Saturday, 11 January 2014

463. New Arabic Genres

8:30–9:45 a.m.

Program arranged by the Division on Arabic Literature and Culture

Presiding: Ken Seigneurie, Simon Fraser Univ., Surrey

1. "Revolutionary Memoirs: Women, Nation, and the Arab World," Tahia Abdel Nasser, American Univ. in Cairo

The memoirs of two twentieth-century writers provide models for reworkings of the genre in the Arab world: the Egyptian writer Latifa al-Zayyat’s prison memoir The Search: Personal Papers (Hamlat taftīsh: awrāq shakhsiyyā) and the Algerian writer Assia Djebar’s Francophone Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade (L’Amour, la fantasie) and Nowhere in My Father’s House (Nulle part dans la maison de mon père). Published in 1992, al-Zayyat’s prison memoir revisits her role in the 1940s national student movement and her political detainment in 1981. While Assia Djebar’s 1982 Fantasia blurs the borders of genre as she reworks autobiographical strands with the historiography of the Algerian War of Liberation (1954-62), her most recent memoir Nowhere in My Father’s House, published in 2007, returns to her life. I argue that the two writers’ reworkings of the genre of memoir reveal the influences of national liberation movements on the development of the genre in a colonial and post-independence Arab context. While al-Zayyat affirms the value of the broader national struggle for women’s liberation, Djebar focuses on colonialism and her vexed relationship with French culture.

My paper concludes by exploring the twenty-first century Tahrir memoir that followed more than half a century of women’s memoirs in the Arab world. In 2012, the Egyptian writer Mona Prince published her Tahrir memoir of the eighteen days of Egypt’s January 25 Revolution Īsmī Thawra (My Name Is Revolution) electronically then in print. Prince’s memoir explores the metaphor of revolution as woman and the role of women in revolutionary twenty-first century Egypt.

This paper frames its discussion of Arab women’s memoirs within the theory of the genre of memoir and the observations of Jean Franco in her study of Latin America during the Cold War on how memoirs directly address “unity, association, community, bonding” and “solitude, fragmentation, entropy” (78). I examine how the memoirs, as they mediate the tension between solitude and the broader world, remake the genre in Arab contexts.

The past decade has witnessed an increase in the production and circulation of war diaries by Arab women from the Middle East as a result of the Internet revolution. These diaries include the Palestinian Leila El-Haddad’s blog *Gaza Mom: Palestine, Politics, Parenting, and Everything in Between* (2010) and the Iraqi Riverbend’s blog *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (2005), both of which were ultimately published in book form by Just World Books and The Feminist Press, respectively. The online diaries transport global audiences to the Gazan and Baghdadi home front, where they are able to witness the lived experiences of civilians under siege. These authors set themselves the task of deconstructing dominant narratives about the Global War on Terror and its impact on civilians and the environment. This presentation focuses on the online war diary as a new subgenre which, despite its generally marginal status in comparison to the novel or even the traditional memoir, is starting to assert itself as a viable literary and cultural product in the digital age. Using a multi-disciplinary framework which combines feminist, postcolonial, ecocritical, and life-writing studies, I offer a close analysis of the texts of El-Haddad and Riverbend, two prominent examples of emerging transnational diaries by Arab women. I demonstrate how the online diary both resembles and diverges from the traditional memoir and journalistic war reportage. I argue that the diarists under study, whom I refer to as “Scheherazadean Cyborgs,” employ *The Thousand and One Nights*’ Scheherazade’s power of suspenseful storytelling and the skillful use of modern technology, a la Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg,” to weave and broadcast real-time stories about the struggles and triumphs of civilians in war-torn countries such as Iraq and Palestine.

3. "Desire and the Canonization of Arabic Literature," Kifah Hanna, Trinity Coll., Hartford


The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) has emerged over the last decade an important subject for several writers, filmmakers and artists. Rawi Hage’s award-winning novel *Dinero’s Game* (2006) and the Oscar-nominated film *Incendies* (2010) are only two high profile examples of creative works that return to Lebanon in the 1970s as a point of entry into contemporary conditions in the Arab World. To a certain degree, *Dinero’s Game* and *Incendies* are as much about Lebanon’s present as they are about its past. Lamia Ziadé’s *Bye Bye Babylon: Beirut 1975-1979* (2011), an illustrated memoir, similarly can be read as a reflection on the legacies of the civil war. But in contrast with *Dinero’s Game* and *Incendies*, which are void of any nostalgia for 1970s Lebanon, *Bye Bye Babylon*—perhaps more like the film *West Beirut* (1998)—seeks to recapture the materiality of daily life during the war. The book is nostalgic in even in its title, which bids farewell to that lost place that now exists only in the artist’s memory.

Ziadé’s sparse narrative and her evocative illustrations work together to recreate a Lebanon, whose quintessential character is defined by the materialism and cosmopolitanism of Beirut’s vibrant urban culture. But even as *Bye Bye Babylon* appears to reaffirm the rather cliché idea of
Beirut as the Paris of the Orient, it undermines this myth by revealing the inequalities of 1970s Lebanon as one of the causes of the war. The book moves between reminiscences of life in Lebanon and exposes of the political complexities and the absurdities of the civil war.

_Bye Bye Babylon_ begins with the following phrase: “In 1975 I was seven years old and loved the Bazookas my mother bought for Walid and me.” And on the first page is an illustration of a piece of Bazooka bubble gum, the red, blue and white rectangle floating on a white background. The harmless object of childhood desire (bubble gum) here represents generally the international trade and the commodity culture of Beirut, but the Bazooka brand is equally significant because of its ironic association with the small and large weapons of warfare. This specific association is further developed later as Ziadé moves beyond the bubble gum to compare by illustration the “wondrous items” in the supermarket and the stockpiling of “weapons and munitions.” These first pages of the book establish the critical perspective, which is developed through the interplay of words and images. For the purposes of this paper, I am especially interested in the ways that the illustrations provide a critical supplement to a personal narrative that at times assumes a childhood innocence, but is framed by political awareness.