. They had wanted to take the valuable wood from doors and roofs when leaving



Fig. 2 *Philae Temple in 1906, partly inundated.* *Photo by Maques & Fiorillo. Public Domain.*

their houses, but the soldiers had not allowed this (Hopkins & Mehanna, 2010b, p. 39).

Recording loss The loss was not new to the Nubians nor the archaeological community. The latter was focused on creating a record before the rich ancient remains were lost under the waters of the lake. The first Aswan Dam was primarily a British colonial endeavour and was celebrated as a major feat of engineering for the benefit of Egypt. Under pressure from the archaeologists, the dam height was restricted to protect the ancient monuments (Carruthers, 2022, p. 34). The extensive flooding of the land upstream affected a number of temples, particularly the well-preserved temple complex on Philae island, which from then on was partly inundated for several months per year (Figure 2). An archaeological survey was organised to record the ancient remains that came under threat. This survey effort was repeated in 1908 and 1929 with the subsequent heightening of the dam to support irrigation in Egypt. The approach of recording what would be lost was made as a "view from the boat" (Carruthers, 2022), a very particular way of considering Egypt from the comfort and distance of a houseboat without having to bother with the people on the shore. Some ethnographic work was done, but this focused on racially charged research questions without recognising the value and loss of the way of life of an entire population.

Under President Nasser, in the late 1950's a much larger embankment dam was designed to be built upstream of the old one. With the construction of the Aswan High Dam, the impact on the region was magnified exponentially, all the way to the south of Egypt and also affecting the north of Sudan. These plans caused a global outcry as scholars focused on the temples and ancient cemeteries in the Nubian region south of the dam, which would be completely submerged. UNESCO's first large-scale project was the rescue of Nubia's cultural heritage. With the help of many universities and museums, a large number of archaeological surveys were set up. The original map is preserved in UNESCO's archives, showing hatched areas in colour pencils dividing the Nubian Nile Valley into sections that are the responsibility of various countries. This enormous documentation effort was focused on Nubia's ancient history and especially the building efforts of the Egyptian pharaoh who had conquered the region during several periods of Egypt's history. Especially the ancient cemeteries and temples were recorded and hastily excavated. The great engineering undertaking of the Aswan High Dam, constructed with funds from the Soviet Union, was matched by a European/American engineering effort to relocate many of the ancient temples to higher ground. The most famous of these was the temple complex of Abu Simbel, which dated to c. 1250 BCE and included two temples: one for Ramses II with four colossal, 20-meter high statues of the Pharaoh carved out of the living rock and staring towards the Southern land of Kush (ancient Nubia), and another for his wife, Nefertari. As part of the UNESCO project, an artificial mountain was constructed to house the relocated temples, a celebrated feat of engineering (Museo Egizio di Torino, 2019). What was not celebrated and kept mostly invisible was the very hard manual labour that this project required: the sandstone rock was divided into blocks and hand-sawned by mostly Nubian labourers.

The enormous effort expended on the ancient remains was not balanced by the same concern for the living heritage of Nubia. In 1960, the Social Research Center of the American University in Cairo started a survey to record the social organisation and culture of Nubians, both in *Old Nubia* and outside of it in Aswan, Cairo and *New Nubia*, the resettlement area (Hopkins & Mehanna, 2010a). The anthropological interests of the time were focused on family structure, tribal organisation and economic analysis, including the influence of



Fig. 3 *Decorated house façade in the Wadi Halfa region.* *Photo by Göran Schildt under CC BY 4.0*

the migration to Cairo of a large percentage of the male population, which seems to have developed especially after the construction of the first dam (Geiser, 1967). This anthropological effort was, however, small compared to what was expended on ancient Nubia. Even these efforts were selective in their focus on the culture of the Egyptian rulers, the temples, or the cemeteries, which yielded intact grave goods, as well as information on ancient demography. The lack of interest in contemporary Nubia was also clear in the disregard for settlements, whether ancient or historic.

Defining loss Even if the monuments of Nubia were "rescued", this effort was very selective. For example, the temples of Philae were moved to Agilkia, a nearby island at a higher elevation. The original island is now underwater, and with it, many of the ancient structures, particularly mudbrick houses, held a continuous history of the population of the island throughout the 6th century and probably much longer.

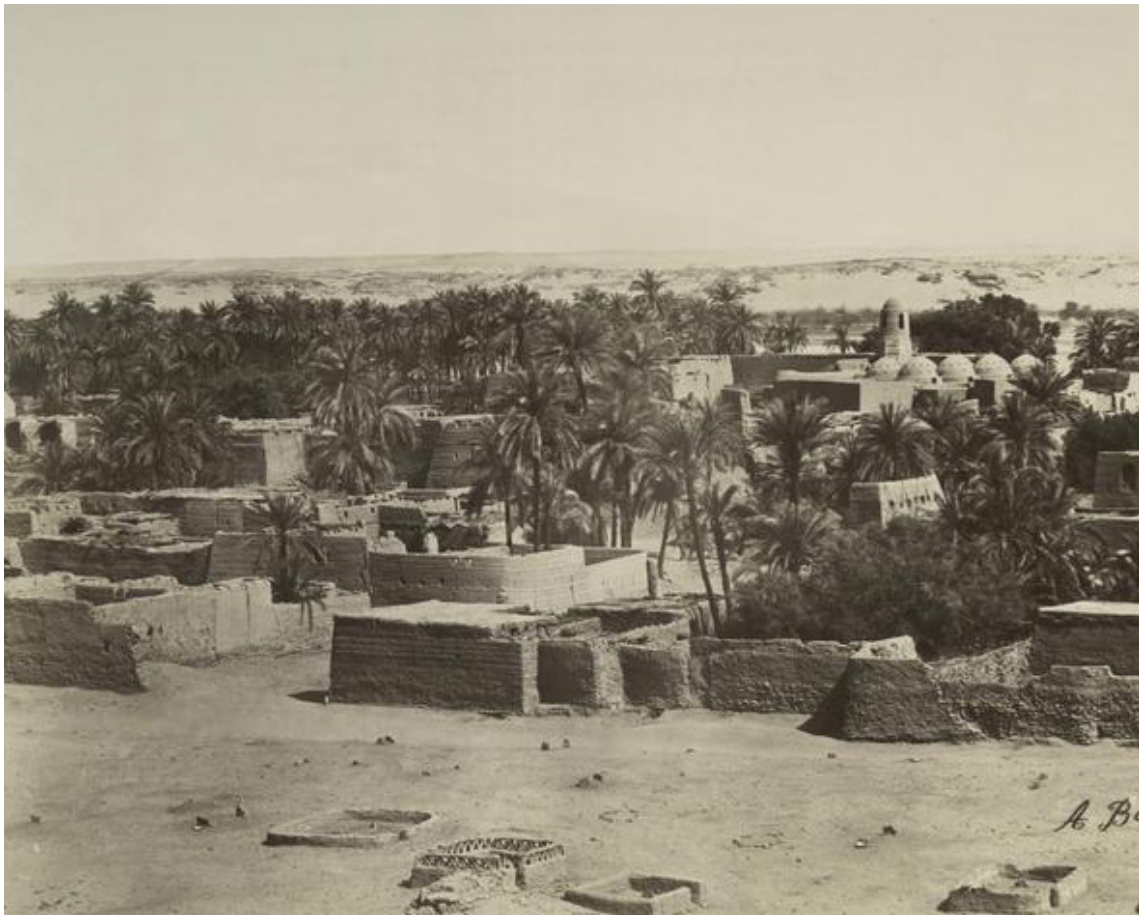


Fig. 4 *The village of ed-Der around 1865* *Photo by Antonio Beato. Public Domain.*

The most painfully felt loss, however, is that the focus on ancient monuments largely overlooked the human impact of the dam. There was no international outcry about the displacement of an entire population, and the loss of a way of life, including the knowledge, experience and memories rooted in the landscape of Nubia, was not recognised. At the present time, the third generation of Nubians, after the displacement, is actively seeking to preserve the knowledge that is still available in the hearts and minds of the displaced generation. This barely includes memories of what life was like in *Old Nubia*. In 1963 most of what now is the older generation, were children. They would remember details, for instance, the decoration of the houses (Figure 3) or the landscape and path from the village to the Nile (Figure 4), and they remember quite vividly how the entire population was required to move their households and livestock to the resettlement area. Especially painful are the memories of arrival in half-built villages, of high infant mortality, of elderly people's untimely death, of feeling literally and figuratively unsettled and having difficulty coping with the harsh climatic circumstances in the new settlement.[1] The Nubian architectural historian Menna Agha terms these "memories of loss"(Agha, 2022, p. 328). In a thoughtful, self-reflexive article, she illustrates the great sense of loss through a comparison of the architecture and way of life in the original villages of Nubia with the ones designed and built by the Egyptian government in what today is no longer referred to as New Nubia, but as "displacement Nubia" (*Nubia el-tahgeer*). Her account is in stark contrast with that by Mohamed Fikri Abdul Wahab, drafted in 1964 and published in 2010. In spite of outlining the far-reaching consequences of a state-planned structure that does not take the Nubian settlement forms and habitats into account, he states: "We can [...] conclude that the Nubians are generally happy and enthusiastic about their new homeland and the care given them by the state." (Abdul Wahab, 2010, p. 236). These completely opposite assessments can perhaps partly be understood by considering the context of both these accounts. Abdul Wahab was Nubian and assisted with the work of the anthropological survey in the Kenzi area of Dahmit, a village 30 km. south of Aswan. This was the place where his two grandfathers lived. His quote above seems to represent



a generally positive outcome of the resettlement. It should be taken into consideration that his conclusion was based on his experience in a very limited area: the Kenzi village of Dabud, 5 km. south of Aswan. Both Dahmit and Dabud had been affected severely by the construction of the previous dams (Abdul Wahab, 2010; Hopkins & Mehanna, 2010b), and their inhabitants often joined village members who had moved in the previous decades. In contrast, the Fadidja settlements further south were confronted with the severe consequences of a radical lake level rise and forced displacement for the first time. Both the general attitude of the Kenzi population as well as the social background of Abdul Wahab may have been influenced by

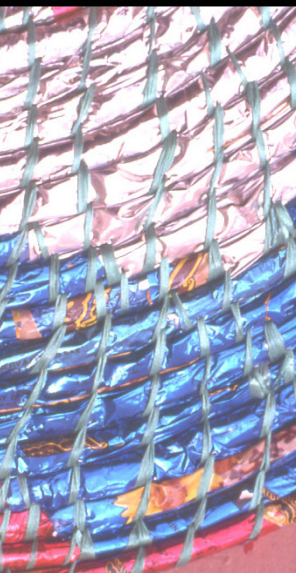


Fig. 5 *Kenzi adaptation to basketry material availability: left washing line, right cotton yarn, bottom candy wrappers.* *Courtesy of the author*

an overly optimistic view. The Fadidja population certainly did not experience the same “care given them by the state”.

In my research in New Nubia / Nubia *tahgeer* in the 1990’s I was struck by the different attitudes of Kenzi and Fadidja basket makers. The Nubian coiled food covers were made by women and were of great relevance both in serving food but also as house decoration. When not in use, the baskets with their colourful patterns were hanging on the walls. In the Fadidja villages, the women were spending a great effort in procuring doam palm leaf, the material they used in Old Nubia. In the end they sometimes settled for using date palm leaf, even if this was not their preferred material. The Kenzi women mostly used artificial materials, such as brightly coloured wool, washing lines and even candy wrappers Figure 5 (Wendrich, 1999, pp. 222—225). Both groups, living in different villages, were resilient and creative, but in a very different way. The aesthetic of colourfully decoratDespite the Egyptian government’s stance that there are no different ethnic groups within Egypt, Nubian identity remains strong. The Nubian Museum in Aswan was opened in 1997, after a period in which there was government resistance against its current name. The museum houses archaeological finds discovered during the various archaeological survey and excavation campaigns. It also exhibits scenes from Old Nubia, including Nubian house facades and frozen life-size scenes of village life. In a way, the museum thus presents Nubian culture as a lost civilisation rather than a living one. Today, there are various Nubian initiatives working to preserve their heritage. Nubian Geographic, a group mostly consisting of the third generation after the 1963 displacement, conducts video interviews with elders who lived through the early 1960s. They use digital means, such as video, Facebook and dedicated web pages, to collect these narratives. Nubian Geographic also collects old photographs and colourises these to connect past and present, showing that the people in the photographs were real, leading real lives in a landscape that no longer exists[2]. Other groups focus on Nubian women’s lives or are involved in teaching and recording the Nubian language and oral traditions. *Digital Nubia* works with Nubian Geographic to explore the lost landscape of Nubia, examining, reconstructing and reproducing the imagined context of people, artefacts, architecture and landscapes. The digital reconstruction of parts of the landscape forms a digital collection space to which stories, photographs, videos, and interviews can be linked in order to reanimate the cultural





heritage of both ancient and recent Nubia and reconnecting it with the cultural memory of Nubians today.

An important question is whether a digital representation can actually aid in regaining or strengthening cultural memory. Menna Agha writes: "We can come to see and understand what the Nubian house in Old Nubia looked like only through storytelling. My grandmother's stories often deal with the house as the site of everyday life; and she usually expects me automatically to set the events of her story into the typology of a house [...]" (Agha, 2022, p. 335). Members of the generation that feels the loss of memory strongly, the grand children of the displaced generation, live as it were in two worlds. On the one hand, they are fully part of modern living, digitally savvy, and politically active, even if this is a precarious proposition in Egypt in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, they have grown up and appreciate the importance of the world of memory narration. Digital Nubia is co-created with both Kenzi and Fadidja Nubians to provide one way among several in which recorded information can be found and embedded not just in a geographic, map-based context but in a three-dimensionally reconstructed landscape. The mudbrick houses now form a drowned and dissolved place underwater (Hamouda et al., 2023). Yet, they can perhaps become a virtual place to link and evoke memories and narratives (Dyke, 2008; Holtorf & Williams, 2006).

> To Nubians, Nubia can be described as collective virtual spatialities fuelled by nostalgia and disembodied from its materiality. These narratives were incubated and reproduced through Nubian affective resources. Our grandmothers' stories were always present to describe spatialities of the old land. Nubian literature and poetry are exceptionally descriptive in drawing an elaborate image of a land that is now under water. (Agha, 2019, p. 4)

The impressive and gorgeous animated movie Hanina|Homesick by Yasmin Moll is a prime example of the nostalgia that Menna Agha describes. That nostalgia can be enhanced by embodying the experience. Allowing movement, a virtual walk through a reconstructed landscape and domestic space, based on all available sources, including the descriptions from memory, might provoke additional narratives. It is a way to include vision and hearing by combining architectural and landscape reconstruction with sounds from the environment as another

step among and in collaboration with initiatives that are mostly visual, such as sharing, creating and preserving photographs and drawings, or aural, such as the *aghani al-tahgeer*, the songs of displacement that were created after 1963. Perhaps the most disorienting difference for the displaced population was that the villages in Nubia *tahgeer* were far removed from the Nile. Life in Nubia was focused on the river, for water provision, agriculture, but also traffic, communication and spirituality. This relation can be called up by the evocative medium of virtual reality where the landscape and the Nile form the context of reconstructed houses, *nagas* and *nahias*, and also ancient remains built by earlier generations and the ancestors.

Conclusion The 1963 displacement, referred to as *Nubia tahgeer* is brought back into memory by the third generation of Nubians (grandchildren of those displaced). The amount of information that is currently collected includes a record of the memories of the generation that lived through the resettlement. Combining all this, mostly digital, information can be done through an archive with metadata or geographic anchors (the places they refer to), but rather than using a two-dimensional map, locating records and memories in a three-dimensional reconstruction of place can provide an embodied experience that is not only a monument to Nubia, or a memorial for a landscape lost, but also the beginning of regaining memories and recognition.

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