

Lost and Found in Beirut

Memory and Place in Narratives of the City

Nour Dados

Doctor of Philosophy

2010

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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My father, who spent all his life in Beirut, even his years in Australia, did not live to see the completion of this project. To him, I dedicate this work.

Dedication

In memory of my father, Metri

To my mother, Katia

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Abstract

Beirut is a city, a memory of a place, a place in memory, stories told and untold. Beirut is a slippery idea, a concrete reality, a liability, an abstraction. This project begins by asking what Beirut might be other than the name of a populous city on the eastern Mediterranean and how, by what means, in what shape, it has arrived in Sydney and in other cities in the world. It is not the sociological or demographic dimensions of these questions that matter most, but the possibility that asking these questions might enable certain as yet undefined processes to unravel, allowing Beirut to invent its own concepts and tell us something about the life of the city and the memory of place.

The project is not only about being lost and found in Beirut, it is also about losing and finding Beirut's trajectories on global maps of knowledge. In the aftermath of Edward Said's landmark *Orientalism*, it is time to mark the space between Beirut as an object of knowledge and an Orientalist construction, and Beirut as a city and a lived space. It is necessary to approach the city from a perspective that does not enclose it in a discursive formation that would be at once a historical past and a spatial void. The question of writing about the city and of inhabiting the everyday spaces of the city is no doubt inextricably entwined with the question of knowing the city and of constructing knowledge about the city. The project takes this doubling as a cue by unfolding from the space between these two ways of knowing and writing. In writing the city, Beirut emerges as a knowing subject and as an imaginary that is embedded spatially and historically in knowledge itself.

The project is constructed as a series of seven 'plateaus' in reference to Beirut's seven ancient gates. The term 'plateau' is borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. A plateau is at once an area of intensity and a formation that is loosely connected to other intensities. In forming these intensities, each chapter explores a particular theoretical concept in relation to Beirut's cultural, historical, spatial and political dimensions. The seven central concepts examined by the thesis are narrative, distance, aspect, tactility, memory, knowledge and place. Beirut is at once the subject of the work and the method through which these concepts in cultural theory are opened up and examined. The plateau structure unravels a contingent landscape in which it is possible to see Beirut without allowing the work – the text itself, to become an image that could replace Beirut. The text follows Beirut's trajectory on the maps of knowledge, or rather takes Beirut as a guide. We could say that the result is a journey and not a map since the journey is a spatio-temporal contingency and not a fixed object that could ever fill in for the city or replace it. Yet, there are multiple ways of mapping a journey, and this text is one such experiment.

Note on Translation:

I have made use of published translations of Arabic, French and Spanish texts where they have been available in English. In all these cases, this is acknowledged by a reference to the published translation and the translator. In some instances, if I have made amendments to the published translation, I have indicated this in the footnotes. Where a published translation has not been available, I have translated the text myself and marked it as such.

Note on Transliteration:

I have retained standard usage without the use of orthographical marks for most words that have been transliterated from Arabic. This includes using established Latinised spellings of Arabic for common words and names (eg. Elias, hammam) but also transliterating less common words, names and titles, which are often transliterated using a specialised orthographic system, phonetically. This has been done to allow ease of access given that this work does not presume familiarity with the specialised transliteration guidelines established by the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft Umschrift.

We call a “plateau” any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome. We are writing this book as a rhizome. It is composed of plateaus. We have given it a circular form, but only for laughs.

Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus

We are wandering in search of ourselves, of our inscription here and now.

Hadjithomas and Joreige ‘Like oases in the desert’

A continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surrounding.

Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque

What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.

Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life

Whatever comes it will be old

So take with you anything other than this madness – get ready

To stay a stranger...

Adonis ‘The Desert’ (Selections from the journal of the Beirut Siege, 1982)

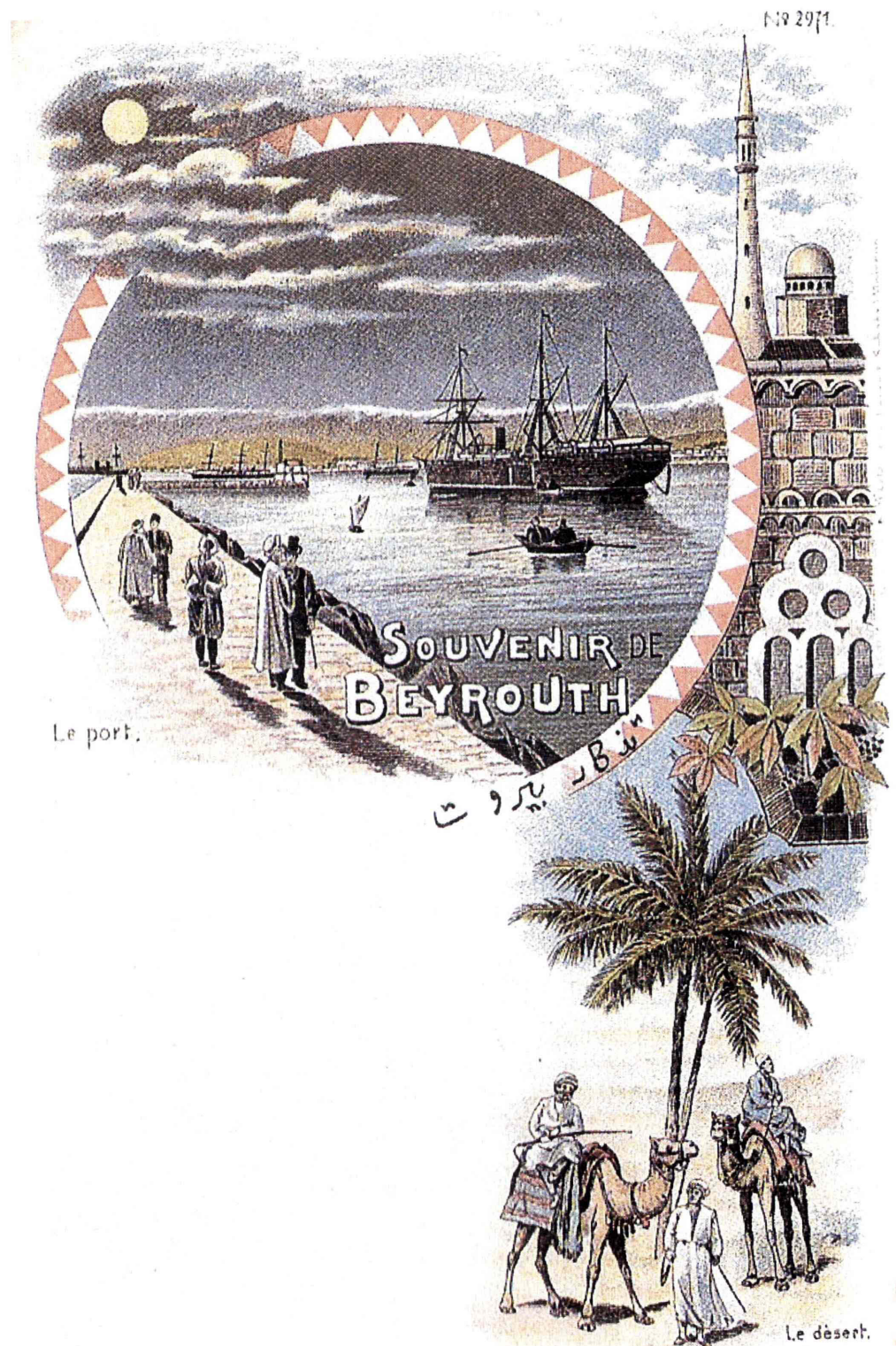


Figure 1 Picture Postcard of Beirut c.1850
Source: Debbas 1986, p.8

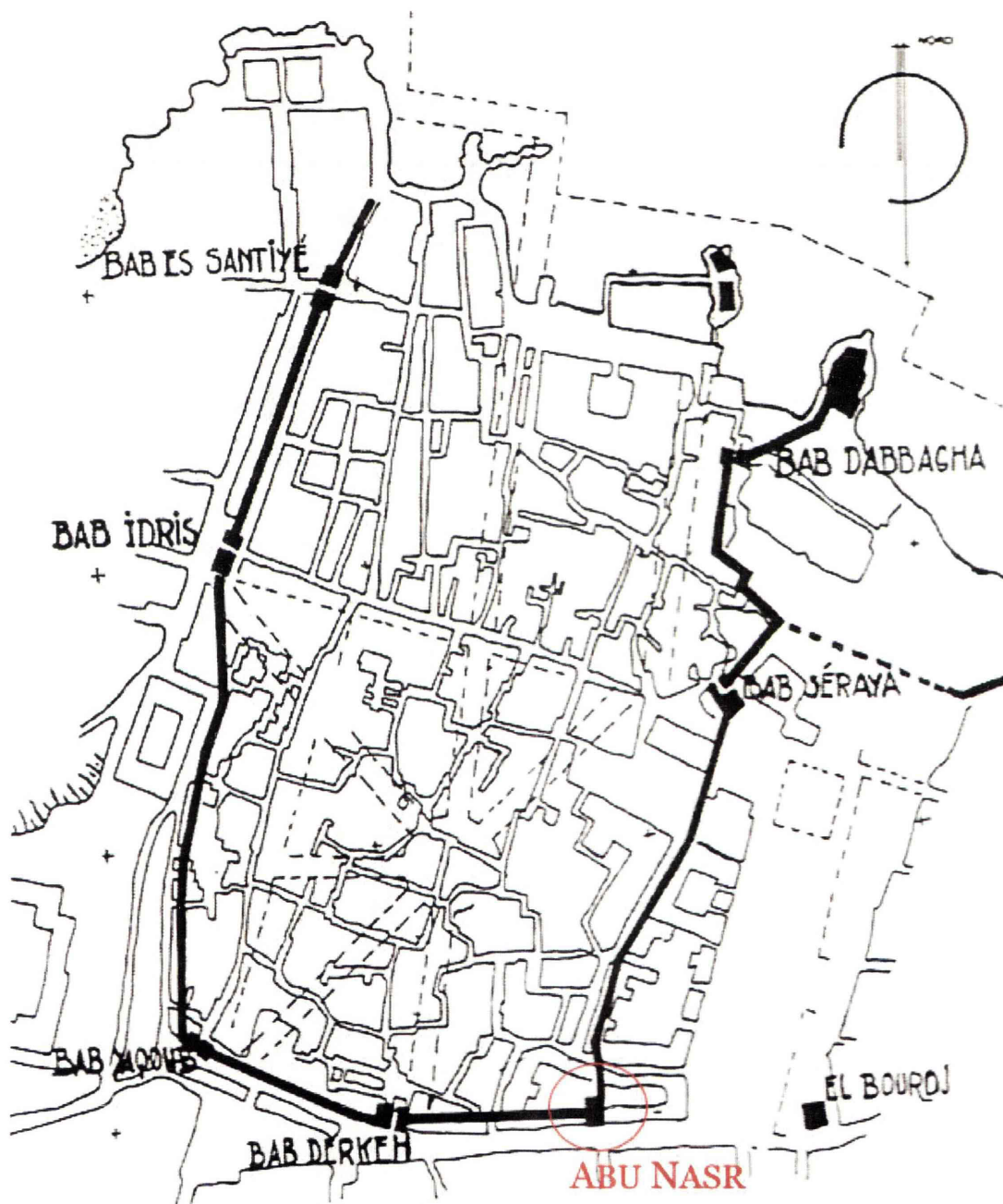


Figure 2 Map showing Beirut's old gates c.1835
 (Abu Nasr added by the author)
 Source: Tueni 2003, p.14