ARABIC LITERATURE FOR THE CLASSROOM

Teaching Methods, Theories, Themes and Texts

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The literary text has often been allocated a privileged relationship with the city. The modern novel has been inextricably linked to the urban.\(^1\) Raymond Williams argues that “the critically altered relationship between men and things, of which the city was the most evident social and visual embodiment” had also inextricably altered the genre of the novel, so much so that “it does not matter which way we put it: the experience of the city is the fictional method; or the fictional method is the experience of the city.”\(^2\) Abdou Maliq Simone has argued that city and text are also ethically linked together: “When diverse peoples, localities and regions intersect, there is a need to narrate the intersection, to define it as an intersection of differences,” concluding that “these diversities are already to some extent incorporated into each other, already on the same plane of communicability.”\(^3\) What more appropriate form to narrate differences than the literary, particularly the novelistic, whose work is, in effect, to make knowable communities out of seemingly disparate individuals, both to represent and make sense of the “new and complex social order” of modernity?\(^4\) By narrating the “intersection of differences,” the urban text “[forces into consciousness] the real and inevitable relationships and connections, the necessary recognitions and avowals of any human society.”\(^5\)

To rephrase this in Samia Mehrez’s words, narrative literature is a privileged form for talking about cities, “precisely because it allows, through its very form and structure, the representation not only of real material geopolitics and histories, but a complex network of human relations across literary topography as well.”\(^6\) If indeed narrative literature is a privileged form for talking about cities, then, in turn, as scholars of literature trained in close reading, we have a privileged role both inside and outside the classroom to make these complex networks visible to our readers, interlocutors, and students. By approaching the novel using the lens of a theoretical approach like cityness, we can begin to untangle these connections.
without flattening out differences, and to explore the entanglements of such complex social structures as the urban without reduction or over-simplification. As I hope to show in this study, this theoretical framework enables us to revisit and cast light on familiar texts, and examine them in a different critical framework.

In this essay, I will focus on the relationship between cityness and the novel as a paradigm for teaching contemporary Arabic literature in the cultural context of the American academy. While I privilege the novel, I admit the existence of a large body of urban literature outside the novelistic tradition. In this critical and pedagogical reading, I will briefly explain the use of “cityness,” and develop my argument that the novel is an especially privileged mode for reflecting upon and producing cityness, as well as making meaning of urban space. Next, I will show how a reading of two canonical novels from the Lebanese civil war focused on the dialectical relationship between literary and spatial practices and understandings can shed new light on canonical texts. Finally, I will briefly discuss the advantages of incorporating this potentially multidisciplinary approach into the classroom.

On cityness

Introducing Abdou Maliq Simone’s City Life from Jakarta to Dakar, Charles Lambert summarizes cityness as capturing “those elements of city life that cannot be captured, least of all by the organizing categories of modern social science.” He adds: “Cityness is about surprises – contradictions that are the source of human enterprise … the visibility below surface appearances of; yes, terrible human misery but also of people working together in order to live.” Moreover, Lambert adds, “cities […] require multiple ways of talking about and engaging them that do not always seem to easily fit together.” Simone’s call for new ways to talk about cities is precisely the formal question at the heart of the urban text – in this case, the novel – since its inception; in fact, the most successful urban novels produce and recount precisely the sort of intersections of differences that Simone is concerned about narrating. Polyphonic as they are, novels are inherently concerned with revealing and examining “terrible human misery” – among other things – and they often, as the work of Raymond Williams and his intellectual heirs has revealed, deal with the relations of people working together; in short, literary texts have dealt with the articulation of cityness in its myriad forms. Furthermore, literary texts play a crucial role in writing and capturing the space at the intersection of differences, and forming seemingly unconnected urban individuals into knowable communities. In other words, novels should be a significant voice in the growing dialogue on the global city.

Yet, while literature has often been linked to urban space, and literary criticism has been interested in cities as well as other spatial matters – such as landscape, for example – the body of analytic work about the city, including the Arab city, has often focused on the symbolic or metaphorical representations of urban space and/or landscapes, and less on cities as actual places. On one hand, this is inevitable; after all, literary language is metaphorical. However, on the other, the exclusive
reliance on metaphor reduces the text's ability to contain the complexities and contradictions that Simone describes as being essential to urban narratives. For example, in her introduction to the canonical anthology *Modern Arabic Poetry*, Salma Khadra Jayyusi uses “the city” as a symbol of what she perceives to be the ills of modernity and tyrannical political rule. She posits that cities are “the center of exploitation and misery, of social injustice and political intrigue,” and that poetry largely deals with the “problems of the modern city.”

Jayyusi places “the symbols of the lost village of innocence, peace and love in tragic opposition to the barren city of corruption and cruelty where love dies and only impotency and cruelty prevail” — a point which reduces or negates the city as a lived space (for more, see Chapter 13 in this volume).

If there is an exception to this rule, it is, in Jayyusi’s view, the Palestinian city, for she argues, “the city, like the rest of the land” are “all integral parts of their lost and ever-sought-after dream. It is interesting to note that the symbol of Palestine lost and Palestine regained, of innocence lost and innocence regained, however, is the city.” The reductive nature of Jayyusi’s approach flattens instead of fleshing out.

While the city has been deployed symbolically in many national and transnational Arab literary traditions, it is also true that readings which emphasize the symbolic and allegorical aspects of urban life suppress or ignore political, social and historical contexts in favor of the abstract or metaphorical meanings of space. In David Harvey’s words, “[t]here seems to be a world of difference [between] invocation of space, place and environment (nature) as convenient metaphors on the one hand and integrating them as historical and geographical realities into social and literary theory on the other.”

For Harvey, the necessity of such work is a matter of theoretical and political consequence, since this “not only has a transformative effect upon the terrain of theory, but also opens up a terrain of political possibilities.” One attempt to integrate historical and geographical materiality into literary debate comes from Nirvana Tanoukh, who argues for a move away from “metaphorical deployments of ‘space’ toward concrete discussions about the materiality of literary landscapes.”

This, she suggests, “would enable a more precise formulation of the role of literature, and literary analysis, in the history of the production of space.” Furthermore, she argues for the reintegration of a specific historical, political and geographical context into literary analysis: “What better program for a geographically enlarged literary history than to conceptualize the dialectic of lived time and lived space in and around literature — in order to understand the entanglement of literature in the history of the production of space.”

Tanoukh’s argument seeks to find a place for the often-marginalized voice of literary production and literary criticism within the disciplines that have traditionally concerned themselves with space: urban studies, policy, economics, but also anthropology, human geography and architecture. In the Arab world, space and place — particularly, in recent years, urban space — have been an especially combustible site of contestations over power, identity, and visibility — one only has to remember the pivotal images of the public city square in cities across the Arab world throughout 2011.
Bringing the city into the classroom

So, how exactly does one go about bringing the city, in all its cityness, into the classroom, and how can one integrate the complex layers of historical and geographical materiality into the teaching of novels, while emphasizing the novel’s privileged role in producing images of the city as a site of intersections of gender, class, religions, sexualities, politics, histories and cultures? As an example of how this approach may work in the classroom, I will focus on literary representations of Beirut during the Lebanese civil war. I aim to show how two quasi-canonical texts of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), Etel Adnan’s *Sitt Marie Rose* and, to a lesser extent, Mahmoud Darwish’s *Memory for Forgetfulness* (*Dhākira lil-Nisyān*) can be read anew with a focus on what Tanoukhí would describe as their “entanglement in the history of the production of space.” I have chosen these particular texts as examples because of their quasi-canonicity and ready availability in English translations, and the fact that novels of the Lebanese civil war are taught in a wide-ranging variety of classrooms, and not only in Arabic literature classes.

I initially draw students’ attention to ways that metaphor and symbolic language have been deployed to frame the wartime city along gendered lines. In novels such as Adnan’s, Beirut is feminized, a city ravaged by patriarchy, “like a great suffering being, too mad, too overcharged, broken now, gutted, and raped like those girls raped by thirty or forty militia men, and are now mad and in asylums because their families, Mediterranean to the end, would rather hide than cure …”

Yet, there is another side to this representation of the city, what Miriam Cooke refers to as the “whore” side of the victim/whore binary, in which Beirut is represented as a threateningly hypersexual woman. Beirut’s sexuality and femininity are depicted as being so dangerous that they have somehow provoked this destiny. In Mahmoud Darwish’s prose memoir of the 1982 Israeli siege of Beirut, he speculates on the city’s downfall, suggesting it was caused by the fact that “Beirut offers herself to a casual passersby.” In *Sitt Marie Rose*, Beirut’s destruction is the result of her promiscuity. Beirut, Adnan writes, “was heedless to the point of folly. She gathered the manners and customs, the flaws and vengeance, the guilt and debauchery of the whole world into her own belly. Now she has thrown it all up, and that vomit fills all her spaces.” Even in other, less anthropomorphic metaphors, Adnan and Darwish repeat the same point: that the city was torn apart because of its openness. “The city is an electro-magnetic field into which everyone wants to plug himself. It is no longer a place of habitation, but a being which resembles a runaway train,” Adnan writes; Darwish describes Beirut as “a global transformer station, that converted every deviation from the norm into a program of action.” In much of this writing, then, Beirut is characterized by a stream of superlatives that eventually led to its downfall: the city was too beautiful, too open, too alive, too accepting, these writers seem to suggest, and the price it had to pay was high. Beirut is a central character in these tragic accounts; anthropomorphizing metaphors undergird the key rhetorical images used to represent the imagined city. In *War’s Other Voices*, Miriam Cooke argues that the contradictory and sometimes
ambivalent representations of Beirut all co-existed simultaneously, that “writers often addressed this muse, sometimes as a queen, sometimes as a prostitute, sometimes as an ascetic”; in all these representations, Beirut is feminized. 

However, I also encourage students to push beyond this, and argue that the relationship between literature and Beirut at war is not merely a reactive, mimetic one, in which the role of the writer is to find a language to express the fragmentation of the nation and the death of the city in symbolic language. The relation is a dialectical one: by writing about the city at war, Darwish, Adnan and other civil war writers also contributed to producing a narrative of the city that reinforced its divisions and wartime topography. Much can be learned about Beirut during the war years from these novels, including how literature can become a site of engagement with the political, social and material urban realities of war.

Beirut’s urban configuration was irreversibly modified as early as the first ceasefire of 1976. The new logic of divided urban geography could not be overcome by the brief intervals in fighting, and most of the merchants whose shops had been in the center moved their businesses out of the now-desolate area and into the areas controlled by their respective co-religionists. The physical and psychological division of the city into East and West was now complete; in fact, even the traffic was redirected. The changing urban landscape produced its own effects on the city’s inhabitants; in many cases, the new reality of division was initially rejected, but eventually became absorbed into the language and practices of everyday life. Under the constraints and rules, the conflict imposed a new understanding of the city, no less so by Beirut’s inhabitants, for “space develops its own logic, its own practices which in turn reproduce other spaces. Space propels its inhabitation. It precedes, resists, yields to, and survives those who assume it to be a neutral site for their control.” In her account of the Lebanese civil war, Jean Makdisi attests to the imposition and subsequent internalization of a new urban logic onto the cityscape. She points out that whereas the barriers “that divide the city, once entirely artificial, have only partly achieved the intention of those who erected them, there now is a difference between East and West Beirut that never existed before.” Makdisi’s point recognizes the artificiality of the war-imposed boundary, while acknowledging the potency of intention in actually propagating and enforcing the division between both sides of the city. In fact, urban scholar Maha Yahya actually contends that this division was initially psycho-social and later became physical, “an invisible barrier between the inhabitants of the same city, [that] was rendered visibly present through its scenes of destruction, its snipers and numerous military personnel on either side.” Yahya argues that there is a dialectical, rather than causal, relationship between the fragmentary urban space produced by the war and the spatial practices and representations of the city’s inhabitants. Yahya states that due to (and during) the war, “[t]he unified image of Beirut is lost in a maze of boundaries carving through it. This destruction is both physical and spatial. It is a physical fragmentation which creates a change in the meaning and perception of boundaries and barriers between different spaces.” She explains: “It generates and is generated by a reorganization of Beirut’s urban landscape, the use of its spaces,
access into and through various territories." It is this dialectical relation between the space of the city and its perceived and constructed meanings that I develop in this section, and attempt to get across in the classroom.

In *Sitt Marie Rose*, the novel’s first section, "Time 1: A Million Birds," is narrated by an unnamed, yet domineering, narrator; Beirut slowly, but nevertheless abruptly transforms from the "City" on page 9 to the "city," transitioning from the symbolic to the literal, from the general to the specific, as the war takes hold of Beirut and its inhabitants. Furthermore, as Amal Amireh points out, as the city fragments under the eyes of the narrator, so too does the narrative she is producing, until it is "incoherent and incomplete, offering only a partial view of a fragmented reality." As she realizes this, Adnan’s narrator takes recourse in a different kind of language and reproduces a few pages from a newspaper, dealing with war atrocities and murders as "incidents." The novel reproduces the fragmented way in which the city is now comprehended. In a bulleted list, the urban neighborhoods are listed by incident, whether looting, assassination, or arson. The list emerges, mapping out the frontiers of the new city at war: the street near St Joseph Hospital, Ain Remmaneh, Tarik Jdeedeh, Sannine Street, Hammama, Louayzeh, Dekwaneh. However, while it is true that the text of the paper as it is replicated in the novel emphasizes fragmentation, the fragments reconstitute a new whole. Just as the sequence of "incidents" of violence eventually cohered into a "civil war," so too does a new geographical reality of the city begin to take shape. This is an urban geography that is based on the new, wartime geographies, which brought a whole new set of neighborhoods to the forefront of the urban imaginary.

By presenting the new reality of urban division through the mediation of a piece of fragmented newspaper text, the narrator creates a distance between the language of the press and the language of the novel. Yet, just as the text reproduces the fragmentation in the city, it also strives to produce and impose its own vision and articulation of urban space. One of the most striking recurrent images in *Sitt Marie Rose* is the narrator on the balcony of her ninth-floor apartment watching the city below her. Her position gives her a vantage point from which to see the fighters, or the streets emptied of passers-by, or the burning of the port. The balcony, as Amireh suggests, makes her "painfully aware of the limitations of her role as witness," but from her position on a ninth-floor balcony she holds a panoptical gaze, with double vision as voyeur and witness. As Michel de Certeau has pointed out, in every act of voyeurism from above, there is also always "an oblivion and a misunderstanding" of the practices of everyday life. So, while it is true that the narrator inhabits the liminal spaces that place her at a remove from the battles, a closer reading, enabled by the awareness of the multitudinous tensions and contradictions contained in narratives of the urban experience, reveals that Adnan’s narrator is very much invested in replicating divisions and in promoting ideological and spatial divides.

In thinking about the divisions of war, I have often found it useful to introduce students to a new concept to the discussion: the issue of geographical scale, which emphasizes how spatial representations are context-specific and, most importantly,
are produced through systems of signification that produce meaning, including literature. Geographers make a distinction between physical distance and psychological or conceptual framings of distance in their definition of the term "scale"; certainly, this conceptual framework sheds considerable light on the practices and representations of urban division in these wartime novels. While the Dictionary of Human Geography defines scale as "levels of representation, experience and organization of geographical events and processes," it makes a distinction between three kinds of scale: the cartographic, the methodological and the geographical.\textsuperscript{35}

Expanding upon the third category of geographical scale, it adds, "geographical scale is in no sense natural or given. There is nothing inevitable about global, national or urban scales, for instance. These are specific to certain historical and geographical locations, they change over time, sometimes rapidly sometimes slowly."\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, "specific events may embody destructions and reconstructions of various scales at the same time."\textsuperscript{37} In short, scale can be used to relate physical space to literary (and other) modes of representation and production of space; as such, it has become of interest to literary scholars, since paying attention to issues of scale can elucidate the relationship between literature and the production of space, and to "the articulation of distance within a particularly spatialized system of social relations."\textsuperscript{38}

In both Sitt Marie Rose and Memory for Forgetfulness, scale is used to emphasize ideological, religious and national difference within Beirut and Lebanon. In both texts, the small physical distance between both sides of Beirut is scaled upwards, the distance exaggerated, such that it appears as large and unbridgeable as the ideological divide between right (East Beirut) and left (West Beirut), and also a symbol in these texts of the divide between global East and West. Commenting on the fragmentation of Beirut, Darwish writes:

And Beirut herself realized that she wasn't one city, one homeland, or the meeting point of neighboring countries; that the distance between one window and another facing it could be greater than that between us and Washington; and that internecine fighting between one street and another parallel to it could be more intense than that between a Zionist and an Arab nationalist.\textsuperscript{39}

By projecting the physical distance between one window and the other onto a complex geopolitical scale, Darwish's imagery exaggerates the divisions of Beirut during war. Darwish further exacerbates the divide between neighboring windows and adjacent streets by comparing it to the especially bitter struggle between Zionism and Arab nationalism; given the context and background for Memory, one can hardly read this particular comparison neutrally. In the passage, the urban landscape becomes a symbol for a social and political divide that is insurmountable; the city is too divided to be reconciled.

Similarly, in Sitt Marie Rose, one side of the city is placed within a broader geopolitical context that literally distances it from the other side of the city. In the
novel, East Beirut is represented as a site of fascist sterility and violence but also as an intrusion, as not belonging to the rest of Beirut. *Sitt Marie Rose* implies that the war is a clash of civilizations between the Westernized eastern Beirutis and the Orientalized western ones. Marie-Rose, *Sitt Marie Rose*'s tragic heroine, sacrificed for transgressing the boundaries between Christian and Muslim, but also for crossing the border and choosing to remain on the other side of the city, explains right before dying that, "this war is a fight between two powers, two powers and two conceptions of the world."  

Although controversial, the novel's authorial voice imposes a dominant reading of cultural binaries, which is often conveyed through spatial representation. Lisa Suheir Majaj asserts that "[in the novel], Lebanese identity is predicated upon the establishment of clear boundaries between Christian and Muslim, East and West, Lebanese and Palestinian, 'civilized' and 'primitive' -- and upon the implicit relocation of the Christian Lebanese to the 'Western' side of the divide," and that this is established by the strong authorial voice narrating the novel.  

Despite Amal Amireh's assertion that the polyphonic voices of the novel make Adnan's an "interrogative text," "which therefore refuses the hierarchy of discourses of classic realism, and no authorial or authoritative discourse points to a single position which is the place of the coherence of meaning," I find Majaj's reading more compelling: there is an authorial voice, and it certainly imposes a dominant reading of certain binaries, which is often conveyed through spatial representation.  

Adnan's text detaches East Beirut from its western counterpart, and metaphorically aligns it with Mediterranean -- but, more importantly, Christian -- Europe, hundreds of miles farther away, suggesting that it does not belong in the Middle East:  

More westernized and efficient in war as in everything, the Christian quarters have a sort of austerity which links them to certain "pieds-noirs" neighborhoods in Nice or Marseilles, or to little towns in Sicily and Greece. The Moslem enclaves still retain the disorder of the Orient which is still the last good in these essentially bastard countries which have no precise culture except for the one that developed from a pell-mell of values in a state of disintegration.  

Thus, the Christian areas of Beirut are given a Mediterranean identity, and the Christians are identified with the pieds-noirs, signaling that these Christian populations do not belong in this city, just as the French colonial pieds-noirs did not belong in Algeria.  

Adnan uses this metaphor to emphasize both the historical links between the Christian Lebanese and the French and to exclude the Christian communities of Lebanon from any native authenticity. Furthermore, by describing the "disorder of the Orient" in the Western part of the city as "the last good" that remains in "bastard countries" like Lebanon, Adnan's narrator is clearly setting up an opposition between what she describes as the authentic, disordered Orient in the West of Beirut and the fascist, ordered, westernized East that does not belong in the city,
and is the effect of its absorption of other values. While Marie-Rose is punished by
the Christians on the Eastern side of the war for being Christian and for crossing
over to the other side, in West Beirut Christians are welcome, and “it’s a beautiful
day on the other side of the city, and the streets, even with bullets flying, are still
lively.” In contrast to the deaf mute witnesses to her suffering (her students) in
East Beirut, whose voices are literally silenced and cannot tell of the murder they
have witnessed, in West Beirut, the news of Marie-Rose’s kidnapping brings
together an improvised community whose voices rise in concern about Marie-
Rose’s fate. “Telephone calls became more numerous, people went out into the
streets to question each other, stunned and carried to the point of rage.” Moreover,
“[e]veryone knew how horrible this war was, but this woman’s capture brought to
light a feeling of revolt against the injustice of the war which up till then had been
held clenched inside.”

The image of community forming together “in the various western quarters, in
the sectors allied to the Palestinians” around a shared grief, and a shared love for
the alleged “outsider” Lebanese Christian Marie-Rose exacerbates the isolationism,
racism, and obsession with purity that Adnan aligns with the eastern side of the
city, where no remorse is shown for one of theirs who has crossed over. Adnan’s
novel often contradicts itself: Marie-Rose and the unnamed narrator frequently
criticize the Christian fighters for forgetting that they are Middle Eastern; yet, the
novel also seems to ascribe to this division itself through its representation of
the spaces of the other side of the city as foreign. Within this contradiction lies the
narration of cityness, and the above is the sort of critical reading that it enables. Even
in a text dominated by a strong authorial voice, within a novel as dichotomizing
and reductive as *Sitt Marie Rose*, reading spatially allows us to see the narration and
production of differences. In other words, by mobilizing the strategies and practices
of geographical scale in the novel, by writing cityness, Adnan reinforces and
produces a geography of difference.

The exaggerated ideological difference between Christian East and Muslim West
Beirut in both texts is also represented by another play on spatial metaphor, namely
by inverting the older mountain/city binary of early Lebanese nationalism. Where
earlier canonical texts idealized the mountain as the site of purity and the
placeholder for Lebanese identity, in these narratives the mountain is a metonymy
of otherness, and clearly associated with menace and violence; moreover, by
emphasizing the spatial distance between city and mountain, the texts also
emphasize the exclusionary nature of each narrative. In *Memory*, the mountains are
figured as violent and aggressive, and Mahmoud the narrator has to tell himself
while making his morning coffee, “[d]on’t look at the mountains spitting masses of
fire in the direction of your hand. But alas, you can’t forget that over there, in
Ashrafiyah, they’re dancing in ecstasy.” The mountain and Christian East Beirut
are combined in violence, positioned in an elsewhere “over there” that is very far
from the actuality and presence of the narrator. Similarly, in *Sitt Marie Rose*, the
mountain is associated with the right-wing, isolationist Christian ideology of
Marie-Rose’s killers, one of whom is her former love interest, Mounir, who thinks
of himself as European, because he is Christian, and the priest Bouna (Father) Lias, who urges Marie-Rose to "come back to the community. You'll inhale the aromas of baking bread and of the mountains." The mountains here are contrasted with the death that awaits her if she remains on the "other side."49 By representing the city as irreconcilably divided into two sides, the narratives continuously reassert this urban division, and reinforce the social divisions of the city and its inhabitants.

In the novels of Darwish and Adnan, the ideological divides of the early war years, between Palestinian left and Lebanese Christian right emerge on the urban landscape and in the text. In Memory, Darwish claims Beirut had a different identity from that of Lebanon, and that it was not part of the imagined, folkloric Lebanon sung by Lebanese artists and poets, described in the introduction: "Beirut was excluded because it had ceased to be Lebanon's Beirut. In the sectarian view, Beirut was not Lebanon; it had become Arab and was sung by the Arabs."50

These writers, imbricated in the ideological struggle of the time, replicate the divisions of the physical city. In fact, they do more than this: they seem to suggest that the divide is inevitable, a result of the unbridgeable ideological differences of the warring factions. While Darwish's text, to his credit, does attempt some perspective — especially in trying to understand the tension between Palestinians and Lebanese over Lebanon — Adnan's does not. In the words of Elise Salem, the novel is reductive, "heavily ideological, it tends to simplify rather than capture complex Lebanon; and because it is accusatory rather than participatory, it is set outside and beyond the Lebanese experience itself."51

To some extent both Darwish and Adnan's novels globalize the Lebanese conflict. The first section of Adnan's book compares Lebanon to Syria and Europe; as noted earlier, the Lebanese conflict is often represented as a struggle between global Christianity and Islam, or West and East. Darwish's text, on the other hand, places the city within the framework of the Arab–Israeli conflict. This is one of the reasons why in this chapter I have explicitly chosen to focus on Memory for Forgetfulness in part because of its status as a quasi-canonical text in so many modern Arabic literature survey classes, but also because it is a transnational text, and as such, presents a challenge to nationalism of which Darwish himself is well aware. The transnational literary appropriation of Beirut, which was eulogized, drawn, lamented, and represented by a generation of pan-Arab writers and artists, underscores one of the most appealing aspects of teaching a class on cities in literature: that one could break free from the nationalistic constraints of other syllabi and allow students to think of these urban spaces as mixed, heterogeneous, dynamic and creative spaces.

I have focused on Beirut to demonstrate my argument about how literature can participate in debates about the social production of space and also invigorate our teaching of canonical texts, but, of course, such methods would be useful in also thinking about the representation and production of spatial meanings in other cities.52 Such spatially attentive readings could breathe new meanings into these canonical works, in a field that has, according to Michelle Hartman, become relatively fixed and stable, unwilling to take too many theoretical risks, which in turn
"also affects our teaching of these texts – particularly as innovative pedagogy tends to lag behind new theoretical approaches."

Conclusion: sharing cities

At the very beginning of her introduction to *The Literary Atlas of Cairo*, Samia Mehrez describes being flattered when invited to present her work at an interdisciplinary conference, explaining that, "as a scholar of Arabic literature, a field routinely marginalized by the dominant social sciences, I was happy to see that the space for interdisciplinary conversation was both possible and welcome." Then, she adds that "many of the issues raised in the social sciences and in urban studies are in fact represented in literary texts that have provided some of the most eloquent and perceptive readings of urban and social reality and its transformation in a form, language, metaphor, and idiom that are part and parcel of such transformations." It is precisely her interest in the city that enables Mehrez to share her literary approach with other scholars from the social sciences. The city enables her to find a common language and to contribute to a multidisciplinary academic framework, and her scholarly focus on the urban allows her to bring literary debates into new academic fora, to position literature as a privileged interlocutor, alongside the social sciences and urban studies, of the urban experience. Focusing on the city can enable new interdisciplinary networks to be made within and across academic departments which may invigorate teaching, learning and research.

Teaching thematically, through a topic like the city, may enable conversations between colleagues that bridge intellectual divides. In "For a ‘Foreign Audience’: The Challenges of Teaching Arabic Literature in the American Academy," Magda al-Nowaihi complains of the institutional structures that impede a multi-dimensional, well-rounded scholarly approach to Arabic literature. She describes departments of Middle Eastern studies as:

A number of individual scholars who have been forcibly lumped together as a matter of convenience for powers that need to look at the countries they focus on as one region. The ghettoization of these departments within the American academy parallels the disenfranchisement of the cultures they represent in the power games on the world arena, and their lack of inner cohesion and solidarity is reminiscent of the sad divisions between the different nation states of the Middle East.

Potentially, by offering a class on an interdisciplinary topic like "the city," one could bring together the disparate scholars that make up a Middle East or Near East Studies department in a collaborative teaching environment: historians, anthropologists, urban scholars and literary scholars could be involved in the design and teaching of such a class. Moreover, by articulating similar challenges as well as national differences, these educators may be able to transcend the nation-centric
ghettoization that al-Nowaihi finds problematic in Middle Eastern Studies, but which others have used to critique the project of comparative literature as a whole.

For students, the appeal of a course on the modern city in Arabic literature, I believe, is that it can be truly multidisciplinary; not only could it attract students interested in Arabic literature, or Middle Eastern Studies, but also students who would not be otherwise: those with an interest in urban studies, for example. From the teaching standpoint, it also offers some really exciting opportunities for collaborative and team-teaching initiatives across disciplines. As I see it, thinking about Arabic literature, particularly Arabic literature in translation, from a new pedagogical paradigm will take the focus away from a nation-based, survey-orientated syllabus and bring modern (and even classical) Arabic literature into an engagement not only with itself, but also with other theoretical and cultural frameworks which, in turn, take the field out of the narrow, marginalized frame in which it has found itself.57 Furthermore, by focusing on the city as the topic of a class, new and interesting connections between various cultures and topics may be made, such as, for example, the city during wartime in literature about Beirut and about Baghdad; the dystopian facts of development in new Cairo and in Saudi Arabia; and life under oppressive circumstances in Tripoli and in Alexandria. By forging new connections between disparate texts, and by designing a syllabus around a flexible, circulating, and ever-increasing body of literature, perhaps one may be able to overcome some of the challenges articulated and identified by other scholars in the field. Furthermore, focusing on space enables literary analysts to engage with different forms of knowledge production – not only with the subject matter of making meaning from words, but also with the intersecting topics that thinking about city space enables: gender, poverty, power, class, ethnicity, migration – all are worthy topics, which can be empowered and produced in a syllabus that focuses attention on these urban intersections without flattening out their meanings and significations.

Notes

1 In the Arab world, recent scholarly attention to the urban in literature can be found in Mehrez 2010; Halim 2013; Aglacy 2015; and Hayek 2014.
2 Williams 1973, 154, 163.
3 Simone 2004, 240.
4 Williams 1973, 155.
5 Ibid.
6 Mehrez 2010, 7.
7 Lambert 2008, x.
8 Ibid., xiii.
9 Any talk of “knowable communities” owes a debt to Raymond Williams, for whom urban novels produced knowable communities by building relationships between strangers within their totalities.
10 Some of the voices in this debate include scholars from geography, anthropology and history: like David Harvey and Neil Smith, and Simone and Saskia Sassen respectively.
11 Jayyusi 1987, 32.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 35.
14 Harvey 1997, 46.
15 Ibid.
16 Tanoukhi 2008, 600.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 613.
19 Ibid. In what follows, I will use Ibrahim Muhawi’s translation of Darwish’s text.
21 Cooke 1996, 16.
22 Darwish 1995, 91.
26 See, for example, Ghandour 1994, Abou El-Naga 2002, as well as Miriam Cooke’s War’s Other Voices.
27 For discussions of this, see Salibi 1976; and Kassir 2010.
31 Ibid., 128.
34 De Certeau 2011, 93
36 Ibid., 725.
37 Ibid., 726.
38 Tanoukhi 2008, 605.
39 Darwish and Muhawi 1995, 93.
40 Adnan 1992, 63.
42 Amireh, in Majaj and Amireh 2002, 262.
44 Ibid., 85.
45 Ibid., 73.
46 Ibid.
47 For more, see Salem 2003; and Stone 2008.
48 Darwish and Muhawi 1995, 18.
49 Adnan 1992, 64.
50 Darwish and Muhawi 1995, 134.
51 Adnan 1992, 114.
52 Cola 2012, 175–183, p. 177.
53 Hartman 2012, 41.
54 Mehrez 2010, 1.
55 Ibid.
57 See, for example, al-Nowaihi and Halim’s essay in Hassan and Darraj 2012.

Bibliography

