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### Reflections on Two Cities: Beirut and Fez

“I hope that my city, Beirut, is relearning to be a true cosmopolitan space, a cosmopolitan space in the age of global reality, where ‘others’ are, again, also ‘us’ and where juxtaposition is fighting hierarchy.”  
Mai Ghoussoub

*My revised essay is interspersed with impressions, observations, thoughts and encounters (not necessarily in chronological order) that took place during the 2009 Souk Ukaz: Writing in and Beyond the City symposium in Fez and Casablanca*

Beirut is the city I feel most attached to. I have vivid childhood recollections of accompanying my *Teta* (grandmother) on her visits to the *souk*. For the sum of 25 piasters, the taxi driver took us down steep, winding roads that sliced through quaint little villages until we reached Martyrs’ Square, with its statue commemorating those who rebelled against Ottoman rule in 1915. From there, we walked to the ancient souks teeming with life and the deafening hum of activity. Jostled by shoppers and vendors, we made our way along dusty, narrow cobblestone streets to the den of shouts, laughter and the clip-clop of donkey’s hoofs. The sights, scents and sounds fuelled my imagination and awakened my senses to the enticements of city life making me all the more determined to live in Beirut when I grew up. *Teta* was not pleased. “It’s risky,” she cautioned. “In this city, the turbulent past continues to intrude on the present.” Many times after that I heard Beirut referred to as the phoenix forever rising from the ashes or the ancient city that refuses to die.

*The souks in Fez are immediately captivating. They engage all the senses. The shops and stalls are packed with a dizzying array of goods. At first, realizing that the ancient Beirut souks had disappeared forever, I was overcome with sadness but soon I was completely absorbed in navigating the labyrinth of streets. My Teta had taught me a trick or two about price haggling yet I was no match for these seasoned, eloquent merchants who have refined the art of bargaining. Their intense transactions and money-extracting skills are truly extraordinary. Upon discovering that I spoke Arabic, the older vendors expressed sympathy for the suffering of Lebanese. They understood the pain of war, the*

*difficulties of ongoing political instability; while the younger ones jumped up from their wares in awe that I come from the land of Haifa Wehbe, a Lebanese actress, singer and sex symbol, often compared to Brigitte Bardot. In the end, despite endless attempts to secure a fair price, Natasa and I pay way too much for our beautiful Berber carpets. The transaction, however, is strangely satisfying. With this loquacious salesman we had indulged in the ritual of bargaining with amazing patience!*

As a student at the American University of Beirut (AUB), I enjoyed the freedom, vibrancy and dynamic energy of city life. Beirut was a compellingly liberating experience, so unlike the restrictive atmosphere of my Quaker high school in the Lebanese mountains. It allowed for public involvement, new intellectual, cultural, social and political challenges that I had only dreamed of. In this arena of limitless growth, I encountered others in stunning variety.

*Entering the enticing, multi-layered, complex, insular medina of Fez is like stepping into a city from the Old Testament. There is no need for its citizens to leave since they provide a vital pool of skills that are sufficient unto themselves. Although this vibrant city is firmly rooted in its past and its history, tradition is not an obstacle, at least to most outward aspects of modernization. The Fassis see no contradiction between internet cafés, mobile phones and young women in the latest fashions alongside women in long robes and headscarves, mosques, artisans' workshops and heavily laden donkeys transporting goods.*

But Teta, of course, had been right. There was a darker side to the city's vitality. The weak state, unregulated chaos, religious, political and social complexity, alongside its regional location, rendered Beirut constantly on the verge of unexpected, quite often, disastrous political happenings. It became a vulnerable space for unresolved local, regional, global hostilities and proxy wars.

*The Medina has a seamy side: Child labor, beggars, prostitution, and animal abuse, though part of an extremely complex society, are disturbingly difficult for an outsider to ignore. Still, all are minor problems compared to the devastations that have plagued Beirut. Does Beirut have a society too complex to hold because of strong religious and clan hatreds? Is the containing frame found in the religious and cultural practices of everyday life in Fez, impossible in a city like Beirut?*

I developed an interest in Lebanese woman writers who lived and wrote in Beirut. In their fiction, Beirut was celebrated as a place of experimentation because it represented a break with the past. In the city, the imposed strictures of rural settings, domestic confinement and routines could be defied. Their novels explored radical and hitherto taboo themes that articulated the individual self, sexuality, politics and other issues that mattered deeply in their lives. Beirut, the realm of

creative energy, offered anonymity, freedom, nonconformity and individualism. Here patriarchal constructions of femininity exercised little or no control.

*On our first evening in Fez medina we gather for dinner at Riad Maison Bleue. I have an interesting discussion with Gürgeç about his essay. He is captivated by rural spaces whereas I have an endless fascination with cities. He believes that green literature, particularly poetry, is imperative for the future.*

*When the earthenware pot of chicken tajine arrives, we speak a little about the difference between Moroccan and Mediterranean cooking. We agree that Mediterranean dishes are all tasty.*

*In the days that follow, we exchange views on the rural areas surrounding Fez. Rural women appear to work much harder than men. They toil in the fields and fetch jugs of water while the men sit idly by. A common sight is that of men riding on horseback while the women follow on foot. Ancient rural traditions and customs are unkind to women. The medina women seem much better off.*

*I sit with my symposium colleagues in the cool shade of a lemon tree, in the exquisite sun-drenched court yard of Les Oudayas, listening to Fatima Sadiqi discuss how language dynamics impacts the triangle of women-religion-politics in Morocco. She argues that women are learning the power of language and, according to their differentiated resources, manipulate it to their advantage.*

*Later, on a medina walk with Fatima and her Husband, I cover my head before entering an ancient mosque only to be scolded by an old Sheikh who suspects I'm non-Muslim. Fatima kindly insists I ignore him but it's an unsettling, bitter experience.*

“Life in a mountain village might be boring but at least it's safe,” teta continued to caution me. How I wish she had been wrong! Her generation had lived in fear of Beirut; never loath to remembering the dark evils that lurked beneath the surface. They knew the present was deeply wedded to the past having witnessed social and religious difference inevitably turn destructive in this city tightly joined in a thin veneer of coexistence. Teta, unlike many Lebanese, did not subscribe to a willful dose of forgetfulness. Beirut, the city of fragile peace and civility, was fated to self-destruct.

During the mid seventies, her warning became a reality. A once vibrant city was completely ravaged by war. Beirut disintegrated into a fierce battleground, a besieged and beleaguered place where every form of brutality and collective terror occurred. The massive devastation wrought by private militias and state-sponsored armies transformed a thriving urban space into a living hell. The streets, especially

those connecting neighborhoods to the Central District and the airport, became a combat zone. Armed checkpoints, roving militias, street violence, car bombs, random shelling and snipers prevented circulation. Some of the fiercest battles took place in the city center, one of the only commercially diverse spaces. The first round of the civil war in 1975, known as the Battle of the Hotels, reduced the downtown district, including the old souks, to rubble.

If the city of Beirut had figured prominently in the lives and writing of women before the war, during the war fiction writing focused intensely on the city, though it ceased to be a liberating space. Beirut was portrayed as a woman exploited and abused by ruthless men or a city of confinement where brutal warring factions inflicted fear, pain and death. Interestingly, the women writers who made Beirut their home transcended confessional and political loyalties to concentrate almost entirely on the omitted stories of pain and suffering.

Beirut was no longer a city where one dreams and imagines.

I left Beirut in 1984 with my husband and two young children for what we thought would be a year's research leave. Having survived a grueling decade of escalating violence and atrocities only strengthened our resolve to gain distance from the savage brutality of warring factions. Over the next eleven years, the life we led in the quiet university town of Princeton was in stark contrast to the battleground of warring Beirut. Still, I continued to visit Beirut many times in my memory never able to dispel the possibility of returning to my city, the place I call home. Perhaps because the images of violence haunted me, I reinvented the prewar Beirut I knew, or thought I knew, constructing it as an example of coexistence and larger possibility, a model true diversity.

*Under a warming April sun, we take a two-hour bus drive through lush, rolling, sparsely uninhabited countryside, to visit the impressive Roman ruins at Volubilis dating back to A. D. 40. My thoughts, though, keep creeping back to the cultural and spiritual richness of the medina with its narrow alleyways and thick sandstone walls: a city not in ruins but a living, dynamic, thriving community where people have continued to live and work and coexist in harmony for countless generations. I take comfort in thinking about the rhythms of life, the daily ordinary: eating, socializing, bargaining, celebrating, the bustle of daily life is what I find most invigorating. I'm suddenly eager to return to the gray limestone city of Fez with its tangle of streets, exotic souks and jostling crowds.*

*That evening we dine in the dazzlingly ornamented courtyard of Les Oudayas. A group of men wearing djellabas sit cross-legged around the fountain chanting Qur'anic verses. Later comes African drumming, singing, dancing. The mood is festive, hypnotizing. The riad help join in. It's as it should be. This would not happen in Beirut.*

In 1995 after eleven years of involuntary exile, I found myself back in Beirut. Almost immediately my sense of place was thrown off balance. This was not the city I had come back to time and time again in my mind. I was shocked by the visual images of a place I no longer recognized. Little had I realized just how distressing reentry would be but how could it have been otherwise? The sheer magnitude of the civil war, one of the bitterest in modern Arab history, was astounding. It had raged on for nearly two decades, claiming 170,000 lives, leaving twice as many wounded or disabled, and two-thirds of the population dislocated. In the Central District, ethnic and sectarian mixing had given rise to a vibrant public culture but during the war years, the social landscape was dramatically altered. The Central District lay in ruin while Beirut remained divided between the Christian East and the Muslim West. Within this division of Beirut, further ethno-religious territorialization took place.

With postwar Beirut came the privatization of urban space. The political vacuum was cleverly exploited by speculators who appropriated valuable lands to build modern, expensive high rise apartment buildings and gaudy commercial ventures. While urban planners, public officials, and citizen groups fought over the fate of the postwar Central District, socially diverse urban spaces that had attracted vibrant public life slowly began to disappear. Today, Beirut oscillates between a playground for rich Arab and international investors and a battleground for warring local and regional political players.

*Michal gives a surreal account of Bratislava's metaphoric disappearance. House Attack, an upside down building, created by the Austrian artist, Erwin Wurm, is how he now sees his city. The fate of Downtown Beirut is equally absurd for it has vanished both metaphorically as well as physically. Its transformation into a sterile hub for tourists has only increased hostilities instead of enabling the present and past to enter into meaningful dialogue.*

*We weave our way through the tangled narrow streets and dark, covered medina passages to the Zaouia of Moulay Idriss II. The smells and sights are intense. This time I make no attempt to enter the sanctuary. Instead, I watch from a safe distance. The shrine is dark, mysterious. As a non-Muslim, I seem to spend much of my time on the outside looking in.*

*I wander through the crowds and narrow passageways lined with tiny shops and stalls, flattening myself against walls at the warning shouts of mule and donkey cart drivers. When I stop to look at some dried lizards, an apothecary asks why I'm alone. Without waiting for an answer, he suggests a cure for an impatient and difficult husband: A hyena's brain in the evening soup for seven days. I thank him and continue into deep labyrinthine passages.*

*The pottery merchant is eager to sell his wares. “Lebanon is a beautiful country. It has a special place in my heart,” he says. To prove his love for the country he balances himself on the rim of a blue and white bowl and sings a Haifa Wehbe song. No price haggling this time. I buy a smaller bowl.*

The desire to return to Beirut had been strong but I now felt anxious and out of place, unable to find meaning or draw strength from reentry. Sadly, the city seemed even more fragmented and volatile than before. Below the surface lurked seething hostility. None of the causes that instigated the war were being addressed, nor were they likely to be in the near future.

I always dreamed of launching creative writing at AUB where I had taught for ten years before leaving to Princeton and New York. Suddenly, I saw a window of opportunity because of its immediate relevance to numerous returnee students also experiencing reentry difficulties to a postwar city. The vast majority were hybrid, multicultural border crossers, whose lives had been spent dipping in and out of Lebanon due to the civil war and continuing political unrest. They, too, were witnessing the euphoric hope and anticipation associated with postwar reconstruction, reconciliation and the resurrection of a glamorous city center, alongside what appeared to be the return of civil society, with mistrust and apprehension.

Almost instantly, their concerns began to echo similar themes and when drafts and manuscripts were presented, my academic world took on new meaning. Our workshops instigated an ongoing conversation that transformed class encounters into charged happenings due to reciprocal phases of reflexivity and collective reflection that explored postwar experiences common to us both. Not surprisingly, Beirut figured prominently in their texts. Could an urban space packed with diversity and contradictions maintain lasting peace within a civilized frame? How can a city like Beirut cope with difference? And can it provide spaces for its youth, particularly returnees, to engage in public dialogue so their voices might be heard in the wider public sphere? Would they ever feel “at home” in a city that was supposed to be home when everywhere and nowhere felt like home to those living between worlds?

My parents say Beirut is our home but I have lived  
in so many cities that I feel everywhere and nowhere  
at home. (Ibrahim)

I point out that Conrad, Nabokov, Naipaul are writers who managed to migrate between languages, cultures, countries, continents, even civilizations. Their imaginations were fuelled by exile and rootlessness. Although my students recognize the advantages of *inbetweenness*, they continue to suffer from its

consequences. Upon re-entry to the city, returnees are confronted with a condition of *twofold liminality* or what Edward Said calls “contrapuntal consciousness,” the inevitable double or plural visions acquired by exiles resulting from an awareness of two or more cultures.

For as long as I can remember, I have had to  
adjust to different cities lifestyles, people and  
situations. I have a mask for ever occasion.  
Rarely do I remove it and relax my face.  
(Munir)

*Our guide, Bouftila, explains that at midnight, the medina gates are locked to protect inhabitants within the city walls. Individuals here seem so at peace with the religious and cultural practices of everyday life. They are too grounded, too inward looking to suffer from rootlessness. Obviously, the dilemma of living between two or more cultures is unattainable and thus unimaginable in this vibrant, mysterious city.*

Another recurring theme is the issue of amnesia. The romantic, nostalgic narratives advanced by parents praising the urban charms of Beirut cause considerable friction. Although some students view it as collective practical forgetfulness, a need to suppress the horrors that occurred, most write that denial thwarts any constructive move forward. They find it impossible to ignore scars which have not healed. Present and past must enter into meaningful dialogue if lasting solutions are to be reached.

My parents still think that Beirut will once again  
regain its past glory. Frankly, I doubt it ever will.  
They live in denial refusing to see Beirut for  
what it really is. They block out past events of  
cruelty and violence. How can a city be rebuilt on  
memories and denial? Although I understand  
their need to forget the atrocities that occurred  
during the war, this vicious cycle will only end  
when people admit that Beirut cannot be rebuilt  
on false assumptions and dreams. (Hani)

*It's so amusing that the stallholder in the Henna Souk who sits proudly behind his display of dried lizard skins, snakes and magical concoctions suggests a cure for amnesia.*

Unlike their parents, students keep revisiting the ugly war years in an attempt to make sense of the present. In Lina Mounzer's short story, 'The One-eyed Man,' Ali tells his Canadian girl friend why he is haunted by the memory of his mother's

excruciatingly painful death from cancer during the bleak days of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut.

During the endless summer of 1982 while the Israeli tanks rumbled in from the south and pierced into the alleyways of the city, she lay dying, her blood slowly turning to poison in her veins. I do not tell her about keeping vigil in her dark room, watching the skeletal frame lit up by the shells that exploded like fireworks in the summer night and thinking that even then, at the very end, there were still many ways for her to die.

Most returnee students are *flâneurs*, situated observers, strolling sightseers, conceptual detectives who are the consumers and producers of narrative texts. They remained simultaneously detached and active, inhabiting in-between spaces, observing with guarded distance, recording what they witness. Their outside gaze inhabits spaces that resist confinement, fuel critical observation and seek new narratives.

Such detached observation prohibits identification with the ‘other,’ empowering students to view life experiences in the streets of Beirut from a safe distance. While the Lebanese population is becoming more and more “retribalized” by withdrawing into the safety of their own communities, detached observation is a way for students to disengage from a troubling urban postwar setting.

I feel most comfortable in Beirut where I am free to observe life and people from a distance. Perhaps I am strange but I don't care. I like being marginal. When I am not reading, I spend my free time walking, watching and writing down my impressions.

(Karim)

*Krzysztof is absolutely right to be concerned about the retribalization of city culture. His tireless creative attempts to build cultural bridges of coexistence are impressive. We discuss the possibility of a visit to Beirut. I know students will be receptive.*

If postwar Lebanon was optimistically perceived by most as a period when the shocking violence that pervaded almost two decades of civil war could be finally tucked away leaving the Lebanese to focus, at last, on reconstruction, reconciliation, revamping a decaying political system and devastated economy, all hopes vanished on February 14, 2005. As the former billionaire Sunni Prime Minister Rafic Hariri drove through the streets of the once war-ravaged downtown Beirut district he had



transformed into a glittering tourist hub, a massive explosion ripped through his motorcade killing him, his young economic advisor, and seven body guards. Following the assassination a wave of massive public protests, largely instigated and sustained by youthful groups, were staged in Martyr' Square against Syria and the Syrian-backed Lebanese government in what later became known as the Cedar Revolution.

My students wrote about their experiences during this brief time of rekindled expectations. In Hala Alyan's story, 'Painted Reflections,' her protagonist, a Lebanese American woman, escaping New York after 9/11 embarks on a journey of rediscovery to Beirut. Shortly after her arrival, when she witnesses the horrific carnage of Hariri's assassination, her thoughts turn to her mother.

For a bazaar second, I imagine my mother with them, begging for the gods to take it back, to erase it all. Is this what she saw? The streaking smoke: the falling people. God's children falling like rain. And she was so young. All at once, I feel a rush of sympathy for the terrified little girl my tall, thin mother with her severe hairstyle had once been. This is not New York City, but Beirut all over again.

During the days following Hariri's assassination, the city center was transformed into a realm of unprecedented opportunity for youth mobilization. A serious youth political culture was beginning to take shape, one that might alter or at least disrupt the status quo. Activism seemed to finally be playing a significant role in instigating broad social and political change.

Alyan's protagonist describes the mood in the city:

The entire country is bristling, a nation that is suddenly wide awake and furious. The stunned, controlled respect and grief that laces the city immediately following Hariri's death seems to have exploded. Scrawled writing appears on the sides of buildings demanding that Syria get out. Groups of young men and women flock to the downtown center near the grave of the political figure now transformed into a reluctant martyr; tents begin to pepper the area. At night cars whiz by with flags flaying out, teenage boys stick their upper bodies perilously out of the vehicles as

they yell random slogans in Arabic. Demonstrations and counter-demonstrations begin.

Unfortunately, the euphoria was short lived. Today, politics in Lebanon is back to the semi-feudal divisions of power and among those splitting the pie are Lebanon's old-time warlords and militia leaders. Reawakened confessional and sectarian loyalties once again define the political system and most aspects of life. The mood of postwar accommodation to sectarian difference has been replaced with anger, even rage. My students feel betrayed by the March 14 politicians who "simply used us to reclaim their seats in the government and parliament." (Tariq)

Downtown Beirut was reduced to rubble twice during the war. By the mid-1990 it had become home to swelling numbers of Shiites from the south, routed from their villages by the Israeli occupation. During this time, Solidare, the private company that rebuilt the city center, was founded and effectively controlled by Rafik Hariri. With sweeping powers to expropriate land from downtown Beirut's owners, the savvy tycoon created a center that excluded the Shiite underclass, catering instead to the rich with its luxury stores and expensive restaurants. Many believe the millions Solidere reaped should have gone to the Lebanese state which today is crippled by mounting public debt.

In 2006 just a few months after the brutal summer war between Hezbollah and Israel, Hezbollah supporters pitched tents in the city center vowing to continue their occupation until the Western backed government of Prime Minister Siniora resigned. Once again, the fiercely contested space of downtown Beirut was transformed into a battle ground with a proxy war underway to determine which groups will gain control over the heart of the city. There was a clear divide in the attitudes of my students regarding Hezbollah occupation, but more alarming was the bitterness that characterized the narratives on both sides. Some students eagerly welcomed the destruction of the city center; while others praised Hairiri for his vision, vowing to reclaim it by force, if necessary.

Why should all the wealth of my country be concentrated in downtown Beirut? It's as if other areas in Lebanon are not part of the country. When only one child is loved in a family how can harmony between siblings exist? This is why downtown is envied and hated by people like me. (Shady)

Hariri poured tons of money into creating a showpiece for the international community, especially the wealthy Gulf States. When he did this he excluded the majority of Lebanese and created hate and anger. They are now

determined to turn his beautiful downtown to rubble. (Myrna)

Hariri did an amazing job of restoring the city center. Now tourists will return and the city will restore its past glory. Hezbollah, nearly destroyed all of Lebanon when they provoked an Israeli invasion and now they are determined to destroy downtown Beirut. We will stop them even if it involves bloodshed. (Sami)

Hezbollah would like to ruin downtown because it represents everything they hate. They don't want people to have fun dancing, drinking and socializing in trendy restaurants, discos, bars and cafés. Instead, they would like to impose an Islamic Republic. I hate their culture of death, resistance and suffering. I hate all they stand for. They will not win! (Hind)

*Is it possible to rebuild a city center in a manner that gives all groups a vested interest in its reconstruction? Or to follow the example of Fez, a place where injustice and hostility have managed to find a containing frame in the religious and cultural practices of every day life? There are many ways to express loyalty to a group and to a city. In Beirut, why does it always have to be through violence?*

With my friend, Mai Ghoussoub, I shared a passion for cities, particularly Beirut. On her last visit, we took our usual route along the downtown streets, only this time it was different. We had to convince heavily armed guards to let us cut through Hezbollah's Tent City. Chatting briefly- as we always did- about Lebanon's never-ending political troubles, we turned into Ma'rad Street and came to a sudden stop. The deserted shops and cafés cast an eerie deathlike stillness over the once vibrant heart of Beirut making it difficult to imagine the crowds would ever return. "I don't necessarily believe in Lebanon, but I always believed in Beirut," Mai whispered.

*The striking patterns in the blue-and-green tile work, the intricate plaster and perfumed cedar woodcarvings embellish the courtyard atrium at Riad Dar Dmana. Through my bedroom window comes the soft morning light carrying the voices of passers-by, Fessis socializing, children playing and donkeys clip-clopping along the cobbled streets. Evenings inside the ancient medina are magical. They are a time for celebrations. Boisterous crowds gather in the narrow alleyways dancing and singing to African*

*drumming and Arabic music long into the night. In the hours before dawn, I finally fall asleep to the Muezzin's call.*

I understood her anguish. During the war years London became her home, a city she often described in her writing as the polar opposite of Beirut, “An Anglo-Saxon city that lives inside, in dim light, with no shore and no café life.” Yet without Beirut, “a city that has always known how to include ‘the other’ and turn it into a ‘self,’” embracing life in London would have been impossible. Mai knew her city had taught her to embrace diversity and resist prejudice. “If I had not been brought up in a city that travels in many directions, I wouldn’t have been able to survive and enjoy the London of today, with its multi-ethnic, fusion culture and juxtaposed realities; London, so different from Beirut, but also a space that generously lives its co-existing realities today.” Mai’s greatest hope was that Beirut, “is relearning to be a true cosmopolitan space in the age of global reality, where ‘others’ are, again, also ‘us’ and where juxtaposition is fighting hierarchy.

*Our cheerful, round-faced guide, Mohanmmad Bouftila, takes us deeper into the heart of the mysterious medina, to a place foreigners rarely visit, the souk of the artisans’ guilds. Here everything is hand made. He says the medina contains the greatest concentration of skilled artisans in the country. Rows of tiny workshops line the narrow alleyways. Like the ancient car-free souks of Beirut, goods are transported on the backs of donkeys, old porters or hand-cart drivers who remain completely oblivious to pedestrians. Consequently, we spend a considerable amount of energy sheltering in doorways to avoid being trampled on.*

*Two vivid encounters remain: As we huddled in the tiny shop of the King’s saddle maker while he explained the importance of passing his craft down from generation to generation, I saw the immense pride he derived from the skillful mastery of his ornate trade. Next we visited Ahmad’s workshop, one of many in a vast, ancient inn. He was the university class mate of Bouftila. Both studied literature but after a few years of teaching, Ahmad decided to take up carpentry, his father’s trade, while Mohammad went on to become a famous guide.*

*Never have I seen individuals take such pride in downward mobility. Yet to these crafts men their skill is a duty, a precious gift passed down through the generations. It gives their lives dignity and value and commands respect throughout the Medina. Their work is public and from it they derive identity, belonging and a sense of self worth. Perhaps there is a significant lesson to be learned from this!*

*My thoughts turn to Lina Mounzer’s protagonist in ‘The One-eyed Man’ and how he views his father’s profession with disgust and absurdity.*

*I tell her how my father has not spoken to me since my immigration to Canada was approved. How he bequeathed his store to Ibtisam's husband, the store that made its own killing during the war, for the worse the fighting got, the more Lebanese women seemed to have a taste for Italian leather shoes.*

Sadly, as dusk fell, our shared Downtown moments indicated otherwise. Reawakened confessional and sectarian tensions seemed to leave no space for the language of coexistence. With hope on all sides slowly vanishing, we were moving in a landscape of hostility and fear. By now, we had both experienced the past repeat itself and no longer believed the future would be any different. What *teta* know, that I was ignorant of then, is that in whatever respect the situation in the past and present might differ, in Beirut, there seems no escape from the brutal consequences of political turmoil. A dynamic and diverse urban space does not necessarily welcome coexistence because groups must feel sufficiently secure to allow difference. They need to feel unthreatened by the challenges that otherness presents. Over and over again, Beirut has shown violent resistance to recognizing others, a resistance no doubt resulting from the confessional character of Lebanon and its feudal politics.

For Orhan Pamuk, Istanbul “has always been a city of ruins and end-of-empire melancholy.” His life has been spent “either battling with this melancholy or making it his own.” For my students, feelings of melancholy result from reawakened confessional and sectarian loyalties. In a deeply divided city, they move through a landscape of bleakness and despair.

Beirut has crushed my dreams and hope for a better tomorrow.  
It's not an open city where people can live together

in peace. During the May 2008 conflict people were attacked and killed on the streets of the city. Some were even dragged out of their houses. Everybody here knows what religion and political party people belong to. There is no tolerance, only hatred and it fills me with sadness. (Karma)

I used to love my life in Beirut but now I live in fear because I know that violence can erupt any time. On the surface it looks civilized but in reality people hate each other because of religion and politics. All this makes me scared and sad because there seems to be no way out. That's why I am planning to leave as soon as I graduate. (Suha)

Understandably, many students now express feelings of exhaustion and a longing to disengage from escalating political tensions.

Life in Beirut is exhausting. I have lost all hope for a peaceful future. I am no longer interested in joining demonstrations or supporting any political party. Let's stop pretending that we can make a difference. (Yousif)

Fourteen years ago, as a returnee to Beirut, I was troubled by the cultural dissonance and uncertainties of a postwar setting. Since that time, I am all the more conscious of the pressing need to reclaim a tolerant and mixed urban environment conducive to a modicum of coexistence. Yet to build a city for difference, differences need to be articulated in spaces that foster public dialogue and sustained engagement in historical experience. Strategies that enable people to live with complexities despite mutual hatreds and necessary silences must be advanced. But in order for this to happen, Beirut needs to reclaim pluralistic 'third spaces' away from escalating sectarian tensions, places where a common language of diversity can be articulated; spaces that are mixed, hybrid, tolerant and celebrate the complexity of social and religious differences. Only in this way can the city lend hope to the future and recapture the imagination of its youth.

During these difficult postwar years the voices of my students have moved between the tensions of disheartening realities and hoped-for expectations, but recently they have turned to bitterness and despair.

I am from a country where nobody is allowed to love the rainbow because every color belongs to a certain faction. In my country hypocrisy rules because everyone hates the other from the moment they are born because of their religion but they hide it behind a fake smile. My country is still fighting past wars instead of looking to the future. My country is a nightmare. (Sahar)

It is now more crucial than ever for Beirut to become a city where young people can speak out against the negative forces that mold and determine their lives. Their views and the role they will hopefully play in shaping public experience discursively, are vital in redefining a postwar city urgently in need of restoring lasting civility and breaking the cycle of self-destruction.

*Saturday, late afternoon, we left Fez and traveled to Casablanca by bus. By the time we drove through the sprawling suburbs of this commercial, manufacturing center of the kingdom, and signed into the Royal Mansour Hotel, I was thrown into severe culture shock. Everything seemed strangely wrong and out of proportion: far too large, tacky*

and modern. The discreet charms and beauty of Fez medina were entirely absent. Here the architectural details are showy and unharmonious.

That evening over dinner, in what seemed like a gaudy hotel dining room compared to the exquisitely decorated dining rooms of the ancient riads of Fez, our group listened to a young Moroccan woman, clad in a mini skirt, sing in Arabic, English, French and Italian. This altogether surreal experience made me strikingly aware of how Fez had captivated my imagination. I was greatly relieved to stop brooding over leaving and focus instead on an engaging conversation, with Chris, about the importance of creative writing in Lebanon.

The next morning, as we toured the Grand Mosque of Hassan II, my disappointment increased. This vast, ornate, extravagant structure, entirely funded by donations from the Moroccan people, is unimpressive. Even the extensive library and baths on the lower level remain strangely unavailable to the public. My exposure to Casablanca, though limited, left me with the impression of an aggressive, unattractive city that exists in sharp contrast to the small-scale splendor and aesthetic sensibilities of Fez.

To some cities like Fez, one is compelled to return time and time again. I now fully understand Alberto's fascination with this ancient medina and the inevitability of being absorbed "inside that flow, still wandering, still taking notes." For a city like Beirut, so steeped in conflict and political unrest, there are many lessons to be learned from Fez. Perhaps the most significant is Fez's impressive ability to hold its civilized frame through spaces of coexistence and interaction rather than those of separation, isolation and hostility. My grandmother, haunted by the fear of violence, took shelter in segregation. In the remaking of Beirut, my students are desperate for workable solutions that foster meaningful interaction, dialogue, reconciliation and coexistence. My experiences in Fez opened a window on an invigorating city that has been able to maintain its inward gaze. But is Beirut, unlike Fez, a city too complex to contain? Is it at all possible to avert the inevitability of destructive forces and impending disasters by developing strategies that will ultimately heal the fabric of this society torn apart by war?

Experiencing diverse cities through the essays and conversations of symposium participants is an extraordinary and highly unusual opportunity. To gather together, to engage in meaningful dialogue, to listen to the voices of dynamic writers and thinkers has resulted in new ways of seeing normally unavailable to individuals like myself absorbed in the mounting difficulties of a postwar society. These outward glances, instigated and enhanced through the exploration of two cities: Fez and Casablanca, have expanded my horizons far beyond the city of Beirut and will most certainly widen the scope and enrich the quality of my work.

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