

Cities in the Arab Imagination: Fiction, Reality, and Futurescapes

MECAM Transregional Workshop | Berlin, 15-16 May 2024

Forum Transregionale Studien, Wallotstr. 14, 14193 Berlin

ABSTRACTS

Wednesday, 15 May 2024: EUME Seminars/MECAM Workshop

Session 1 (15.00-16.30)

Teresa Pepe (University of Oslo/ MECAM Fellow 2021), Cities of the Future in the Arab Literary Imagination

Nowadays contemporary Arabic literature and cultural production abound with depictions of future cities. Yet this topic has occupied the minds of Arab authors and thinkers from the early-twentieth century to the present day. This talk draws on a selection of texts drawn from modern and contemporary Arabic cultural production - including a short story by Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti published in 1910, a play by the architect and thinker Hassan Fathy written in 1942, as well as science fiction novels from the 1980s and 2000s, and finally, contemporary dystopian Arabic climate fiction - to address the following questions: What do future cities look like in these fictional texts? How do elements such as class, gender, religion, and socio-economic disparities factor into these depictions? How do visions of future cities change in response to evolving urban and non-urban landscapes in the region? Lastly, what is the connection between these futuristic visions and the changing climate of the Arab region?

The central aim of this talk is to connect these imaginary cities with the realities from which they originate and to show the relation between future thinking and attempts to change the present.

Session 2 (17.00-18.30)

Ammar Azzouz (British Academy Research Fellow/University of Oxford), Erased City: Imagining a Future Without Ruins?

Since 2011, several cities in the Arab Region have turned into the sites of battlefields. From Mosul and Tripoli, to Aleppo and Gaza, cities have become symbols of urban misery and mass destruction. Sieged, shelled, and destroyed, cities have been left in ruins even when bombs have stopped. But can we imagine a future without ruins? To answer this question, it is essential to deconstruct the word *reconstruction* and investigate the multiple 're's within it. In this presentation, I will look at the city of Homs, Syria, where over half of its neighbourhoods have been destroyed, and explore the complex and difficult questions of a reconstruction yet to come.

Thursday, 16 May 2024

Panel 1 (9.30-11.00): Fictional Realities

Loaav Wattad (EUME Fellow 2023/24), Jerusalem's Dragons: Socio-fantastical Realities in Palestinian and Israeli YA Literature

At the dawn of the 21st century, a notable surge in youth literature publications has swept through cultural landscapes, profoundly shaping the ethos of contemporary society (Jennings, 2014). A prevailing trend within this literary wave is the prevalence of dystopian narratives, featuring adolescent protagonists navigating through post-apocalyptic worlds, either in survival or rebellion (Jennings, 2014). Scholars often interpret this as a symbolic reflection of the perennial struggle of youth, infused with a fervent aspiration to forge a new and improved reality, distinct from preceding generations (Hintz, 2013).

Yet, amidst this global literary phenomenon, a compelling question emerges: how do these narratives intersect with the intricate political and social tapestry of a city as storied as Jerusalem, particularly considering its current colonial status? What unfolds when the universal themes of adolescent strife encounter the complex realities of Palestinian and Israeli youth in Al-Quds/Jerusalem?

This study delves into this inquiry by analyzing five Palestinian and five Israeli young adult (YA) books published in the last two decades, each prominently featuring Jerusalem. Within these narratives, the city is often portrayed through a lens of fantasy, leveraging its rich historical and mythological backdrop as a narrative device to grapple with its multifaceted reality. While some books touch upon the political landscape and Jewish-Arab relations, their treatment varies, with no definitive stance emerging across the texts. Instead, these themes often serve as focal points, shaping the narrative trajectory while leaving room for interpretation and exploration.

In delineating two societal paradigms regarding the treatment of youth, one characterized by reluctance to harness their latent potential and the other by active engagement and collaboration, it becomes apparent that youth serve as a catalyzing force for societal revitalization. However, without adequate integration mechanisms, tapping into their latent energies and fully incorporating them into society poses a significant challenge. Palestinian and Israeli youth literature reflects these societal dichotomies, providing nuanced perspectives on the contemporary youth's role in either resolving or perpetuating the colonial situation in Al-Quds/Jerusalem.

Hanan Natour (Freie Universität Berlin), Tunis and Beyond: Power, Access, and Representation in the Tunisian Arabic Novel

By asking how tensions between the urban and rural play out, this paper approaches the workshop's theme through its opposite. Instead of focusing on imaginations of cities, it explores how urban spaces are defined by their relation to suburban margins and the countryside. What does the divide between centre and periphery mean for questions of power addressed in modern Arabic prose? Two Tunisian Arabic novels provide the source material for this endeavour: Habib Selmi's *Jabal al-'anz* (Goat Mountain, 1988) and Hassouna Mosbahi's *Hikaya tunisiyya* (A Tunisian Tale, 2007).

Both novels were published during the rule of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali which lasted from 1987 until the uprisings in 2011. Yet, their political context differs as one is published at the beginning and one towards the end of his rule. Both texts deal with questions of representation, social

mobility, and community while narrating opposite trajectories. *Jabal al-'anz* traces a movement from the city to the village where the two protagonists – the local leader and the stranger – engage in a fatal fight for power that implicitly criticises the increasing centralisation of power under Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987). *Hikaya tunisiyya*, on the other hand, follows a young family from the countryside to the Tunisian capital – a movement which ends abruptly in the suburbs of Tunis. The failed reach for access leads to hostile encounters with their new neighbours, ultimately causing the father's death and the son's revenge. Through their narrating protagonists, both novels address imaginations of community informed by the past of their families, and of the postcolonial Tunisian state.

Panel 2 (11.30-13.00): Speculative Futures

Sanabel Abdelrahman (EUME Fellow 2023/24), The Future Arab City: A Palimpsest of (Post) Colonial Imaginaries

The protraction of the current Arab reality into the future within the science fiction mode has been depicted in literary works such as *Iraq + 100*, *Palestine +100*, Ahmad Khalid Tawfiq's *Utopia*, and Rachid Boudjedra's *al-Ḥalazūn al-'Anīd (The Obstinate Snail)*. In these texts, the Arab cities turn into further deformed, unlivable spaces owing to the perpetuation of existing settler and postcolonial structures coupled with capitalist expansion.

In this presentation, I want to look at other possible futures of the Arab city by proposing the incorporation of frameworks borrowed from magical Marxism, Arab futurism, and politically informed poetics of the city. Investigating the "slippage between two futures: a real future and a future imagined," presents an opportunity for activating the collective imagination to reify alternative futures through stubborn or "militant optimism," which can be exercised within (Marxist) magical-realistic ways of knowing and being in the Arab city.

Farah al-Qasimi's works on 'Gulf Futurism' shed light on possible magical-realistic futures of the Arab cities while conscious of the egregious effects of capitalism. Mounir Ayache's installations around "oriental sci-fi" that present future Arab cities within non/post-human frameworks, and Zineb Sedira's interweaving of the past and the present of the (colonized) Arab city within the white cube offer much to be interpreted.

Further, I want to investigate the possible roles played by nostalgia in this context. Given the early definitions or 'diagnosis' of nostalgia as missing a home that was lost, how does its collective utilization towards envisioning the Arab city affect the image of a late nineteenth-century al-Quds or a sixties Cairo? How do such images affect how we view the Arab city today? How do the poetics of a city mutate or otherwise change after massive and historic violences, such as Israel's inception or the American invasion of Iraq?

Rasha Chatta (Freie Universität Berlin/MECAM Fellow 2021/EUME Fellow 2017-21), Beirut and the Ruins of the Future in Speculative Comics

In this presentation, I discuss the speculative turn in recent Arab literature and arts by focusing on the comics genre and by tracing the ways in which the speculative element is used as a tool to deal with socio-political aspects. Through the analysis of selected contemporary works by Lebanese comic artists, I examine how speculative fiction figures the city of Beirut as the central nexus of dystopias, thereby responding to present anxieties and providing realms for projecting future visions. By delineating recurrent key tropes as well as aesthetic and literary strategies, the genre's potential suitability to engage with speculative futurity is explored.

Panel 3 (14.00-15.30): Urban Structures

Katarzyna Puzon (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), 'After the Future': A Walk in Time in Beirut

In this paper, I will examine how time materializes in space and how space plays out in time. In doing so, I will discuss an audio walking tour/performance in Beirut that took place in the contentious site of Downtown Beirut. Conceptualised and guided by a local artist, the tour aimed to contest a newly reconstructed district infused with a sanitized version of history and heritage by a Lebanese joint-stock company that turned itself into a worthy heir of the district's past. I will probe into ways in which the tour operated as a space from and in which one does not simply retell the past but also imagine the future — in the present — while challenging the linear understanding of time. The talk will feature selected recordings from the tour.

Yahia Shawkat (10 Tooba, Cairo/Berlin), Two Dimensional Futures: The Stubborn Failures of Egyptian High Modernist Planning

Since the early days of urban and regional planning in 1950s Egypt, planners have been obsessing over how 'only' a small portion of Egypt is settled, leaving a vast desert 'vacant' and underutilised. High Modernist visions sought to resettle (and socially re-engineer) significant portions of Egyptians to new cities and model villages in the desert. Through architectural visualisations and aerial photography, I would like to juxtapose these plans against their epic failures, littering the desert with ghost villages and towns. Failures rooted in the planner's two dimensional top down views flattening the vibrant three dimensional landscape.

Panel 4: 16:00-17:00

That Was Tomorrow: A Conversation about Arab Imaginaries in Berlin

Conversation with Syrian writer Rasha Abbas (Independent, Berlin) and Palestinian artist Muhammad Jabali (Independent, Berlin) moderated by Diana Abbani (MECAM/Forum Transregionale Studien), on the future of Berlin, once envisioned as an Arab cultural hub, exploring the evolving dynamics and narratives shaping the city. The discussion looks into their own personal experiences of exile and diaspora, intersecting with broader Arab imaginaries in Berlin. It also addresses the contemporary context of repression and silencing within the city, reflecting on its impact on the city's artistic and cultural expressions, hopes and dreams.

Participants: Speakers & Chairs

Diana Abbani is a cultural historian of the Modern Middle East. She is currently working as the science communication coordinator for the project Merian Center for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) at the Forum Transregionale Studien (Berlin). Her research focuses on popular and material culture, the implications of social, political, and technological changes, as well as the emergence of music industries and entertainment in Beirut and Bilad al-Sham region. Diana was a EUME fellow in 2018-2023.

Rasha Abbas is a Syrian journalist and short story writer. She is working recently as the culture editor at Aljumhuriya,.net. Born in Latakia and brought up in Damascus, she studied journalism at Damascus University. While working as an editor for television, she published her first short story collection entitled *Adam hates TV* (2008). After joining the anti-government protests in 2011, she had to leave her country, moving first to Beirut and later to Germany. She is currently based in Berlin. She has held a number of fellowships and writing residencies across Europe and North America, and takes part in cultural festivals. She co-wrote the script for a short film, *Happiness and Bliss* (2013), produced by Bedayat, and contributed, both as a writer and as a translator, to *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (2014), published by Saqi Books. She has published two short story collections (*The Invention of German*, 2016 and *The Gist of It*, 2017) and is currently working on her first novel. A theatre play based on her book *The Gist of It*, was presented on Maxim Gorki theatre stage in Berlin (2022 - 2023)

Date of birth: 1984

Country of birth: Syria

Country of residence: Germany

Publisher(s): Al Mutawassit/ Mikrotex

Sanabel Abdelrahman holds a PhD in Arabic Studies, focusing on magical realism in Palestinian literature, from Philipps-Universität Marburg. She completed her BA and MA at the University of Toronto's Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. She is a bilingual writer and publishes essays critiquing art and literature on platforms including *Fus7a*, *al-Akhbar*, *Tiber*, *Jadaliyya*, and *NO NIIN*. In the academic year 2023/24, she is a EUME Fellow at the Forum Transregionale Studien.

Mariam Aboughazi is a PhD fellow at the Berlin Graduate School of Muslim Cultures and Societies; since October 2022. Her PhD in Anthropology is titled "The Aftermath of Hope: Defeat, Recovery and Dreams In ~~Post~~ Counter Revolutionary Egypt." She is also an affiliated researcher with the Age and Generation Research unit at ZMO. Beyond her PhD project, she worked on various projects including, archiving and oral history projects, as well as, board game design and podcast production.

Yvonne Albers is a postdoctoral researcher at the Cluster of Excellence *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective* at the Freie Universität Berlin. She studied theater studies, philosophy and Arabic literature in Leipzig and Damascus and received her doctorate in Arabic studies at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the Philipps-Universität Marburg. Her work is located at the intersection of intellectual, cultural and media history, with a focus on periodical print history in the 20th century. Her second monograph *Beirut and the Journal Mawaqif* was published last year (Brill 2023). Albers is co-founder and former editor of the open access journal *Middle East – Topics and Arguments* (2011-2021) and member of the editorial board of the *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*. She is an affiliated EUME Fellow for the academic years 2021-24.

Ammar Azzouz is a British Academy Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. He is the Principal Investigator of *Slow Violence and the City*, a research project that examines the impact

of violence on the built environment at the time of war and peace. His research has been published by several platforms including The Guardian, the New York Times and the New Statesman. He is the author of *Domicide: Architecture, War and the Destruction of Home in Syria* (Bloomsbury, 2023). Ammar is on X: @Dr_Ammar_Azzouz

Rasha Chatta is a comparative literature and cultural studies scholar, specialising in the contemporary Arab world and its diasporas. She is currently an Associate Researcher at the Freie Universität Berlin, where she is completing a monograph titled *Sketching Migration in Arab Comics: War Narratives, Conflicted Memory, and Gender*. She has published scholarly articles on Arab migrant narratives, war literature, visual archives, and Arab comics, in addition to numerous magazine entries and podcasts on comics. Rasha was a MECAM Fellow in 2021 and a EUME Fellow in 2017-21.

Muhammad Jabali is a Palestinian artist, author, illustrator, DJ and cultural activist who earns his living through managing a distribution company. He is a published Children Picture Book author, in addition to publications on The Arts. His latest book is "The Entrapment" of the Place: A Critical Study of Fine Arts in Israel. In addition he was an establishing member of the music and art collective AL.Berlin since 2018

Mina Kanlarzadeh is a historian specializing in the contemporary Middle East. As a former postdoctoral scholar at Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy, she co-authored an upcoming book contracted with MIT University Press, which explores the intersection of science, technology, and politics. She earned her Ph.D. from Columbia University with a dissertation titled *Alienation, Translation, and Their Postcolonial Critics*, situated at the crossroads of gender studies, decolonial political theory, and literary studies. Her research interests encompass gender and sexuality studies, critical theory, global political thought, Islamic studies, and translation and literary studies. Mina's academic contributions have been featured in publications such as *Religions*, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, and *Popular Music and Society*. Beyond academia, her creative writing, including poetry and non-fiction, has been showcased in *Arts of The Working Class*, *Still Dancing*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Jadaliyya*. In the academic year 2023/24, Mina is a EUME Fellow.

Hanan Natour is a PhD candidate at Freie Universität Berlin and member of the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies. Her doctoral research focuses on "Narratives of Liberation, Emancipation, and Decoloniality in Tunisian Arabic Prose (1987–2017)". Between 2019 and 2023, she served as research associate to the ERC-funded project "PalREAD – Country of Words: The Reading and Reception of Palestinian Literature from 1948 to the Present" directed by Prof Refqa Abu-Remaileh. She graduated from the University of Oxford with a Master of Philosophy in Modern Middle Eastern Studies (2018) and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Arabic Studies and German Literature from the University of Göttingen (2016), including one year of studying abroad at the University of Paris-Sorbonne.

Anne-Marie McManus has a PhD in Comparative Literature from Yale University. She heads the European Research Council Starting Grant SYRASP ("The Prison Narratives of Assad's Syria") at the Forum Transregionale Studien.

Teresa Pepe is a Professor of Arabic Studies at the University of Oslo. Her research interests include Arabic literature, media, popular culture, sociolinguistics, and the relation between aesthetics and politics. She is the author of the book *Blogging From Egypt: Digital Literature, 2005-2016* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2019) which explores blogs as forms of digital literature emerging in Egypt during the rise of the political protest of the Arab Spring. She is the co-editor of the volume *Arabic Literature in the Posthuman Age* (with S. Guth, Harassowitz Verlag 2019), which examines the use of dystopia, necropolitics, monsters and satire in Arabic literature today. She has also edited two special issues for the *BRILL Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, one

on “Media Transition and Cultural Debates in Arabic Societies” (with Barbara Winckler, 2022) and one entitled: “Arab Futures Re-considered: Historical, Cultural and Ecological Approaches”. Her Chapter on “Futures” is forthcoming in the *Cambridge Companion for Modern Arabic Literature*. In 2021, Teresa was a MECAM Fellow.

Katarzyna Puzon is an anthropologist trained at the University of Edinburgh, the Polish Academy of Sciences, and University College London. She has conducted long-term ethnographic research in Lebanon and Germany, and has wide-ranging scholarly interests, with a major emphasis on the anthropology of time, critical heritage perspectives, and public makings. Currently she is based at the Humboldt University where she works on sound archives and their entangled legacies, and she is also finishing a book on temporality, heritage, and loss in Beirut.

Yahia Shawkat is a housing policy analyst and the co-founder and research coordinator of [10 Tooba](#) research studio, Cairo. He edits its [Built Environment Observatory](#), which investigates the commodification of housing, and raises awareness around equitable housing policies and strategies. Yahia also authored [Egypt's Housing Crisis: The Shaping of Urban Space](#) (AUC Press, 2020), and co-edited [Nashtari kul shay' \(We Buy Everything\)](#), (Dar al-Maraya, 2022).

Loay Wattad is a 2023-2024 EUME Fellow at the Forum Transregionale Studien, and a literary scholar and critic specializing in the sociology of Palestinian and Israeli children's literature.