

Balconies onto Beirut

Spatiality in the Travelling City

Nour Dados, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Abstract: Space is a site on and through which struggles for identity and power are enacted and the nature of those struggles is reflected in the way place is constituted. This paper will consider the nature of place in Beirut by examining how place is constituted in the geography of the city and in literary and artistic work. Further, the paper will consider how Beirut functions as a mirror of other places and how other places are mirrored in Beirut by mapping a trajectory for Beirut as a travelling city. By exploring Beirut as a travelling city, the paper will explore how questions of migration and exile, in creating diasporic identities, also inform the constitution of place. In moving between the local and the global, and by extension the micro and macro view of the city, the paper hopes to maintain a tension between detail and panorama and to locate place in the movement between those spaces. This reading is made possible partially by the view from the balcony, as both a symbol and an actual place, in which meaning is created and place is constituted.

Keywords: Space, Place, Travelling City, Exile, Migration

THE PLACES EVOKED in this paper appear only to disappear. They are not absolute. Rather, they are the product of a shift in gaze¹ which itself is both subjective and limited and results in some places becoming visible while others remain unseen. 'Place' in Beirut emerges as a product of struggles over the social, the historical and the spatial.² It is not singular, static nor finished, but rather a process constituted and re-constituted by contested and contradictory spatial, social and historical elements.³ It is also the product of the processes of migration and diasporisation which mirror, fragment and reconfigure place in relation to places beyond.⁴ Beirut emerges as a travelling city both inside and outside Beirut. For this reason it becomes necessary to draw upon the balcony as both symbol and actual place to locate and place this paper in relation to the city of Beirut. In

times of peace, the balcony is a privileged space in Beirut, but it does not necessarily offer a privileged view. Rather, it indicates the limitations of what can be seen from my own position as a traveler between Sydney and Beirut. It maintains a necessary tension between what exists and what is visible, between the observed and the observer, between here and there. The balcony however is only a beginning. Reading place in Beirut requires multiple views that displace and are displaced: below, above, beyond. Place is constituted by this movement. It appears through movement and disappears through movement.

Geography and Fear

In examining the psychology of the 1975-1990 conflict, Samir Khalaf, locates war-torn Beirut within "a burgeoning geography of fear" in which the "logic of enclosure" was reinforced by "ideologies of

¹ Paola Yacoub and Michel Lasserre explore Beirut through a series of shifts in gaze which reveal changes in the aspects of a place in their essay "The City of Beirut is no exception." In Paola Yacoub and Michel Lasserre Beirut es una ciudad magnífica: cuadros sinópticos/Beirut is a magnificent city: synoptic pictures (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 2003).

² Although Edward Soja does not directly discuss place, (he approximates it to Henri Lefebvre's combined 'everyday life' and 'lived spaces of representation'), my understanding of 'place' as a struggle over social, historical and spatial elements draws upon his 'trialectics of spatiality, sociality and historicity.' Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los-Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 40,73.

³ The view of place as a process rather than something that is static and complete is one of the principle points made by Doreen Massey in "A Global Sense of Place." In Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 155.

⁴ Doreen Massey writes that "a sense of place...can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond." Massey, *Space, place and gender*, 156.



enmity towards the 'other.'⁵ Khalaf's exploration of the social and psychological impact of war reveals the correlation of the human and the spatial.⁶ More recently, journalist Mohammad Abi Samra has taken the connection between geography and fear beyond Lebanon's borders.⁷ While Abi Samra rejects the imaginary links in architecture, history, society and environment that initially appeared to him as a traveler in the Middle East and North Africa, he is quick to point out that such links still unconsciously operate in the text. For Abi Samra, what links these places is that they are the "loot of insult and fear," if not places threatened "by civil and internal wars, which are also wars of fear, identity fundamentalism, position and power."⁸ Abi Samra's text, self-consciously infused with a "Lebanese sensitivity,"⁹ suggests that the climate of insult and fear that permeates certain places causes the subsequent geographical, architectural, historical and sociological links between them to appear natural and justified.¹⁰

While the connection between geography and fear in Beirut appears to be a product of the civil war, it continues to permeate the city's vocabulary of place. Although written about the 1982 siege of Beirut, Adonis' poem "The Desert" draws Beirut's landscape as one marked by violence. He writes:

The killing has changed the city's shape – This
rock Is bone This smoke people breathing."¹¹

The transformation of rock into bone, with all the brutality it implies, continued long after the events of 1982, exposing the connection of the human and the spatial by imbuing the cityscape with places marked by conflict and death. These places have continued to alter the spatial long after the end of the conflict and appear and disappear through the ele-

ments of a place.¹² Consequently, elements of "The Desert" continue to disturb Beirut's post-war 'peace' through a simple shift in the gaze: present-day Beirut recedes and civil-war Beirut reappears. Further, the poem's solemnity and its overriding preoccupation with death, which is addressed directly or indirectly in almost all of its thirty-five stanzas, also work as an antithesis, not only to the aspirations of present-day Beirut, but also to the images of pre-war Beirut as the 'jewel of the Middle East,'¹³ the revolutionary image of the city captured in Mahmoud Darwish's writing,¹⁴ and Nizar Qabbani's romanticisation of the city.¹⁵

The poem's spatial vocabulary constitutes what had once been 'a city,' as 'a desert,' empty of everything but death. This desert is simultaneously human and spatial: the siege emptied Beirut of human life, but it also emptied it of humanity. As such, it is not clear in the poem's images of dissolution whether it is the human entity that dissolves into the landscape so that it is no longer recognizably human, or whether it is the landscape that takes on a human form. This ambiguity is accentuated by the sinister undertones of these images. The vision of "rock" as "bone," while evoking the biblical image of flesh turned into salt, also alludes to the appearance of dead bodies as common features of the landscape rather than the exception that they should be. The image of 'smoke' as 'breath' is even more sinister as it pre-empts another verse in Adonis' poem, "They took him to a ditch and burnt him/He was not a murderer, he was a boy."¹⁶ Smoke not only represents breath, but also alludes to the final breath.

In "The Desert," the final shape of this transformation of the human and the spatial by the violence of war is death:

⁵ Samir Khalaf "Urban Design and the Recovery of Beirut," in *Recovering Beirut*, eds. Samir Khalaf and Philip Khoury, (Leiden, The Netherlands: EJ Brill, 1993), 27-28.

⁶ The link between geography and fear appears particularly salient in Beirut and has resurfaced in Ghassan Tueni's "From a Geography of Fear to a Geography of Hope" in *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City* eds. Peter Rowe and Hashim Sarkis, (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998), 285-295. It also appears in Khalaf's subsequent "From a Geography of Fear to a Culture of Tolerance" in Samir Khalaf, *Cultural Resistance: Global and Local Encounters in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 249-267.

⁷ Abi Samra, Mohammad, *Bilad al-Mahana wal-Khawf* (Countries of Insult and Fear) (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2003)

⁸ Abi Samra, *Bilad al-Mahana wal-Khawf*, 8.

⁹ Abi Samra, *Bilad al-Mahana wal-Khawf*, 8.

¹⁰ Abi Samra, *Bilad al-Mahana wal-Khawf*, 8-9.

¹¹ Adonis "The Desert" in *Victims of a Map: A Bilingual Anthology of Arabic Poetry*, Samih al-Qasim, Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, (translated from the Arabic by Abdullah al-Udhari), ed. Abdullah al-Udhari (London: Saqi Books/Zed Press, 1984), 139: stanza 7.

¹² For Yacoub and Lasserre, it is the elements of the landscape, rather than the landscape itself, which reveal these places. They write that the "elements come from war, from the vision of war. Only they can pass into the present. Not the landscapes" and that "[t]he elements can no longer even associate to form a place." Yacoub and Lasserre, *Beirut is a Magnificent City*, 101.

¹³ Post-reconstruction Beirut is likened to pre-war Beirut in Ayman Trawi, *Dhakirat Beirut/Beirut's Memory/La Memoire de Beyrouth*, (Beirut: Banque de la Mediterranee, 2003), 8.

¹⁴ See in particular, Mahmoud Darwish, *Madih al-Thil al-Ali* (In praise of the high shadow), (Beirut: Dar al-Awda, 1984). Part of this ode was turned into a song sung by the Lebanese singer Majida al-Rumi under the title "Saqata al-Qina'."

¹⁵ The best example of Qabbani's romanticisation of Beirut can be found in Nizar Qabbani, *Ila Beirut al-Untha ma' Hubi* (To Beirut the female with love) (Beirut: Nizar Qabbani Publications, 1976). The romanticisation of Beirut also returns in his last autobiography, *Nizar Qabbani, Min Awraqi al-Majhula* (From my unknown papers) (Beirut: Nizar Qabbani Publications, 2000)

¹⁶ Adonis "The Desert" in *Victims of a Map*, ed. Abdullah al-Udhari, 145: Stanza 16.

We no longer meet
 Rejection and exile keep us apart
 The promises are dead, space is dead
 Death alone has become our meeting point.¹⁷

The declaration that “space is dead” only becomes clear in the line “Death alone has become our meeting point.” All the spaces of the city have become spaces of death so that to meet in them is to meet in death. In becoming spaces of death however, the spaces of the city have caused space to die so that the city no longer exists as a social space. This death of space is also the death of dialogue, “We no longer meet/Rejection and exile keep us apart/The promises are dead.” Without a space for dialogue, war continues until the last fighter falls. In return, the end of dialogue ensures that space remains dead.

While the mood of Adonis’ “The Desert” is somber, it is written about a city that has often been described as “the city that refused to die.” In the free Beirut map printed by the Ministry of Tourism, the city’s brief biography states that “Beirut survived a decade and a half of conflict and so has earned the right to call itself ‘the city that would not die.’”¹⁸ The city’s perceived resistance to death is a particularly crude selling point, but it does in some way testify to the human resistance and endurance which continue to constitute what remains of Beirut as a city. This refusal of death cannot be seen as the denial of human death, but the refusal of the death of space in spite of the overwhelming human toll. The disparity here between the survival of Beirut as a space and the human cost of the war’s brutality, however, has meant that parts of the city continue to produce a ‘sense of place’¹⁹ that remains geograph-

ically linked to fear and marked by the very fact of human death.²⁰

Marked Places

The car bomb, a devastating symbol of the civil war, is one means through which parts of the city have been marked by a differential spatial vocabulary as sites of a particular type of violence, as are sites of massacres and executions. The car bomb operates as an invisible menace that reframes the spatial vocabulary of the city not only in terms of fear, but also in terms of an unspoken anxiety that appears as both psychological incapacitation and cynicism.²¹

As the city is transformed into a theatre of war, its altered geography results in acute and chronic psychological states.²² The spatial transformation of the familiar into the menacing is explored in Ziad Rahbanni’s play *A Long American Film*.²³ Set in a hospital in Beirut’s southern suburbs, the play’s dialogue is punctuated by the aircraft noise of civilian planes from the nearby airport, gunfire and explosions. While these poignant spatial markers of war punctuate the play’s events, ‘the conspiracy’,²⁴ a favourite topic of the Lebanese, looms ironically in the background. Anxiety about the unknown results in psychological incapacitation in the patient Asim, but it is also expressed as cynicism in the patient Rachid. Asim’s fear of explosions borders on obsession and makes him scream *unexpectedly* in case something *unexpected* happens. On hearing an explosion, he is the first to ask “What was that? An explosion? Were there any casualties?”²⁵ By contrast, Rachid, who goes to the window to find out, comes back only to say laughing, “It was nothing, just a bomb.”²⁶ Rachid’s cynicism towards the situation is

¹⁷ Adonis “The Desert” in *Victims of a Map*, ed. Abdullah al-Udhari, 141: Stanza 8.

¹⁸ Beirut Map (Beirut: Lebanese Ministry of Tourism, 2005).

¹⁹ The use of the phrase ‘sense of place’ throughout this paper reflects its use by Doreen Massey in “A Global sense of place.” In Massey, *Space, place and gender*, 146-156.

²⁰ This is particularly salient in Fadi Tufayli’s “The Garden of the Two Martyrs” which constitutes the place-ness of Beirut’s southern suburbs in light of the physical transformation of Beirut’s pine woods into a graveyard for war-dead. In *Transit Beirut: New Writing and Images*, eds. Malu Halasa and Roseanne Saad Khalaf (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 36-45.

²¹ Although outside the scope of this paper, the return of the car bomb to the streets of Beirut on the 14 February 2005 in the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri which claimed the lives of more than twenty others including M.P. Basil Fleyhan and all the members of the Prime Minister’s convoy signals that the car-bomb as a physical and psychological form of terror continues to haunt Beirut. This assassination was followed by a series of targeted assassinations. In June, 2005, writer and journalist Samir Kassir was killed when a bomb was placed underneath his car in Beirut. Intellectual and political figure, George Hawi, was killed in the same way several weeks later. These assassinations were followed by the failed assassination attempts of a journalist and a politician. The year ended with the assassination of the journalist and politician Gibran Tuani in December 2005 by means of a roadside bomb which was detonated as his vehicle was passing by on the way to Beirut.

²² Maha Yahya discusses the reverberations of the city as a theatre of war in a section titled “The City: Theatre of War” in her essay on reconstituting space in Beirut while Samir Khalaf’s “Scares and Scars of War” examines the psychological effects of the war on the social and the spatial. Maha Yahya, “Reconstituting Space: The Abberation of the Urban in Beirut” in *Recovering Beirut*, eds. Samir Khalaf and Philip Khoury, (Leiden, The Netherlands: EJ Brill, 1993), 131. Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, (New York, Chichester West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2002).

²³ Ziad Rahbanni, *Film Ameriki Tawil*, (Beirut: Live Recording, 1980). Although the title is translated as *The American Motion Picture* in the live recording, *A Long American Film* is closer to the Arabic title and is used in most English language references to the play.

²⁴ The conspiracy (al-mu’amara) in Ziad Rahbanni’s play about the civil war is never completely exposed or explained but rather functions as a point around which the play circles.

²⁵ Rahbanni, *Film Ameriki Tawil*.

²⁶ Rahbanni, *Film Ameriki Tawil*.

also reflected in the way Asim's character is ironised before a live audience. Audience laughter in the play's live recording is indicated in the following excerpt from the play to highlight the way in which the play's treatment of the terror of car bombs is transformed into humour before a live audience. Asim's neurosis allows the audience, living and experiencing the same terror on a daily basis, to laugh at their own neuroses. Part of the humour of the play works on its outward expression of the psychological fears of the audience that would otherwise not find a voice. This allows a catharsis to take place as the audience laugh at themselves when they would normally be unable to:

Asim: The white Peugeot parked downstairs...

Miss Aida: What about it?

Asim: It's still parked there. (laughter)

Miss Aida: So what if it's parked there?

Asim: It's been parked there since this morning. (laughter)

Miss Aida: So what?

Asim: It's got explosives. (laughter)

Miss Aida: No, it doesn't.

Asim: It's better if a car bomb expert checks it. We have to call one because it definitely has something...

Miss Aida: We don't need an expert...there's nothing wrong with the car.

Asim: How do you know? It's not right. It's been parked there all day.

Miss Aida: Calm down...just take it easy.

Asim: My God...do you want it to blow us up then?

Miss Aida: It's not going to blow us up.

Asim: So why did God create car bomb experts? (laughter)

Miss Aida: Not every parked car needs a car bomb expert...²⁷

This conversation also works as an ironic expression of place, whereby noticing that a white car has been parked downstairs all day signals that you are in Beirut.

Similarly, Rachid Daif's *Forget the Car* also works as an ironic reference of Beirut as a place. Although set in the post-civil war years, the spatial vocabulary of fear nonetheless makes an unexpected return. When the novel's protagonist devises a plan to get his girlfriend back by leaving his Subaru parked outside her flat with a 'For Sale' sign, he is not expecting the response he receives.²⁸

I was asleep when my phone rang... I answered. It was a police officer from the local station wanting to confirm the identity of the car's owner. I answered in the affirmative that I was definitely the owner of the car, thinking that this reply would end the interrogation.

Who are you he asked.

I'm me I replied; I'm the owner of the car.

If I didn't want the car opened, searched and taken somewhere far away I had better get out of bed and get there immediately.²⁹

The novel's protagonist later discovers that his girlfriend had deliberately called the police and drawn their attention to the 'suspicious' car outside her flat that was not 'from the neighbourhood.' When the protagonist arrives at the police station half an hour later he sees "people...gathered at the corners of the adjoining streets where the car was parked looking at it cautiously out of fear that it was loaded with explosives."³⁰ He spends the night under interrogation. When he finally leaves the station the following morning the irony of the narrative is undercut by the reality of life in Beirut and he says:

I hadn't noticed that representatives from the resistance against Israel live in this neighbourhood, and only a few weeks ago, one of the leaders of the resistance had been assassinated in the centre of Beirut.³¹

The car bomb also appears in Rachid Daif's *Techniques of Misery*. Unlike *Forget the Car*, which was set in post-war Beirut, *Techniques of Misery* is set during the civil war. The protagonist of *Techniques of Misery*, Hashim, leaves his house by foot walking towards Hamra Street in the centre of Beirut. He checks his watch which tells him that it is nine o'clock and then reaches into his pocket to check for his tranquilisers and pain killers. By this time:

...he had arrived at the intersection of Snoubra at the Syrian army checkpoint. Here, there were no parked cars in the whole area. It was illegal. Here...here Hashim stopped a little, caught his breath, and observed the road ahead near the Minqara building where there were a lot of parked cars, and cars traveling down towards Hamra. He took a step in this direction. He stopped again.

He observed the road in front of him again, where the parked cars overflowed onto the footpath. He looked at his watch again: 9:30!

²⁷ Rahbanni, Film Ameriki Tawil.

²⁸ Rachid Daif, *Insi al-Siyara (Forget the Car)*, (Beirut: Riad el-Rayyes Books, 2002), 134.

²⁹ Daif, *Insi al-Siyara*, 134-5.

³⁰ Daif, *Insi al-Siyara*, 135.

³¹ Daif, *Insi al-Siyara*, 135.

He could feel sweat forming on his forehead on this cold winter's day. He put his hand into his pocket again and felt for the tranquilisers and pain killers... He bit the inside of his bottom lip without opening his mouth and continued.³²

Hashim makes his way into Hamra weaving around the cars slowly, "without making eye contact with any of them."³³ One car however grabs his attention and makes his hair stand on end. He tries to move away from it as much as he can. "He closed his eyes as someone who had been hit closes their eyes" for the length of one step, and then he opened them as someone who hadn't been hit.³⁴ The dramatisation of Hashim's fear of car bombs is undercut with textual irony once he arrives at the café to meet his friends. He lights up a cigarette and breathes deeply leading one of his friends to ask whether he wasn't going to give up smoking.³⁵ "Yes," he replies, but "I usually leave home... between nine and eleven, and this is a perfect time for car bombs."³⁶

The recurring nightmare of the car bomb, dramatised and ironised, rewrites Beirut's familiar landmarks as elements of the spatial vocabulary of fear in which the socio-psychological damage of war alters the places of the city. Although clearly used by Rahbanni and Daif to different effect, it nonetheless surfaces as an obsessive fear in response to what Samira Aghacy describes as the "violation of boundaries, those imposed by the civil war."³⁷

A Balcony of Spaces

From a balcony on Abdel Azziz Street in the Hamra area of Beirut, it is possible to see how the war in Beirut continues to permeate the area's spatial vocabulary (Figure 1). This commercial and business district in the centre of Beirut experienced the impact of the conflict. Although the scene from the balcony appears ordinary enough, it reverberates with low-

level anxiety that recalls Jalal Toufic's observation: "How provincial 1992 Beirut would be were it not for its war and civil-war ruins."³⁸

The scene in Figure 1 catches a glimpse of the shop-front of a vibrant gift shop (lower left) specializing in the off-beat and unusual. Apparently, few of the store's customers notice the details of the design of the wrapping paper before they leave the store (Figure 2). Although somewhat veiled by the squares of red, green and white (in this case brown due to it being printed on brown paper) that evoke the Lebanese flag, these pictures do not recall the cosmopolitan, glitzy and enduring Beirut that the tourist industry promotes, but rather some of the most horrific war-scenes that directly or indirectly constitute part of this area's memory. As such, the images on the store's wrapping paper reference a spatial vocabulary of fear that persists despite the quietude of the street view and instigate what Yacoub and Lasserre describe as a change in 'aspect.'³⁹ A change in 'aspect' can be read as a shift in 'place-ness' brought about by a shift in 'gaze,' since "the aspect offers, not time itself, but the movement of its coming."⁴⁰ In "The City of Beirut is no exception," Yacoub and Lasserre write:

...I suddenly see this street near the port of Beirut with a certain nervousness, but I don't know why. It withdraws ever so slightly away from me, I cannot believe in it in the same way. And thus it is tinged with a diffuse disquiet, it changes aspect.⁴¹

In the same way, the store's wrapping paper alters the view from the balcony on Abdel Azziz street so that it is reconstituted with a shift in gaze. The view from the balcony is not hierarchical; it is constituted by views from below. In the movement between the view from the balcony and the view from within, another view emerges.

³² Rachid Daif, *Techaniyat al-Bu'us*, (Techniques of Misery), (Beirut: Riad el-Rayyess, 2001; 1st ed. 1989), 12.

³³ Daif, *Techaniyat al-Bu'us*, 13.

³⁴ Daif, *Techaniyat al-Bu'us*, 13.

³⁵ Daif, *Techaniyat al-Bu'us*, 16.

³⁶ Daif, *Techaniyat al-Bu'us*, 16.

³⁷ Samira Aghacy, "Rachid El Daif's An Exposed Space between Drowsiness and Sleep: Abortive Representation," in *Journal of Arabic Literature*. 27: 3 (October, 1996), 195.

³⁸ Jalal Toufic, "Ruins," in *Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations 1: Beirut, Lebanon*, (Barcelona: Fundacio de Antoni Tapies, 2002), 20.

³⁹ Yacoub and Lasserre, *Beirut is a Magnificent City*, 99-100.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 282. Cited in Yacoub and Lasserre, *Beirut is a Magnificent City*, Footnote 4, 103.

⁴¹ Yacoub and Lasserre, *Beirut is a Magnificent City*, 99.



Figure 1: A View from a balcony on Abdel Azziz Street, Beirut 2005



Figure 2: Details of the wrapping paper. House on Mars Gift Shop Beirut

The movement between detail and panorama constitutes a spatial vocabulary that extends beyond the limitations of each. Such a view was possible at the Jean-Marc Nahas exhibition *Beyrouth Mon Amour* at the French Cultural Centre in Beirut in February 2005.⁴² Part of the exhibition consisted of an artwork that covered an entire wall (Figure 3). This work was comprised of hundreds of small, individual 'Beirut scenes' or 'snapshots,' many of them depicting death, suffering and the horrors of war (Figure 4). The

multiplicity of these individual scenes works to unsettle the grandeur of the size of the artwork.⁴³ The details of the scenes unsettle its location at the prestigious French Cultural Centre. As such, the exhibition instigates a change in the aspect of place and reminds us of the Centre's location in close proximity to the National Museum of Beirut, known during the war years not for its showcase of cultural artefacts, most of which were looted, but for its heavily milit-

⁴² Jean Marc Nahas, *Beyrouth Mon Amour*, exhibition, (Beirut: Centre Culturel Francais, 10 February to 4 March 2005).

⁴³ Details of the artwork can be found in Jean-Marc Nahas, *Jet d'encre*, (Beirut: Alarm Editions, 2005).

arised checkpoint dubbed the “Museum Crossing” (al-Mathaf in Arabic).

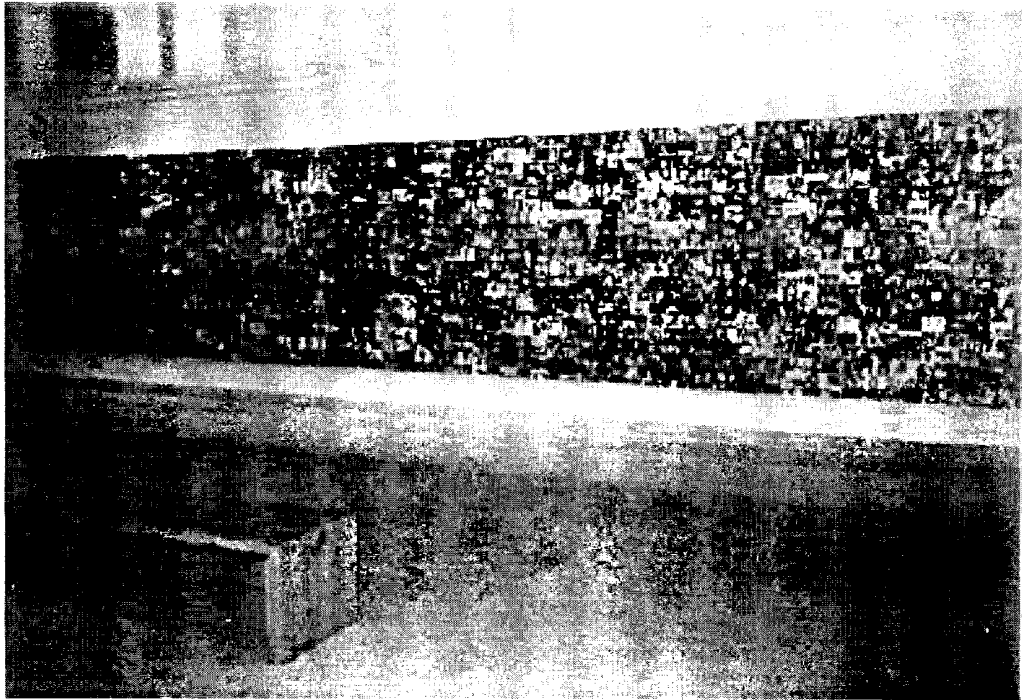


Figure 3: An artwork from the exhibition 'Beyrouth Mon Amour' Beirut, 2005



Figure 4: Detail from the artwork. Jean-Marc Nahas, Jet d'encre: (Alarm Editions, 2005, Beirut)

From a video about the restoration of the National Museum of Beirut made in Beirut and shown at an

exhibition in Sydney, the scene of the destruction of the National Museum of Beirut (Figure 5) constitutes

a movement through several spaces: motion media and still media, Beirut and Sydney, destruction and exhibition, architecture and ethnography, National Museum and Powerhouse Museum, as well as a movement through the spaces of the Museum Crossing itself which for almost fifteen years was one of the checkpoints that divided Beirut into two separate sectors. Indeed, the 'Museum Crossing' itself was a place of movement between 'East' and 'West' Beirut. Hazim Saghie's chronicle of the 1982 siege of Beirut encapsulates some of the frantic movement at the Museum Crossing and the resonating sense of place it produced:

The crossing between al-Barbir and al-Mathaf in the summer of 1982 was crowded with cars and people who were only interested in carrying on with their lives; they didn't want to fight.

Some of them wanted water, some of them were carrying babies, as if the tiny creatures were pleas for compassion and mercy since they were Muslim families going among the Christians for sanctuary.⁴⁴

The newly restored National Museum that appears in tourist brochures today seems to conceal these reverberations of place through the considerable lack of the physical presence of people at what was once a militarized crossing. Accounts such as Saghie's, however, continue to produce the place of the Museum as a social space marked by division and struggle, creating a shift in gaze which alters the aspect of its stillness in present-day tourist brochures, a stillness which ironically references the absence of the checkpoints.



Figure 5: Destruction of the National Museum of Beirut. From the film *Revival of a Museum* shown at the Beirut to Baghdad Exhibition, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, August 2004

During the civil war, the Museum Crossing was a point of movement along what was known as the

'Green Line.' Maha Yahya describes the 'Green Line' as "a stoneless 'Berlin Wall'" between the two

⁴⁴ Hazim Saghie, "Crossings: Beirut in the Eighties" in *Transit Beirut*, eds. Halu Malassa & Roseanne Saad Khalaf, (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 112.

sectors of Beirut, recalling Louis Mumford's ancestral cities' in which the fortified city wall socially delineated "between the insider and the outsider."⁴⁵ Yahya writes: "[w]ith the first rounds of heavy fighting, Beirut quickly degenerated into a series of little enclaves linked together by this winding 'invisible wall.'⁴⁶ These lines of demarcation recurred throughout the city on many levels, particularly in the inside/outside ideologies of the home. While this process of delineation was the result of a total failure of negotiation, it also necessitated the creation of new 'breathing spaces'⁴⁷ in order to facilitate movement between the inside and outside. Like the Museum Crossing, these areas were clearly marked and heavily militarised.

The creation of military checkpoints as spaces of negotiation also signalled the destruction of social spaces of negotiation, like the balcony.⁴⁸ It is therefore not surprising that many of the buildings that were damaged by the war partially or totally lost their balconies. One such example was the building housing the offices of the Municipality of Beirut in the centre of the city. The comparative pictures published in Ayman Trawi's *Beirut's Memory* (Figures 6 and 7) highlight the return of the balconies, decorated with numerous Lebanese flags signalling the return of national and nationalist dialogue to the public arena, after the building's post-war restoration.



Figure 6: The Municipality of Beirut in the civil-war period. Ayman Trawi, *Dhakirat Beirut/Beirut's Memory/La memoire de Beyrouth* (Beirut: Banque de la Mediterranee, 2003)

In Beirut the balcony has a particular importance and resonance. Its return denotes not only the return of nationalist dialogue, but the return of everyday life

(Figure 8). This resonance is picked up by Diyala Khusawana in her article "Why do I love you Beirut?" for the *Inside the Place/Outside the Place*

⁴⁵ Maha Yahya, "Reconstituting Space: The Abberation of the Urban" in *Recovering Beirut*, eds. Samir Khalaf and Philip Khoury, 132-133.

⁴⁶ Maha Yahya, "Reconstituting Space: The Abberation of the Urban" in *Recovering Beirut*, eds. Samir Khalaf and Philip Khoury, 133.

⁴⁷ Maha Yahya refers to the "military checkpoints" as "the only breathing spaces between various sectors" thus becoming "the gateways into different territories." Maha Yahya, "Reconstituting Space: The Abberation of the Urban" in *Recovering Beirut*, eds. Samir Khalaf and Philip Khoury, 134.

⁴⁸ Samir Khalaf notes that during the war years "[b]alconies, verandahs, walk-ups, doorways, and all other open airy and buoyant places the Lebanese craved and exploited with such ingenuity became dreaded spaces to be bolted and shielded." Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, 249.

edition of the Arabic cultural newspaper *Zawaya*. It is significant that Khusawana chooses to begin her article with the balcony:

I have a nice home. A large apartment filled with sunlight all day long. I have three balconies. The large balcony looks out onto a garden with chickens and a rooster and almond trees and a grape vine... I drink my coffee on the balcony every morning, and watch the world go by. And the world watches me.

In the building across from me lives a woman with her husband. She is originally from Greece. We got to know each other after we discovered that we hung the same sheets out on our clothes

lines. Beige sheets with blue flowers. When I see her in the street, we chat, and she always asks me about my studies.⁴⁹

The balcony appears in Khusawana's article as a space that links between here (this home) and there (that home). It is a negotiating space. The negotiating space reinstates dialogue into the spatial vocabulary of place whether that place is the space *between* two adjacent buildings or two adjacent buildings and the space between them. The balcony allows dialogue to occupy a (separate) physical form. In this case, the sheets hanging out on the clothes lines constitute a spatial dialogue which leads to the conversation between the two women.



Figure 7: The restored Municipality of Beirut. Ayman Trawi, *Dhakirat Beirut/Beirut's Memory/La memoire de Beyrouth* (Beirut: Banque de la Mediterranee, 2003)

⁴⁹ Dalia Khusawana, "Li matha Uhibuki ya Beirut?" (Why do I love you Beirut?) in *Zawaya*, 10-11 (January 2005): 8.



Figure 8: The Return of everyday Life, Beirut 2003

Spatiality in the Travelling City

The re-emergence of dialogue in the post-war era is constituted in part by the global adventures of Beirut as a travelling city. When migrants and exiles travel, their cities travel with them as a set of spatial elements. This displacement allows place to emerge as a product of movement across space, a product of travel. In this way, Beirut's famous 'Rawsha' travels to Sydney and a balcony is opened.⁵⁰ In traveling, Beirut is initially embedded in its new home as an expression of nostalgia. Memory is triggered by the spatial transfer of the visual aesthetic. But the visual aesthetic relies on several aspects of spatial recall to be enacted simultaneously.

Through the landmark, it is possible to recreate aspects of Beirut in other places. The name of a Lebanese restaurant in Sydney for example functions precisely by choosing aspects of Beirut's spatial vocabulary which allow the city to travel and to be reconstituted as a 'local' in other localities (Figure 9). In order for Beirut to acquire a place in the spatial vocabulary of Sydney, it is necessary for several elements to travel. The actual physical rocks are only one aspect. In representing the rocks as a product of simulacra, the artificiality of their new place-ness is fully exposed and nostalgia gives way to desire (Figure 10). This is the desire to recreate a place in which the rocks, the restaurant, and the table, can be experienced simultaneously.

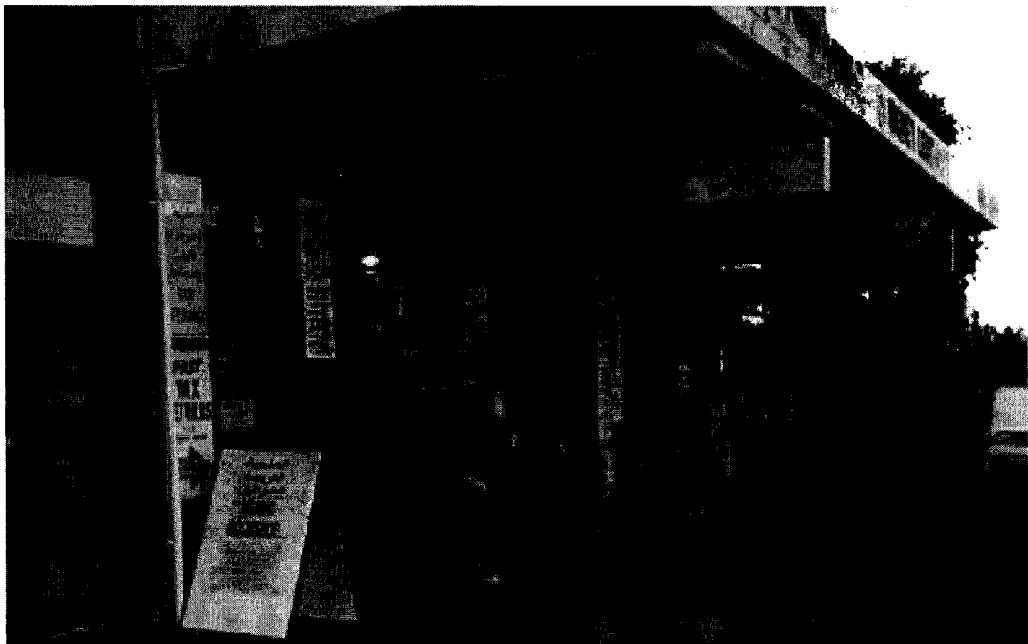


Figure 9: Al Rawsha/La Roche Restaurant, Sydney 2005

⁵⁰ Al-Rawsha refers to a site off the coast of Beirut constituted of some large rocks close to the shore. The whole area is known as 'Al-Rawsha' (or 'La Roche' in French) and many of the cafes and restaurants in the area have incorporated this landmark into their names.

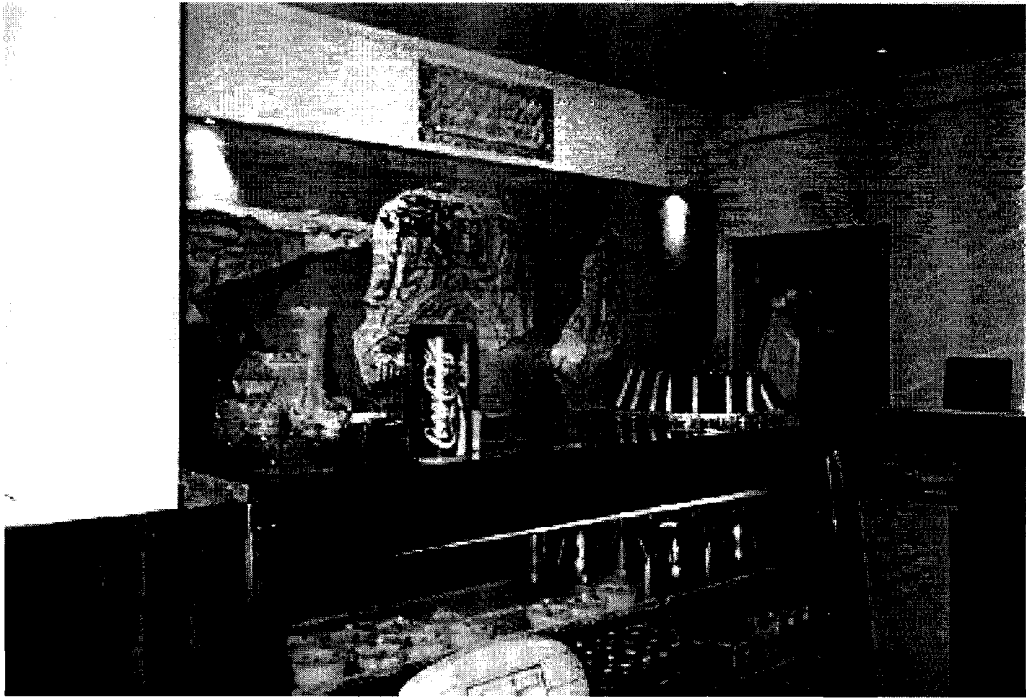


Figure 10: Inside al-Rawsha/ La Roche Restaurant, Sydney 2005

Beirut Express restaurant in London displays a different desire (Figure 11). This desire alludes to a present that looks towards the future. The desire for travel here is mediated through speed rather than memory. It evokes different aspects of recall. The trendy snack shops around Beirut's Bliss Street are one aspect.⁵¹ These aspects are all outward looking. They reflect Beirut's supposed modernity. The style

and colour of the Arabic word Beirut on the restaurant's sign (left of the *Beirut Express* logo) similarly mimics Beirut's post-war 'modernity' by replicating the Arabic calligraphy of the new Municipality of Beirut logo (Figure 12). The spatial vocabulary referenced by *Beirut Express* constructs Beirut as a place travelling towards a modern future.

⁵¹ Bliss Street, lining the main entrance to the American University of Beirut in Hamra, is full of popular, fast-food chain stores.



Figure 11: Beirut Express Restaurant, London 2005



Figure 12: Municipality of Beirut Reconstruction Logo (bottom right), Beirut 2003

Although Lebanon has a long history of travel, the emergence of Beirut as a travelling city was primarily a product of the complete breakdown of its civil society. The destruction of Beirut between 1975 and 1990 meant that for a significant period of time, Beirut was no longer physically recognisable as the

capital of Lebanon. It was no longer a city but a dislocated imaginary of a city. This process is one given to fragmentation and projection so that the city becomes a number of cities realised through a series of projections from other cities. In travelling, it could

exist in other places even though it did not itself exist, nor did it exist any longer as itself.

The poet Nizar Qabbani had lamented Beirut's death in 1976 with despair writing "I carry an urn with Beirut's ashes/And another with mine."⁵² Twenty years later he was still carrying the wounded Beirut in his London exile when he wrote:

Beirut is a state of poetry that cannot be easily replicated, a poem that cannot be rewritten. For this reason it is naïve to ask: When will Beirut return? If it is possible to bring back the stones, steel, aluminium, bridges, cranes, highways and hotels, the return of the Beirut of poetry remains an impossible task.⁵³

In travelling with Beirut's 'ashes,' Beirut re-emerges in Qabbani's *writing space*, rather than *as* the writing space it had previously been.⁵⁴ It no longer functions as a place but as a dislocated spatial imaginary. A spatial rift divides the old Beirut, the Beirut of poetry evoked by Qabbani, and the present Beirut. This rift derives its pathos by evoking the memory of its predecessor. For Qabbani, this pathos marked the spatial poetics of his exile.

For Mahmoud Darwish as for Qabbani, Beirut was no longer inside Beirut, nor was Beirut even a single city, but rather a city of multiple projections from the inside and outside.⁵⁵ In his chronicle of the 1982 siege, Darwish wrote that "there was no Beirut in Beirut."⁵⁶ But even before this, Darwish had lamented the suicide of his friend, the Lebanese poet Khalil Hawi, on 6 June, 1982:

In his house a hunting rifle,
A bird in his chest
And in the trees a salty sterility.
He didn't witness the last chapter of the city.
Everything was clear from the beginning,

Clear.
Or clear
Or clear
And Khalil Hawi does not want death, despite himself
He listens to his own tune
Death and freedom
He does want death despite himself
But to begin his poem
And leave...⁵⁷

Hawi had shot himself on his balcony in Beirut after the Israeli tanks rolled into the city.⁵⁸ He had not stayed to experience the full scale of the siege that turned Beirut into a desert for Adonis, or as Darwish wrote, he had left "before June could tempt him."⁵⁹ Hawi's suicide altered Beirut's prevailing vocabulary of fear. He dared to go outside onto the balcony, which in war had become a no-space. And so the balcony emerges as a space of absolute defiance. It does not mark dialogue, only the end of dialogue. "The poet's poem was completely exposed,"⁶⁰ wrote Darwish. This poem was the silence of death. The balcony as part of Beirut's spatial vocabulary temporarily returns. But it returns momentarily, only to say goodbye.

The places evoked in this paper are inadvertently places of travel that have emerged through my own migration. Textual or physical, this travel is part of the sense of movement Beirut evokes. Beirut emerges as a series of moving images on a journey that allude to different journeys and conflicting destinations. Beirut emerges as a multiplicity of events and spatial reverberations caught within a series of displacements and counter-displacements. The balcony appears only to disappear: it resonates with absence. The balcony disappears only to appear, as an element of travel.

References

- Abi Samra, Mohammad. *Bilad al-Mahana wal-Khawf*. Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2003.
Adonis. "The Desert (The Diary of Beirut under Siege, 1982)" translated from the Arabic "Al-Sahra: Mukhtarāt min yawmiyat hisar Beirut, 1982" by Abdullah al-Udhari. In *Victims of a Map: A Bilingual Anthology of Arabic Poetry*. Samih al-Qasim, Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, ed. Abdullah al-Udhari. London: Al-Saqi Books/Zed Press, 1984.
Ajami, Fouad. *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

⁵² Qabbani, Ila Beirut al-Untha ma' hubi, 12.

⁵³ Qabbani, Min Awraqi al-Majhulah, 91-2.

⁵⁴ Qabbani had spoken of Beirut as constituting what he called his 'space for writing' in Qabbani, Ila Beirut al-Untha ma' hubi.

⁵⁵ Mahmoud Darwish, Memory for Forgetfulness, August Beirut, 1982, translated from the Arabic Dhakhira lil-Nisyan by Ibrahim Muhawi (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 92-3.

⁵⁶ Mahmoud Darwish, Memory for Forgetfulness, August, Beirut 1982, 93.

⁵⁷ This excerpt is from Madih al-Thil al-Ali which was published before Memory for Forgetfulness. Darwish, Madih al-Thil al-Ali, 78-79.

⁵⁸ Details of Hawi's suicide can be found in "The Suicide of Khalil Hawi: Requiem for a Generation," in Fouad Ajami, The Dream Palace of the Arabs (New York: Vintage Books, 1999, 1st edition Pantheon Books, 1998), 26-110. Some details on Hawi also emerge in Darwish, Memory for Forgetfulness.

⁵⁹ Darwish, Madih al-Thil al-Ali, 80.

⁶⁰ Darwish, Madih al-Thil al-Ali, 80.

- Aghacy, Samira. "Rachid El Daif's *An Exposed Space between Drowsiness and Sleep*: Abortive Representation." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 27: 3 (October, 1996).
- Beirut Map. Beirut: Lebanese Ministry of Tourism, 2005.
- Daif, Rachid. *Techaniyat al-Bu'us*. Beirut: Riad el-Rayyess, 2001, 1st ed. 1989.
- . *Insi al-Siyara*. Beirut: Riad el-Rayyess Books, 2002.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *Madih al-Thil al-Ali*. Beirut: Dar al-Awda, 1984.
- . *Memory for Forgetfulness, August, Beirut, 1982*, translated from the Arabic *Dhakhira lil-Nisyan* by Ibrahim Muhawi. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.
- Halasa, Malu, & Roseanne Saad Khalaf, eds. *Transit Beirut: New Writing and Images*. London: Saqi Books, 2004.
- Khalaf, Samir. "Urban Design and the Recovery of Beirut." In *Recovering Beirut*, eds. Samir Khalaf and Philip Khoury. Leiden, The Netherlands: EJ Brill, 1993.
- . *Cultural Resistance: Global and Local Encounters in the Middle East*. London: Saqi, 2001.
- . *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*. New York, Chichester West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Khalaf, Samir and Philip Khoury, eds. *Recovering Beirut*. Leiden, The Netherlands: EJ Brill, 1993.
- Khusawana, Dalia. "Li matha Uhibuki ya Beirut?" In *Zawaya* 10-11 (January 2005).
- Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- Nahas, Jean-Marc. *Jet d'encre*. Beirut: Alarm Editions, 2005.
- Qabbani, Nizar. *Ila Beirut al-Untha ma' Hubi*. Beirut: Nizar Qabbani Publications, 1976.
- . *Min Awraqi al-Majhula*. Beirut: Nizar Qabbani Publications, 2000.
- Rahbanni, Ziad. *Film Ameriki Tawil*. Beirut: 1980.
- Rowe, Peter & Hashim Sarkis, eds. *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998.
- Saghie, Hazim. "Crossings: Beirut in the Eighties." In *Transit Beirut*, eds. Halu Malassa and Roseanne Saad Khalaf. London: Saqi Books, 2004.
- Soja, Edward. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los-Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Toufic, Jalal. "Ruins." in *Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations 1: Beirut, Lebanon*. Barcelona: Fundacio de Antoni Tapies, 2002.
- Trawi, Ayman. *Dhakhirat Beirut/Beirut's Memory/La Memoire de Beyrouth*. Beirut: Banque de la Mediterranee, 2003.
- Tueni, Ghassan. "From a Geography of Fear to a Geography of Hope." in *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City*, eds. Peter Rowe & Sarkis Hashim. Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998.
- Tufayli, Fadi. "The Garden of the Two Martyrs" in *Transit Beirut: New Writing and Images*, eds. Malu Halasa and Roseanne Saad Khalaf. London: Saqi Books, 2004.
- Yacoub, Paola and Michel Lasserre. *Beirut es una ciudad magnifica: cuadros sinopticos/Beirut is a magnificent city: synoptic pictures*. Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 2003.
- Yahya, Maha. "Reconstituting Space: The Abberation of the Urban in Beirut." In *Recovering Beirut*, eds. Samir Khalaf and Philip Khoury. Leiden, The Netherlands: EJ Brill, 1993.

About the Author

Ms. Nour Dados

Nour Dados is a full-time PhD student at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research project is an investigation of memory and place in Beirut.